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Confederation or Cooperation? Pakistan Bangladesh Relations in a Changing South Asian Order

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ABSTRACT

The history between Pakistan and Bangladesh remains defined by old animosity and historical unresolved issues and the disparate national path between the two states, but the concept of confederation as a tool of regional reconciliation in South Asia is periodically resurrected through the rhetoric of politics and strategic debate. The current literature mostly addresses such relation rather in terms of conflict and estrangement and there is no extensive analysis of whether confederation is feasible as compared to other ways of engaging in the modern geopolitical environment. To fill this gap, the paper uses qualitative historical and political analysis, which relies on historical records, political rhetoric and the discourse of regional security to assess the structural, politics and social conditions that such an arrangement needs, and evaluates common historical experiences, regional economic complementarities, and regional dynamics and common challenges of identity, sovereignty and grievance. The results show that a formal confederation is an extremely unrealistic possibility in the foreseeable future because of the entrenched and enduring political sensitivities and more and more divergent national trajectories; still, gradual collaboration in commerce, connectivity, and multilateral participation can be an efficient and opportune alternative that can restore bilateral relations and some form of constructive collaboration, which can be part of wider debates on post-conflict reconciliation and the changing structure of cooperation in South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The debate on post-conflict regionalism is shifting to address more how historical ruptures interact with altered geopolitical realities in the transformation of political possibilities. These discussions have reoccurred in south Asia as the structure of power has changed and economic interdependence has also



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grown and even the resurgence of interest of non-regional alignments. In this regard, the idea of a confederation between Pakistan and Bangladesh is in an awkward and quite unexploited stage. And yet, as of the year seventeen seventy one, the two states have followed sharply diverging political courses, despite the fact that a few years ago they were the two out of one nation, which was built on the basis of antagonism, shock, and antithesis of discourses of sovereignty and identity. The dream of a new political integration has not been treated as a mainstream issue throughout decades because of historical resentment and nation-building priorities. Nevertheless, the alterations of the region politics, the shift of the balance of power, and the recently emerged discussions of the economic cooperation have regularly re-evoked the idea of the politically impossible structure (Zakaria, 2019; Dutta, 2015; Rais and Munir, 2025).

The critical absence of systematic framework as the critical evaluation of the confederation proposal under condition other than normative rejection or romantic surmise is the principal gap in the research problem. The available literature largely approaches the relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh as either rupture and estrangement, their origins, national identities construct, and the frontiers of South Asian regionalism (Braithwaite and D'Costa, 2012; Mahmood et al., 2015; Ahmad, 1978). Part of these new works indicate reconciliation and changing strategic conditions (Dutta, 2015; Biswas and Mahmood, 2019), but even those hardly doubt the reality that confederation was historically hermetically sealed, or that something might be reintroduced under different conditions (John, 2025). This gap obscures the board with how the historical trauma in the contemporary economic interdependence and emerging geopolitical pressures merge to define other futures in South Asia.

This paper therefore presents confederation as a policy measure but rather as a theoretical window of how one might quantify the degree of estrangement and the destiny of reconciliation and limitations of the politics structure of South Asia. It would prefer to move beyond emotive accounts and uninformed suppositions to evaluate the likelihood, consequences, and the potential outcomes of additional political conditioning between Pakistan and Bangladesh by grounding the discussion in historical experience, bilateral happenings and the regional general environment, including economic relationship, security preferences and foreign power. At the same time, it determines the political, social, and psychological impediments that have been internalized and continue to affect the relationship between the two states and are part of the reasons why broader discussions on how historical ruptures limit though do not predetermine the political future are made (Arko, 2021; Rais, et al., 2025). Based on this template, the paper shall provide three key questions which will be:

- To what extent can a Pakistan-Bangladesh confederation be structurally and politically feasible in the context of modern South Asian order?
- What does historical trauma, formation of national identities and issues of sovereignty hold against a political reintegration?
- Is slow cooperation in trade, network and multilateral action a practical substitute to confederation and reconciliation?

The paper too spreads the thesis that though it is quite improbable that we could come to a formal confederation in the foreseeable future due to the entrenched political sensitivities and the national dissimilar directions, practical and sustainable functional collaboration is a practicable and viable method of re-engagement. This discussion commences by placing the debate into historical context in 1971, literature review, and subsequently a review of the contemporary political, economic and geopolitical realities followed by comparison between confederation and incremental cooperation as both alternative approaches to how to relate Pakistan and Bangladesh in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic interest in the conception of a Pakistan Bangladesh confederation is oblique and diffuses on a wide range of bodies of literature, such as works on partition, South Asian state-building, nationalism, regional integration, and post-conflict reconciliation. Although outliers are almost nonexistent,



confederation does not reflect on itself in much of the literature, but may manifest itself implicitly when entering into a discussion on the failure of political unity, post-1971 bilateral relations, or the possibility that the structural conditions needed to build renewed cooperation can ever be rebuilt (John, 2025). This section codes the literature into thematic strands of importance to the research subject and critically outlines what is underexplored.

- **Partition, State Failure, and Structural Imbalance.** Historical, political narratives of the 1971 split have claimed that the disintegration of the united Pakistani state was due to structural asymmetries between East and West Pakistan such as political marginalization, economic polarization, linguistic marginalization and domination by a centralized military-bureaucratic elite. These documents claim that, the lack of true federalism and fair distribution of power made an application of long-term political cooperation impossible. In this context, confederation has been said to be projected back in retrospect as a missed opportunity that would have served to defuse tensions before the situation got out of hand. However, the majority of researchers argue that even a more informal political framework would have failed by the end of the 1960s, as there would be no trust at all and no political goals would have suited each other (Mahmood et al., 2015). Although this literature maintains those explanations convincingly on the failure of unity; however, it is still historical in a way that it takes 1971 as the end of the analysis but does not question the interactions of its legacies with the modern-day situation.
- **Nationalism and Post-Independence Formation of Identity.** The second strand gives attention to post-independence Bangladesh and nationalism and identity construction. Analysts underline the fact that the statehood in Bangladesh developed as an opposition to the Pakistani experience consciously, and the language, cultural self-rule, and political self-determination were the pillars of national identity. Such consolidation makes any future political reunification very improbable because it will disrupt the historical story of independence. In this respect, confederation seems revisionist or politically unacceptable, especially without accountability and historical recognition (Braithwaite and D'Costa, 2012). Yet this literature tends to incorporate identity as fixed, providing insufficient information about how generational transformation, economic expediency or shifts in regional standards could alter political imaginaries over time.
- **Foreign Policy after The Year 1971.** Research on foreign policy of Pakistan after 1971 describes the period as being slow and uneven normalization with Bangladesh, with a strong impact of domestic political developments and the desire by Pakistan to have better relations with India. Despite stabilization of diplomatic relations, the literature records low rates of trade, personal contacts and strategic collaboration between the two countries. Analysts explain this by institutional inertia and other regional and global alignments (Glynn, 2016). These records describe the inability of integration to deepen, but falls short of evaluating the possibility of one or more options changing regional incentives to change this trend.
- **Functional Integration and South Asian Regionalism.** The literature on South Asian regionalism provides a wider comparative prism through which one can look. The proponents of SAARC and other regional programs hold that the region faces brings together failure because of political distrust, asymmetry of power and outstanding historical resentment. In this context, the relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh are frequently mentioned as such, where economic complementarities were not realized. Economists and geographical theorists postulate that functional cooperation- especially in trade and connectivity have potential to bring about mutual values even without political unification (Ahmad, 1978). Although the arguments are not trying to support the concepts of confederation, they address the concept of the impossibility to have significant integration and political separation, thus the conceptual escapes into an alternative way of the alignment.
- **Reconciliation and Post Conflict Transformation.** The more recent literature on post-secession reconciliation reflects that symbolic gestures, historically explicit recognition and continuing dialogue



can help to change hostile relationships over time. The comparative analysis of divided states and the unified states that were formed in the past indicates that generational renewal, practical economic thinking, and alliances changes working towards the diminishing of deep-rooted enmities (Dutta, 2015). When applied to the situation in Pakistan and Bangladesh, this literature emphasizes the point that historical grievances are still one of the great barriers, but it also suggests that the political relationships are not fixed.

- **The Dynamics of Geopolitics and the Shifting Regional Order.** Geopolitical studies add the second dimension, underlining the importance in which seafarers of Indo-Pacific dynamics of changing roles of China, India, and the United States can redefine bilateral motives. The increasing economic self-confidence of Bangladesh and the diversification of regional relations by Pakistan are occasionally cited as things that might foster engagement. However, these studies typically view confederation as hypothetical and reiterate that the issue of sovereignty, strategic self-determination and separate foreign policies remains predominant with regard to state behavior (Biswas & Mahmood, 2019).
- **Critical Contribution and Gap.** In these strands, the literature spills over to the perspective that a confederation between Pakistan and Bangladesh cannot possibly emerge at the current circumstances because of historical trauma, deep rooted national identities and loose institutional interconnectedness. What is not yet developed, however, is a synthesizing structure that follows up on how regional pressures, economic interdependence and long-term reconciliation processes may overturn what has historically been thought impossible. What is presently written is either historically determinative or functionalist in its analysis of cooperation without returning to the broader political imagination.

This work bridges that gap, combines the elements of historical, political, economical, and geopolitical explanations to cross out retro-explanations of failure. Instead of posing a question on why unity failed, it would be a prospective question: can new strategic grounds help re-open discussions about different ways that Pakistan and Bangladesh can align? By so doing, it reformulates confederation not as a policy plan but as a studying tool to challenge the constriction and options of post-conflict change in South Asia (Rais & Munir, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

The nature of the research design in this study can be described as a qualitative, analytical and interpretive type of study, which is apt to investigate the historical enshrined phenomena of a political nature that can never be measurably shifted to the quantitative scale. Confederation between Bangladesh and Pakistan is not a statistical value, but a question of memory, identity, sovereignty, and geopolitical imaginative a dimension to be contextual and discursive. The exploratory approach facilitates the exploration of how the possibilities of politics are being built and constrained and rebuilt with time and is therefore a quite good method of estimating estrangement, reconciliation and structural constraints in the South Asian political landscape.

The research time frame extends to 1971 to 2025. This period means the short-term post-secession period, the subsequent normalization period and the changes of the geopolitical processes of the region and the world today. The selection of the sources is based on three inclusion criteria:

- The study on the relations between the countries of the South Asian region, especially Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- The analysis of the themes of partition, nationalism, reconciliation, or integration.
- The selection of the published sources that belong to the reputable academic, policy, or institutional publications. Others that have limited journalistic or speculative content or other articles lacked with scholarly support are also excluded to create the rigor of analysis.

Information will be mined out of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources should be used and this should include regular government announcements, policy papers, diplomatic reports and documents in



the government archives of bilateral affairs and regional programs. Examples of the secondary sources are peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports and reputable think- tank publications. The analytically corpus of writings measures up to about 60-80 texts that ensure breadth in chronological, political, economical, and geopolitical perspectives but seems apparently manageable in the context of the thorough qualitative examination.

The study follows four steps. Analysis of the archival and historical materials on the topic is the first step that will allow tracking down the way the relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh have been developing since 1971. Second, oration on political speeches, policy statements, and scholarly arguments about the nature of the confederation, reconciliation and cooperation concepts by elites, academics and regions players would be done through discourse analysis. Third, thematic coding is used to classify the findings on the primary dimensions that include history, identity, economy, security, as well as geopolitics. Fourth, the future prospects of alignment on redefinition determine the implications of the regional trends are assessed analytically by convergent synthesis in prospect. The triangulation of different kinds of sources in the process will help enhance the validity, minimize the bias in the interpretations and the study will be capable of the reconciliation of the past and the present.

RESULTS/ANALYSIS

This research shows that the conception of a Pakistan-Bangladesh confederation, is motivated by the historical memory and political psychology rather than the modern strategic rationality. The structural bases needed in a lasting confederal scheme were mostly nonexistent even before 1971. Archival documentation and academic commentaries indicate a consistent historical experience of political marginalization, major economic inequalities and inability to institute significant federalism. All this undermined institutional integration to the point at which even a loose confederal structure could not have been effective in achieving legitimacy or operating viability. Of the imbalance of political power, the demographic changes and centralized systems of governance, long-term political integration was impossible. Confederation should therefore be viewed more as a retroactively envisioned lost opportunity than as an option, which, institutionally or socially, could have existed at the moment of separation (Numanoglu and Ergun, 2025).

After the year 1971, even the possibilities of political reunification were farther. Conscious opposition to the Pakistani experience shaped the Bangladeshi national identity with the bases of sovereignty, the language, and the political self-determination to be taken as the main sources of legitimacy in it. It is the discourse of independence in Bangladesh that presents independence as a moral and historical break and thus at the social level any political reconciliation with Pakistan is socially unacceptable. The opposite of this is true in Pakistan, where separation is internalized as a strategic and territorial defeat, yet lacks a long-term policy foundation based on reconciliation. Such unequal stories have expanded as opposed to closing the fictional divide between the two societies and increased estrangement (McDonald, 2025).

Normalization has not seen deep bilateral relations. Trade movement is hampered, institutional collaboration is nonexistent, and interpersonal relationships are underdeveloped. This is more the slack of historical ulterior motives and tiredness, but also the lack of strong economic or security incentives. Both states put more emphasis on other regional and global alliances that can yield more material and strategic gains within a shorter time. So, as of this, Pakistan Bangladesh relations are placed at the periphery of the respective countries diplomatic hierarchies and support minimalist diplomacy, as opposed to strategic convergence (Kumar et al., n.d.).

Simultaneously, the analysis demonstrates that the confederation debate is more of a thought experiment, and not a policy goal. The changes in regional politics, economic pragmatism and generational shift have opened the narrow margins of reassessing bilateral relations in less hostile terms. There is a growing trend by younger political participants, academics and civil society groups toward cooperation in practice, facilitation of trade, connectivity, education and cultural exchange, as opposed to symbolic reconciliation



or political union. This is an indicator of a progressive disconnection with the sentiment-based historical versions to the issue-based sort of engagement. Nevertheless, these changes are not enough to break the structural and psychological barriers (Bates, 2025).

Scenario analysis also shows that a formal confederation would geographically be limited by constitutional incompatibility, power differences, internal politics, and foreign geopolitical influences. Any sudden step in the direction of political integration would most probably cause a sense of instability, social opposition and local strategic fear. The political and security expenses of confederation are more than the hypothetical benefits, which makes the institution not feasible in modern times (Pollatu, n.d.). In general, the results indicate that confederation cannot be a possibility of the future. The analytical merit of it, rather, is that it throws light upon the long-term effects of historical discontinuity, the constraints of South Asian political imagination and the slit doors within which it is possible to re-engage (Alemdar, 2025).

Theme I: Historical Breakage and Constriction of Identity

Sub-themes:

- History of 1971 and open scores.
- Integrity of national identity in Bangladesh.
- Knowledge and symbolic gravity of sovereignty in the two states.

The greatest obstacle to political reintegration has always been historical trauma. That of 1971 is year events preceding a coming-of-identity, especially in Bangladesh, where the independence is an event marked as moral discontinuity. Re-establishing any political order is thus seen as a revisionist or unlawful. Pakistan has made separation a closed chapter, which creates one-sided memory and restricts mutual recognition. Such conflicting accounts produce profound psychological and symbolic opposition against the supranational political formations.

Table 1: Identity-Based Constraints on Confederation

Dimension	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Implication for Confederation
Historical Narrative	Treated as past error	Foundational trauma and victory	Asymmetry in memory
National Identity	Post-1971 strategic reorientation	Identity rooted in separation	Political incompatibility
Public Perception	Low salience	High emotional and moral salience	Popular resistance
Sovereignty Sensitivity	Strategic autonomy emphasized	Independence as sacred principle	Structural rigidity

Theme II: Structural/ Geopolitical Realities

Sub-themes:

- Lack of institutional linkages.
- Different foreign policy interests.
- Indo-Pacific power shifts

Structural conditions are disadvantaged even when identity barriers were softened. Pakistan and Bangladesh are not strongly institutionally, economically or security interdependent. They also have a different foreign policy as Pakistan places more emphasis on strategic balancing whereas Bangladesh focuses on economic diplomacy and integration with the global markets. The power transitions in Indo-Pacific not only create few incentives to engage with but also increase concerns over sovereignty. Geopolitics now supports individual paths as opposed to converging.



Table 2: Structural Conditions Affecting Feasibility

Factor	Current Status	Effect on Confederation
Trade Volume	Low and under-institutionalized	Weak integration base
Strategic Alignment	Divergent	Policy incompatibility
Regional Institutions	Limited bilateral mechanisms	No framework for union
External Power Influence	India, China, U.S. pull differently	Heightened autonomy concerns

These conditions indicate that confederation lacks both political demand and institutional foundations.

Theme III: Good Cooperation as a Pragmatic Renewal

Sub-themes:

- Trade and connectivity
- Multilateral engagement
- Incremental trust-building

Despite this being unlikely since they confederate, the review shows that there is space to reach cooperation, which is incremental. Identities contradictions can be evaded with the help of functional involvement in trade, transport connectivity, education and forums of multilateralism creating functional interdependence. They are not dangerous to national identities and sovereignty compared to political union. They are able to standardize their engagement gradually, reduce suspicion, and form engagement building blocks.

Table 3: Confederation vs. Functional Cooperation

Dimension	Confederation	Functional Cooperation
Political Cost	Extremely high	Low
Identity Impact	Disruptive	Neutral
Institutional Need	Extensive new structures	Use of existing frameworks
Public Acceptance	Low	Moderate to High
Feasibility	Near-zero (short–medium term)	High

Synthesis

The findings prove the main hypothesis historical trauma, identity consolidation, structural divergence make a formal association of Pakistan and Bangladesh only possible in the predictable future. But even these limitations cannot exclude healthy interaction. Functional cooperation is a politically viable way forward that is consistent with the regional reality and sovereignty issues. Confederation is therefore not a realistic configuration but a theoretical prism- showing the level of disjunction, the constrained scope of political imaginings, and the role that must be played by gradualism in post-conflict South Asia.

DISCUSSION

The conclusions of this paper are widely consistent with the literature that views a Pakistan Bangladesh confederation to be politically unrealistic under current circumstances. Previously existing literature focuses on how the 1971 breakage, structural imbalances, and entrenched national identities did not open the door to sustainable political unity (Mahmood et al., 2015; Braithwaite and D'Costa, 2012). That research proves those conclusions and follows the lead of showing that historical trauma and sovereignty sensitivities play a decisive role in political imagination to this day. Nevertheless, the analysis has gone further to expand the literature by placing these limitations in a transformed regional and domestic context, specifically, an economic resurgence, a generational shift, and an increasing strategic confidence of Bangladesh in the minds of the earlier studies, either underestimated or peripheral to the main argument



(Rahman et al., 2009; Mandal, 2024). Instead of regarding identity and history as fixed divides, the results propose that their political prominence is becoming mediated more by practical interests of development, connectivity and globalization.

In this sense, the work is to some degree critical of the determinism of much of the literature about partition and nationalism. Although the argument of Braithwaite and D'Costa (2012) about the Thailand-Bangladesh identity making political reunification unacceptable is convincing, the current analysis reveals that the new generation and economic priorities are changing the conditions of the political discourse. The power of historical memory still exists, yet, it does not work as the obstruct to be the single axis of political awareness (Mandal, 2024). In the same manner, bilateral relations scholarship has focused on the aspect of inertia and limited engagement (Glynn, 2016); but nowadays, specific tendencies (such as the aggressive statecraft in Bangladesh and the updated regional stance) suggest that the strategy landscape could be more vibrant (Hasan, 2012; Rahman et al., 2009). The results hence complicate the current belief that Pakistan Bangladesh relations are frozen structurally.

These contributions can be explained by revisiting the research questions. To begin with, the issue of feasibility ascertainment establishes that the formal confederation is structurally and politically unsustainable in the present South Asian order. This result supports the prevailing academic opinion (Mahmood et al., 2015; Biswas and Mahmood, 2019). Second, the analysis confirms that political reintegration remains limited due to past trauma, the establishment of national identities, and the sovereignty issues, which advocates the central ideas of literature concentrating on nationalism (Braithwaite and D'Costa, 2012). Three, but the study contributes to the literature because it demonstrates that incremental cooperation in the trade, connectivity, and multilateral engagement are not only an added value but are the most plausible streams in the way of changing bilateral relations. The fact is also echoed in the works of the functionalists in the analysis of regionalism (Ahmad, 1978) but reevaluates them in the context of the post-conflict reconciliation (Dutta, 2015).

The confederation argument is, therefore, more of a road map to political union rather than a diagnostic instrument that can be used in understanding the changing strategic anxieties of the South Asian region. According to Saxena (2014), these types of thought experiments conceptualize the inflexibility of historical frontiers and force policymakers to rethink inherited assumptions. What is lacking today is institutional trust, political legitimacy, and social acceptance which can be emphasized by the hypothetical gains of confederation, which include, economic integration, strategic realignment and security coordination (Akbar, 2010). Any such vision is further exacerbated by external actors and power politics in the region (Burki et al., 2019). This, in turn, turns the discourse itself into a sign of uncertainty, not necessarily of what is to come in the region, but of something bigger (Pattanayak and Prusty, n. d.).

Implications for the Future

These findings have two implications. Conjecturatively, they argue that historical break in post-conflict areas ought to be perceived as demarcating, as opposed to indeterminately shutting down, political prospects. Political imagination is subject to change as it passes through generations when economic change is to occur, and when geopolitical realignment is to ensue. In practice, the findings say that policy makers should dump the dichotomous thinking of separation and reunification. Institutional fantasies of confederation will never be the future of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, but its continued, low-cost, high-impact cooperation, i.e., facilitation of trade, transport connectivity, exchange of educational services, and multilateral coordination. Stability in South Asia, as LaPorte (1972) had forecasted in the former debates of region, will come not through resurrection of the past unions but through reconstitution of relationships in terms of realism, mutual respect and the current geopolitical conditions. Political union is not the most plausible way to achieve reconciliation and regional resiliency; instead, functional cooperation is a likely way to go.

CONCLUSION



This paper proves that the idea of having a confederation between Pakistan and Bangladesh is more of a strategic imagination than a policy horizon. The legacies of 1971, which have found their entrenchment in political institutions, collective memory, and the national identity, will go on to frame the bilateral relations and make political reintegration extremely unlikely in the current domestic and regional circumstances. However, the analysis also demonstrates that confederation has analytical worthiness beyond impracticality: it reveals the role of historical ruptures to South Asian strategic thinking and how reconciliation is limited in the lack of trust, accountability and engagement. Political imagination there is still constrained not by material interests but unresolved histories of legitimacy, loss and responsibility (Leidhold, 2025).

Meanwhile, there is a more plausible direction of future relations, which is also indicated by the findings. Instead of massive institutional initiatives, selective and incremental functional collaboration provides the most legitimate prospect. Trade activities, exchanges, education cooperation and connectivity are politically acceptable means of interrelation which are non-threatening to sovereignty and non-eliciting to social opposition. The low-priced, high-value initiatives can allow space to benefit each other and will progressively dull the fixed perceptions as time goes by (Shamai, 2025).

Finally, the debate of confederation does not rise on the basis of restoring the departure of a dead political arrangement but rather questioning how the record regulates the realm of possibility. Although a dynamic re-engagement between the two parties is also exceptionally far-fetched by a dramatic reunion, there are possibilities of re-engagement based on realism, mutual respect, and regional pragmatism. The history of discontinuity is not something that closes any possibilities of the future but, on the contrary, establishes the harsh terms according to which a reconciliation and collaboration can be born (Basu et al., 2025).

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