The Indian EXPRESS
JOURNALISM OF COURAGE

Expert Explains: As new West Bengal govt turns focus on Bangladesh border, how differences can be resolved

Maj Gen (retd) Prof G G Dwivedi, a war veteran and currently a professor of strategic and international relations, explains the genesis of the India-Bangladesh border dispute and the way forward in tackling the issues involved.

Written by: Maj Gen (retd) Prof G G Dwivedi, May 18, 2026 07:14 PM IST



A view of the India-Bangladesh border near a BSF camp. (Wikimedia Commons)

Last week, in one of its first Cabinet decisions, the new BJP-led government in West Bengal decided to hand over land at the Bangladesh border to the Border Security Force (BSF) to complete fencing.

Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari announced that the handover will be completed within 45 days, framing it as a step "crucial for national security". The issue was raised during the state elections

as well, with the BJP alleging that the earlier TMC government had **stalled these projects** to allow the illegal entry of Bangladeshis.

Why does the border issue remain contentious, and what can be done to resolve it? **Maj Gen (retd) Prof G G Dwivedi**, a war veteran and currently a professor of strategic and international relations at Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management, Delhi, explains.

The genesis

Bangladesh is a strategic neighbour of India due to a unique combination of geography, economic and security factors. The countries share a long border, stretching over 4,096 km across India's five states (West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram), as well as deep historical, cultural and ethnic links.

Since its birth in 1971 following the Liberation War, Bangladesh has maintained cordial relations with India, although the border continues to remain vulnerable, marred by numerous intricacies.

The root cause of the problem lies in the hurried Partition of India. The Radcliffe Line created an unnatural frontier by arbitrarily dividing villages, rivers, tribes and even families. For decades, the unresolved enclaves and adverse possessions became major irritants in the bilateral ties.

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To resolve the border dispute, in 1974, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rehman signed the initial Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). While Bangladesh ratified the agreement quickly, India did not do so due to constitutional and political constraints associated with giving up land.

A breakthrough came about in 2015, when the Indian Parliament unanimously passed the 100th Constitutional Amendment, enabling the implementation of LBA.

The Accord was operationalised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Under the Agreement, India transferred 111 enclaves covering around 17,000 acres, and Bangladesh transferred 51 enclaves spread over 7,000 acres. The residents were given the choice of citizenship. The adverse possession areas under one country's actual control, despite belonging to the other, were regularised. Consequently, the entire land border was demarcated clearly.

The agreement saw significant payoffs — it alleviated the uncertainty of enclave residents, strengthened bilateral ties, and improved security and regional stability. However, challenges continue to persist.

Key contentious issues

Illegal migration: This remains the most politically sensitive issue. Economic disparity, demographic pressures and political instability have led to migration from Bangladesh to India, especially Assam and West Bengal.

Over the decades, the issue has led to some political and social unrest due to fears of demographic change and pressure on resources. The issue has periodically triggered political movements and identity concerns over land ownership, leading to the legislation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Border incidents: Frequent incidents of border firing and civilian deaths remain a major irritant. In targeting the criminal networks engaged in trans-border operations, the BSF has to resort to force at times, which results in civilian casualties and raises humanitarian concerns.

Transnational crime: The border being porous lends to the extensive smuggling of narcotics, cattle, fake Indian currency, arms and human trafficking, especially women and children. Poverty and weak enforcement mechanisms are exploited by mafias. These unlawful activities also have serious security implications, given the links between criminal syndicates and extremist groups.

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Security concerns: Historically, the insurgent groups in India’s northeast have been known to use Bangladesh territory as sanctuaries for carrying out hostile actions. During Sheikh Hasina’s time, Dhaka cooperated significantly with Delhi to dismantle the infrastructure of anti-India militant groups.

However, concerns remain about the possibility of such groups becoming active again in the border areas. The influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh from Myanmar and their movement into India has further compounded the security challenges.

River water dispute: The matter of water sharing of the transboundary rivers, especially the Teesta, remains unresolved. Though not strictly a border issue, the absence of agreement on the Teesta adds to the friction and mistrust, impacting bilateral ties. Bangladesh views equitable water

sharing as essential for agriculture and livelihood. Dhaka's appeals to China for help regarding the Teesta Project have raised concerns in India.

Way forward

Besides being a bridge to the northeast, the India-Bangladesh border is crucial for India's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies for greater diplomatic engagement in the region.

A stable border is also vital for economic and sub-regional groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) initiative. To address the prevailing complexities, there is a requirement for a de novo approach.

Firstly, the current process of border management needs to shift from 'border policing' to 'border governance'. This includes smart fencing, high-tech surveillance, coordinated patrolling and avoiding excessive use of force. A major hurdle for border fencing was making available land to the BSF, which now stands resolved.

Secondly, there is a necessity for an institutionalised mechanism between the BSF and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), entailing intelligence sharing, flag meetings and joint training for confidence building.

Thirdly, the economic development of border areas is crucial as it will go a long way in alleviating poverty and providing employment, thus curtailing illegal migration and smuggling. Creating trading corridors, joint check posts and connectivity projects could transform the border regions into zones of prosperity.

Fourthly, civilian casualties ought to be minimised through non-lethal means and refined rules of engagement.

Lastly, steady bilateral relations and political trust are vital for resolving difficult issues, and there are positive signals on this front so far. With the new government under Prime Minister Tarique Rehman in place, the bilateral ties between Delhi and Dhaka are on the mend, which was much-needed following the strain during Mohammad Yunus's one-and-a-half-year interim tenure.

Although the India-Bangladesh border bears the burden of history, the overall trajectory of the relations has been positive. There are opportunities to convert complexities into sustainable solutions, by way of flourishing commerce, through political will and addressing mutual

sensitivities. Peaceful borders and a conducive environment are indispensable not only for India and Bangladesh, but also for the stability of the Indian subcontinent as a whole.