
The Role of Regional Geopolitics in Shaping Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations in The 21st Century

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Abstract

The relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 21st century is deeply shaped by evolving regional geopolitical dynamics. Historically strained due to the events surrounding Bangladesh's independence in 1971, relations between the two nations remain complex, characterized by lingering distrust and historical grievances. However, the shifting balance of power in South Asia, driven by strategic alliances and regional competition, continues to redefine this bilateral relationship. Pakistan, keen on expanding its regional influence, views Bangladesh's growing partnership with India as a strategic challenge. This dynamic has intensified Pakistan's efforts to engage Bangladesh diplomatically and economically, aiming to balance India's expanding influence in the region. Conversely, Bangladesh is navigating its foreign policy with increasing autonomy, balancing relations with regional powers like India, China, and Pakistan to safeguard its national interests. Regional geopolitics, particularly the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan and the rising influence of China in South Asia, significantly impact Pakistan-Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh's active participation in regional platforms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) further complicates the geopolitical landscape. Additionally, Bangladesh's constitutional commitment to fostering fraternal ties with Pakistan, rooted in shared cultural and historical connections, presents opportunities for diplomatic engagement despite underlying tensions. This study explores how these geopolitical factors shape the diplomatic, economic, and strategic interactions between Pakistan and Bangladesh. It also examines whether Bangladesh can develop an independent and balanced foreign policy that allows it to engage Pakistan on its own terms. Understanding the role of regional geopolitics in this evolving relationship is crucial for predicting future developments and fostering a more stable and cooperative South Asian region.

Keywords: Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations, Regional Geopolitics, South Asia, India-Pakistan Rivalry, Strategic Alliances, Foreign Policy, Regional Cooperation.

Introduction

Pakistan-Bangladesh relations are undeniably among the most intricate and multifaceted in this current era, marked by the rapidly evolving landscape of international geopolitics. The dynamics of regional geopolitics exert a profound influence on the development of diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties between these two nations throughout the 21st century. In the immediate aftermath of its independence, Bangladesh openly criticized Pakistan, drawing attention to a range of historical injustices and humanitarian grievances that were held against its former rulers and the implications of their legacy (Dar & Ahmad, 2024). This section aims to delve into whether such sentiments of distrust and criticism are still prevalent in contemporary Bangladesh today, or if a new chapter has begun in their collective narrative. On the flip side, Pakistan finds itself deeply entrenched in a vigorous competition to engage and win over Bangladesh, seeking to enhance its influence and power within the broader region of South Asia (Bose & Jalal, 2022). This competitive dynamic creates a charged atmosphere where Bangladesh's increasingly close relationship with India has become a focal point of concern and anxiety for the establishment in Rawalpindi. The burgeoning partnership and warmth between Dhaka and New Delhi have garnered significant attention, making headlines not just locally, but also in international circles. This shift towards a positive outlook between Bangladesh and India is particularly newsworthy and critical for analysts and scholars who are closely monitoring and studying the strategic environment and balance of power in South Asia, where alliances and rivalries continue to shape the future trajectories of nations involved. Whether the ties between Pakistan and Bangladesh will continue to remain a complicated fusion of both cooperation and conflict, which is invariably bolstered by the inherently unequal power relations characteristic of the region, or whether Bangladesh will be able to independently craft a foreign policy that allows it to engage with Pakistan in a more balanced and self-determined manner, remains an open question that has yet to be definitively answered. It is, however, more important to consider what specific role regional geopolitics will play in shaping and influencing this intricate relationship in the years that lie ahead. The citizens of Bangladesh harbor deeply complex and often contradictory emotions regarding Pakistan, emotions that oscillate widely from a begrudging respect for certain aspects of its history and culture to a profound and seething hatred rooted in past grievances (Aslam et al.2024). The historical context is significant; Pakistan was considered their homeland after the bloody and tumultuous events of the partition-era plebiscite of 1947, which occurred only a month prior to the formal declaration of a state of Pakistan itself. Additionally, the Constitution of Bangladesh explicitly states that it aims to bolster and strengthen the fraternal relations that exist between the people of Bangladesh and the people of Pakistan, grounded in the foundation of shared history, intertwined cultural heritage, the common faith of Islam, and the guiding principles of non-alignment in international affairs. How regional geopolitics will continue to shape this multifaceted relationship is a complex question that will undoubtedly unfold and develop further between Dhaka and Islamabad as we move into the future.

Historical Context of Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations

Despite their common British colonial past, relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh remain uneasy. Decades of historical political and social baggage continue to predetermine their contemporary interactions. Key to understanding these two neighbors is an appreciation of the war that secured Bangladesh's independence and national identity. Waged between March and December 1971, the liberation war emerged as a brutal and genocidal response from the Pakistani military dictatorship towards ethno-linguistic and political Bengali demands. These brutal responses allowed for India's involvement in the war and the eventual breakup of Pakistan and the subsequent establishment of an independent Bangladesh. As a result, the idea of Pakistan is closely

associated with various forms of exploitation and economic discrimination such as natural resource management and access to the Bay of Bengal. Equally, the wounds suffered during the war of liberation continue to mark and shape Bangladeshi-Pakistani relations (Hajjaj, 2022). The India-Pakistan enmities of the 1960s as well as the 1990s colored Indian-Bangladeshi relations after the Cold War. The memory of 1971 also casts an imperial shadow across this subregion. As memories tarnish with time, they develop a neatness about them, fall into logical narratives, and are subject to political interpretations. Ill-defined notions about imperial expansion and ambition, Hindu-baiting, and separatism intertwined to define a narrative of nationhood (McLaughlan, 2021). The intervening period has seen accordingly a shorter, less significant parenthesis than understood, and links a quite distant past to a very recent and occurring present. The emotions and passion in relation to 1971 are undiminished and unalloyed. The Indo-Bangladesh delimitation to the counterfactual and a brief coup d'état in Bangladesh also represent the contemporary backdrop to the world's complexity.

As this recent flashpoint illustrates, memories of 1971 significantly shape today's geopolitics. The war's legacies are at once acted upon and usefully consigned to the past, the collective remembrance shaping both the bonds and enmities felt by the separate communities. Memory of the war has been subject to numerous historical revisions in both Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Pakistan, an initially dismissive attitude prevailed regarding Bangladeshi independence. Only in the post-9/11 world, and dissatisfaction with American foreign policy, did some sections of the Pakistani intellectual class begin to stress their understanding of what it means to have lost East Pakistan (Shah & Phil, 2024). In Bangladesh, conversely, an emerging engagement with the complex, state-oriented narrative of war and national formation is increasingly characterized by a de-secularization and the growing perception of religious conflict.

Evolution of Geopolitical Dynamics in South Asia

The South Asia we see today stands as a multifaceted product of various contentious callings and situations, continuing to carry forward a multitude of unresolved confrontations and issues from the past. The entire region, along with its diverse countries, has been evolving at an unprecedented pace, characterized by a dynamic interplay of influences and relationships. If one were to painstakingly characterize the existing geopolitical environment of today in South Asia, it would undoubtedly present itself as a picture of pronounced polarity. Emerging prominently from within the northeast of the region, India, with its colossal population and significant military capabilities, is now challenging longstanding traditions of unipolarity that have historically defined South Asia (Yogaswara and Sukaedi 2024). On the other hand, if this situation is assessed in a broader context, we can't ignore the increasing power dynamics of China, whose assertive strongman diplomacy on the global stage in recent years has raised eyebrows and drawn criticism. This posture, particularly in relation to its influence and actions within the region, is viewed with a great deal of unease and apprehension by the United States. The U.S., for its part, is re-entering the strategically crucial region in what can undoubtedly only be characterized as a low-intensity, preliminary attempt at maintaining its strategic hegemony during an era of relentless geopolitical competition and rivalry. This interplay of forces represents a complex tapestry of relationships and intentions that continue to shape South Asia's future trajectory. The power change in South Asia is economically sourced from some more than others, but it incurs investment in immense military capabilities, brings strategic partnerships, yet underscores the tenuousness of constructive collaboration, sour hostilities of past conflicts, reveals fault lines of religious divides, and is the cradle of many internal crises. This is a cascade of information that finds relevance particularly in this research endeavor, to elaborate on the role of regional geopolitics in shaping the contemporary geopolitical contours of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations (Shabaga, 2024). Like it is for the rest of

the region, Pakistan-Bangladesh relations cannot be understood without understanding the evolving geopolitical dynamics of South Asia. Beyond their bilateral colors, both these countries are compelled to interact and behave in a region of such fluidity. To do so in a future that promises to be as volatile and unpredictable will require the strategic acumen of the one who reads the future. Therefore, the first three chapters of this research are devoted to an elaboration of how the regional geopolitics of South Asia have been evolving since 1947, how these changes are located within broad global trends affecting countries' national interests and securities.

Key Geopolitical Players in South Asia

The South Asian geopolitical scene is remarkably diverse and complex as the region accommodates not only the strategic interests of regional players but also those of extra-regional powers. In recent years, the two most crucial players in this multifaceted region have been the regional powers India and China. Meanwhile, the United States and Russia continue to have significant stakes in the area and actively maintain their presence. While India finds itself in a direct territorial conflict with Pakistan and has had longstanding historical issues with Bangladesh, China has recently emerged as a formidable new player with heavy strategic and economic stakes in the region. This includes a strategic partnership involving Pakistan and Bangladesh, which complicates the dynamics even further (Sehgal, 2024). These countries actively engage with one another across various diplomatic platforms to address shared regional challenges and opportunities. On the regional front, a triangular relationship exists between Pakistan, China, and Russia, creating intricate balances of power. Furthermore, Pakistan and other neighboring countries have various levels of engagement with regional players, showcasing a web of alliances and rivalries that mark the South Asian geopolitical landscape as one of the most dynamic and strategically important in the world today. Given the endeavors of regional and global players to forge new alliances, the nationalist-capitalist sovereign state system of contemporary International Relations gives strategic freedom to every state and makes them fungible. In the given circumstances, the external forces involved in the political and economic activities of two states shape their relations and influence domestic policy and strategic decision-making as well. Therefore, in order to understand a state's foreign and domestic policy orientation, internal and external factors should not be considered in isolation from each other. Hence, Pakistan-Bangladesh relations in the twenty-first century are conditioned by some of the external players in the region as well (Hassan, 2022). The above-mentioned factors have had historical stakes in the political and strategic security regions, contributing significantly to the political, economic, and military architecture of states. Each of them carries distinct values and norms competing to be accepted in regional and international spheres and construct relations characterized by competition as well as cooperation.

Bilateral Relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh

Islamabad and Dhaka have experienced complex and often volatile relations since the historic dismemberment that took place in 1971, which remains a defining moment in their shared history. The opportunities to construct and nurture mutual understanding have often been severely hampered by the complicating factors of regional domestic politics. These politics tend to resort to selectively chosen grievances that serve to fuel the flames of nationalism, leading to heightened tensions. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, the two sides have begun to address some progressively serious bilateral matters over the years. Leaders and representatives from both countries have engaged in various forms of state and non-state discussions, which include talks and visits aimed at improving relations (Ali & Brice Lee, 2022). They have interacted among themselves at a multitude of events, such as sessions, conferences, summits, and various

ministerial meetings. Moreover, there has also been significant interaction occurring within Bangladesh, characterized by periodic exchanges of government officials and judicial delegations. Notably, there has even been a visit from a speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan, indicating a willingness to engage and explore avenues for dialogue and cooperation. Cultural links remain profoundly robust between Eastern Pakistan and Bangladesh, reflecting a historical interconnectedness that persists even today. Presently, there are an estimated 1.5 million Pakistanis who can trace their ancestry to Bengali descent residing in Pakistan; these individuals have successfully integrated into the broader fabric of Pakistani society and contribute significantly by working in various critical sectors, including education, healthcare, engineering, and even politics. Among these populations, there are approximately 100,000 West Pakistani Biharis who continue to wait for repatriation from Bangladesh, highlighting ongoing complexities in migration and identity (Arciero et al.2021). The commercial relations between these two regions faced considerable challenges initially due to the upheaval experienced during the war of liberation in 1971. However, in spite of the distressing past, bilateral trade has now emerged as a constructive area for mutual cooperation and understanding. In more recent years, Pakistan and Bangladesh have proactively agreed to foster and encourage people-to-people contacts, primarily focusing on enriching ties in diverse sectors such as education, culture, sports, and tourism. The 3rd meeting of the Joint Economic Commission, a significant event aimed at enhancing economic cooperation, was held in Islamabad from 18-21 June 2012 (Ishaq et al.2024). Moreover, Bangladesh and Pakistan have also reached a consensus to work together in the critical area of combating violent extremism and addressing the financing of terrorism, showcasing a commitment to cooperation that seeks to bolster security and stability for both nations in an increasingly interconnected world.

Impact of Regional Geopolitics on Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations

Pakistan and Bangladesh are often regarded as regional examples of difficult relations. The crucial question of whether their difficult relationship is contingent on larger geopolitical vicissitudes in regional and larger arenas has not been investigated so far. This chapter seeks to fill that lacuna. The analysis of geopolitical conditions in the regional arena pertaining to Pakistan and Bangladesh yields useful insights. The intense competition over regional leadership has continually defined the regional reality in South Asia. This remains one of the principal sources of tensions and competitive bilateral relations in South Asia, with much arising from the underlying geopolitical rivalries in the region. These intangible layers have the potential for severely undermining both political and economic processes that exist alongside, such as peace-building initiatives, counter-terrorism drives, or international markets, trade associations, and economic cooperation that often secure the extraterritorial aspects of bilateral relationships (Hossain & Islam, 2021). The narratives regarding regional geopolitics emanating from Dhaka and Islamabad have been quite different. This divergence is not solely rhetorical but gets translated into the foreign policy of the two countries, thus affecting bilateral relations. The foreign policy orientation, and hence worldviews and strategies of the two states, are directly influenced by their readings of how the geopolitical shifts and stresses, particularly in South Asia, are framed. Bangladesh's concerns about regional security emanate from the fact that it is surrounded by India from three sides, with the Bay of Bengal forming the fourth. A hostile regional power militarily occupies Bangladeshi territory on three sides, with a continual history of border violations and coercive pressure, particularly in the northeastern and northern borders. Pakistani policymakers were anxious to ensure a quasi-ideological affinity between 'West Pakistan' and 'East Bengal,' increasingly being expressed in the form of hostility towards India. Almost 70 years after comments, Pakhtuns have yet to integrate into Pakistan, and the very roles prescribed, such as those of 'lovable allies' (of the Pakistani military), who feared and distrusted India, that the tribal regions were meant to play, and even be

confined to, within Pakistan, are largely occupied by a mix of Kashmir-focused militants and Punjabis who migrated from land farther east when India was divided (Kuznetsov et al., 2024). Finally, Dhaka's aversion to having to serve as India's 'security buffer zone' on account of its geographical position, particularly aggravated by the widespread anti-Bangladeshi feeling in the northeastern states, was echoed by the leader of the L.D. in Pakistan's National Assembly. Hostility from the West also results in terrorists using Bangladeshi territory to primarily target its often-quarrelsome western neighbor (Uddin et al.2023). Apart from bilateral collaborations, India has also continued with security and training assistance to help in combating a high level of militancy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts bordering India. Militant movements active in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have also sought refuge across the border in India. Terrorists escaping from Bangladeshi security forces often find refuge in these areas. Based on reports, it is estimated that 15 to 20 camps of Indian insurgent groups are established across the border in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Conflict and Cooperation in the Region

South Asia, also known as the Indian subcontinent, can be aptly characterized as a vast and intricate region where the threads of conflict and the inevitabilities of cooperation are thoroughly intertwined. In this diverse area, conflict often emerges as a consequence of geographical proximity, where the closeness of nations leads to disputes over territory, resources, and political influence. At the same time, the necessity for cooperation becomes evident, driven by mutual benefits on various critical issues that transcend individual national interests. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in the 21st century serve as a quintessential representation of this dual characteristic of both ongoing conflict and potential cooperation. The relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh stands as a particularly clear example of the complexities that underlie the conflict dynamics in the region (Kuszewska, 2022). This relationship is not merely an occasional clash of interests but rather a deep-seated historical narrative that continues to evolve amid contemporary challenges. Historical grievances and current disputes in the southern part of South Asia persistently complicate the prospects for an enhanced collaborative paradigm that all three nations share. Moreover, some independent experts and analysts firmly believe that improving regional relations is not just important but a fundamental necessity for the sustainable development of nations within this region. They argue that overcoming historical conflicts and nurturing cooperative ties will be essential for addressing pressing issues such as poverty, economic development, and cross-border terrorism, creating a more stable and prosperous South Asia for future generations. The escalation of the ongoing Pak-India crisis, particularly at the height of ignorance, loomed heavily and threatened to create deep-seated mistrust and suspicion not only between Islamabad and Dhaka but also extending to the broader South Asian region. In the year 2015, the coastal border dispute that had plagued relations between the two nations was dropped without resolution, leading to a renewed cycle of rising tensions and conflicts in diplomatic relations (Siddiquee, 2022). The trio of warning notes issued in the wake of these tensions holds promise but lacks any substantial attention being given to the serious corruption accusations that have plagued both nations, where the prevailing political order remains entrenched in two essential problems. The issues of poverty and overpopulation in both countries present significant challenges that are creating long-term systemic issues, a point highlighted by some Pakistani experts who closely monitor these developments. Moreover, valuable opportunities to establish a firmer footing within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the evolving structures in the Indian Ocean region are also being sidelined in the current climate. It is also claimed that a Bangladesh initiative involving the exchange of physical planning missions, led by various South Asian research institutions over the past decade, has not received the attention it warrants. Discussions surrounding areas of cooperation have taken place, focusing particularly on

security and exploring ways to enhance various aspects of comprehensive cooperation for mutual benefit (Boateng, 2021).

Role of Non-State Actors in Geopolitical Dynamics

Non-state actors have emerged as influential players, significantly impacting the complex geopolitical dynamics in South Asia, particularly in the regions of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Within the civil society frameworks of both nations, various non-state actors operate, which are often referred to as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and local community-based organizations that address specific regional needs and concerns. Extremist groups have made concerted efforts to radicalize certain segments of the population, encompassing a range of transnational organizations that have established a presence in South Asia (Ahmed, 2023). These entities play a critical role in shaping and framing the socio-political landscape of both countries by either vehemently opposing the interests and agendas upheld by the respective state governments or by successfully attracting segments of the population that hold supportive views towards the opposition's stance against the other state. This ability to influence public opinion is significant, particularly in relation to governmental policy-making processes. Moreover, civil society, backed by the energetic mobilization of activists and substantial support from the diaspora communities residing in the Western world, has effectively diminished any viable prospects for cooperation between Bangladesh and Pakistan. The complexities of these interactions reveal the intricate web of influences that non-state actors exert within these countries, often complicating diplomatic relationships further. The diaspora that is active in the United Kingdom could also very well play a similar role in influencing political and social dynamics. The diaspora present in the two countries consistently exhibits strong support for the nationalist agendas and self-reliant foreign policies that have been adopted. Additionally, anti-India non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Bangladesh have significantly influenced the orientation of foreign and security policy towards India, capturing a sizable portion of the population who aligns with the perspectives put forth by these organizations (Rahman, 2024). The increased usage of social media platforms by these NGOs and other extremist factions has further added fuel to the fire in shaping the narratives surrounding various conflicts and disputes in the region. This phenomenon has led to the concept of securitization becoming the principal driving force behind the interactions of these non-state entities with the established state mechanisms in both countries. There has been a noticeable uptick in the focus on the well-being and contributions of the non-resident Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities to their home countries, which highlights an area where non-state actors can assume a growing and constructive role. Moreover, the implications of their involvement could lead to positive outcomes in economic and social development, ultimately fostering better relations between these communities and their respective governments (Xie & Warner, 2022).

Future Prospects and Recommendations

India currently holds a position of importance for both countries. Improved relations can have far-reaching effects both directly and indirectly. With India's active support, an opening between Dhaka and Islamabad can occur in four manners.

- 1) Indian diplomats can formally mediate a settlement, which would include any necessary arbitration. While Pakistani diplomats have previously supported such a structure, it might not be an avenue with which to begin talks. Even the offer of third-party membership in bilateral talks would need to be carefully weighed by the Bangladeshi government.
- 2) Bilateral talks can occur with India as a sponsor. Again, this type of proposal would need to be approached cautiously.

3) India can encourage a long-term friendship.

4) India and Bangladesh must endorse a combined regional structure that embraces peace and stability, opening the door to neighborly relations.

This is the most crucial area for these states if they are to contend in South Asia. Recommendations have been divided into the actors that they affect and include measures that prioritize immediate security concerns as well as steps that both countries should involve in order to come to terms with historical grievances. These remain relevant as signs suggest that as the relevant regional actors transform their priorities, the anarchic strategy approach adopted by both countries is no longer appropriate. For Bangladesh:

- Improve diplomatic relations and engage in diplomatically open communication with Pakistan.
- Promote trade with Pakistan.
- Bangladesh should strive to erase resentments on both diplomatic and societal levels
- fully accepting the status quo on the eventual matter of theory and academic historical debate.

For Pakistan:

- Adopt a policy of non-interference.
- Need to ensure that Pakistani intelligence agencies maintain a lack of presence in Bangladesh.
- When the relationship is formalized through diplomatic treaties
- a more direct political relationship can be conducted
- Bypassing ongoing historical acrimony.

Bangladesh should continue to pursue its 'Look East' policy, including with India, but should not let its ties with Pakistan needlessly fluctuate depending upon relations with other regional powers. Local considerations should primarily shape regional relations. With the dilution of the two-nation theory in post-Bangladeshi society, Pakistan should look again to its closest regional neighbors for goodwill and cooperation. Local problems have not pursued a foreign policy that has made as vigilant attempts to gain a tone of regional cooperation, especially in this post-September 11 era, as has Bangladesh. This type of policy preference has allowed Bangladesh to host Pakistani warships and multiple military exchanges between Bangladeshi and Pakistani military forces, and Pakistan to stop thinking it can counteract any Bangladeshi moves by bypassing it strategically and moving bases directly to Myanmar, has opened the doors for future collaboration on wider issues such as anti-terrorism, trade, and climate change.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, the international geopolitical landscape of South Asia is undergoing a transformation, reshaping both its reality and its aspirations aimed at fostering lasting peace in the region. This essay has thoroughly explored the deep significance of regional geopolitics and the crucial role it plays in the complex formulation and evolving nature of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations. While articulating the intricacies of regional geopolitics and its desired aspirations, it is essential to delve into the multifaceted and complex history that underpins both nations. This historical context is indispensable for a nuanced understanding. Moreover, the essay explicitly identifies and highlights the various challenges both countries are currently facing in this contemporary phase of their diplomatic relations, which are increasingly convoluted. This essay posits two principal arguments: firstly, that mere political rhetoric alone is unlikely to effect any genuine change in the relations between both nations; instead, such rhetoric could potentially aggravate the existing hostility and tensions between them. Therefore, a sober approach from both sides that includes patience, genuine empathy, and a profound understanding of their intertwined

historical narratives is critically necessary. Secondly, it emphasizes that the roles and influences of major powers in the region, along with their implications for bilateral relations, must also be taken into serious consideration in any discussion aimed at improving the relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh. Through this multifaceted lens, we can hope to gain a clearer perspective on future interactions. In conclusion, it is established that the geopolitics of larger South Asia play an exceptional role in developing Pakistan-Bangladesh relations. Besides the history of complex interdependence, which always compels the two countries to work together for the region, there are a few others that play their role in determining the character of the relations, and there is a need to explore further how different non-state actors from both countries may have their hands in the ongoing conflict. The extended areas of research could also include the role of international as well as regional cooperation. Our main focus should not be to argue either on conflict or cooperation but to bring a theory that combines both as one dimension of improved policy and policy thinking. In doing so, Pakistan-Bangladesh relations can be seen as important and meaningful; hence, we need to give importance to research and research policies.

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