



# EXPLOITER SERIES

## Sociocultural Exploitation of Bangladesh

*The Exploiter Series unveils key actors and their motivations for exploiting local and regional vulnerabilities that advance their strategic interests and disrupt national, regional, and global security and stability. It uses a rigorous social science-based approach grounded in the Exploitable Conditions Framework (ECF).*

### KEY JUDGMENT

Bangladesh faces systemic and persistent vulnerabilities, including widespread corruption that affects services at the national, divisional, and district levels. This allows state actors, such as China, to use their geographic proximity and debt connections to effect decisions made in Daka. Currently, China's financial assistance constitutes about six percent of Bangladesh's external debt, allowing Beijing to exert coercive influence on the country's leaders, even as Chinese companies develop vital infrastructure there.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, violent Islamist movements—such as Jamaat-e-Islami, Hefazat-e-Islam, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and Islamic State—Khorasan Province (ISIS-K)—leverage economic inequalities and disaster-related shocks to incite social unrest.

### KEY IMPLICATIONS

#### Political Instability and Radicalization

Persistent governance shortfalls and economic instability drive social unrest and radicalization. Rivalries among political parties, frequent transitions, and weak institutions open windows for malign actors, increasing the likelihood of violence that could impinge on U.S., Allied, and partner basing or overflight corridors during contingency operations.

#### Foreign Influence and Dependency

Exploitative labor practices in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector and record overseas worker remittances tightly link household incomes to external market demand. Reduced foreign direct investment and increased reliance on developmental finance heighten Bangladesh's vulnerability to China's economic coercion.

#### Humanitarian Crises and Resource Strain

Environmental shocks magnify governance strain, forcing largescale displacement and giving both China and Islamist charities opportunities to offer conditional aid that enhances influence.

### ADVERSARY EXPLOITERS

China



Islamist Groups



### ECF Assessment

Cross-border Encroachment



Demographic Pressures



Divided Societies



Economic Inequality



Environmental Threats



Illicit Networks



Ineffective Government



Infrastructure Deficits



Mobilizing Ideologies



Multiple Sovereignities



Resource Scarcity



"Technification" of Society



Not Relevant      Relevant  
Somewhat Relevant      Highly Relevant

### DOMINANT CONDITIONS

Economic instability, ineffective government, and environmental threats regularly interact to increase instability—creating opportunities for exploitation by malign actors, particularly China, and fundamental religious ideologies.

# ANALYTIC BACKGROUNDER

## Geographic Context

Bangladesh lies in the low-lying Ganges–Brahmaputra Delta, bordered by India and Myanmar and less than 1,200 miles from China, with a long coastline along the Bay of Bengal. Frequent cyclones and monsoon floods routinely breach embankments and devastate cropland. Its fertile plains support agriculture and trade, but the extensive river systems intensify flooding risks, which growers have not been able to mitigate on a large scale. Aside from weather hazards, Bangladesh’s porous western and southeastern borders enable informal trade, human trafficking, and Rohingya refugee flows that strain local resources and security forces.



Figure 1: (Source: TRADOC G-2)

## Economic Landscape

Bangladesh’s economy has expanded rapidly, powered by the RMG industry (84 percent of exports) and overseas remittances (USD \$27B in 2024, up 22 percent year-on-year).<sup>2, 3</sup> Because the economy depends so heavily on low-wage RMG jobs and migrant income, it is highly exposed to external demand shocks. Although poverty is steadily declining, nearly 20 percent of Bangladeshi citizens are living below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup> The informal sector employs about 85 percent of workers,<sup>5</sup> offering little regulation or social protection and perpetuating economic instability. Bangladesh’s Gini coefficient increased to 0.50,<sup>6</sup> but improved to 0.32 in 2024,<sup>a</sup> indicating a reduction in the income gap, which is linked to its decreasing poverty rates.<sup>7</sup> Labor demand already exceeds local supply in export zones, driving factories to recruit migrants from rural districts and heightening the stakes of disruptions in remittance-sending markets.



*Bangladeshi citizens living below poverty line (2025)*

**19%**

**85%**  
*jobs lacking contracts or social protections*



<sup>a</sup> The Gini coefficient is a statistical measure of income or wealth inequality within a population, ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality), where higher values indicate greater disparity.



## Political History

In 1971, following the Liberation War between East and West Pakistan, East Pakistan seceded from Pakistan and became the sovereign state of Bangladesh. Since its independence, Bangladesh has experienced multiple periods of political instability, including military coups and eras of authoritarian rule. The rivalry between the two major political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has often paralyzed governance, resulting in strikes, political violence, and gridlock. Corruption remains pervasive, with Bangladesh ranking 149th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Nearly 71 percent of households reported paying a bribe in 2023.<sup>8</sup> Allegations of human rights abuses and manipulation of democratic institutions, such as the judiciary and the Elections Commission, further erode public trust in government, creating opportunities for foreign intervention and internal unrest.

## Sociocultural Dynamics

Bangladesh is predominantly Muslim, with minorities including Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. Although the country is generally known for religious tolerance, political actors and extremist groups sometimes aggravate underlying social tensions. Rapid population growth and urbanization strain the country's infrastructure and resources, intensifying social tensions. This combined with high poverty rates and economic inequality, make Bangladesh susceptible to radical groups, both secular and Islamist, as well as foreign actors who would manipulate societal discord for their own strategic or political gains.



Figure 2: Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:4.Bangladesh\\_quota\\_reform\\_movement\\_2024.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:4.Bangladesh_quota_reform_movement_2024.jpg)

# EXPLOITATION BY U.S. ADVERSARIES

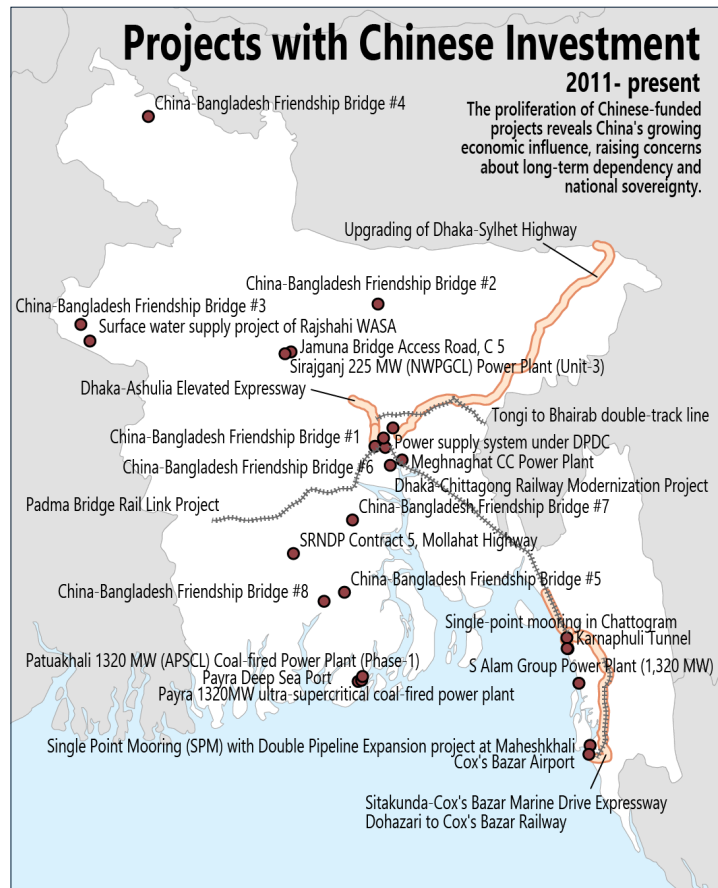


Figure 3: (Source: TRADOC G-2)

China's ability to gain influence and access is based on its extensive infrastructure projects in the country. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) funds significant projects,<sup>9</sup> including the Padma Bridge and the Karnaphuli Tunnel, enhancing trade routes and connectivity, which are crucial for Bangladesh's economy. These investments have raised concerns about debt dependency, however, as Bangladesh owes China approximately six percent of its total foreign debt.<sup>10</sup> While Bangladesh has managed its debt prudently thus far, its continued dependence on Chinese loans for critical infrastructure increases its economic vulnerability and gives China leverage over Bangladesh's political decisions. China is interested in Bangladesh primarily because it allows China access to the Bay of Bengal, as well as positioning China to accomplish other geopolitical objectives.<sup>11</sup>

**Islamist groups** in Bangladesh, including Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Hefazat-e-Islam, use religious tropes to stoke existing social conflicts created by Bangladesh's sociopolitical instability, weak governance, and economic inequality. Islamist organizations state openly that their objective is a Sharia-based polity; JI's 2024 manifesto calls for "Islamic constitutional order," and Hefazat-e-Islam rallies demand blasphemy laws. In Bangladesh, as in other countries, these groups are using violence and religious ideologies as a means of control.<sup>12, 13</sup> Islamist groups have expanded their influence in both urban and rural areas via political participation as mainstream political parties such as the AL and BNP have lost ground as a result of internal strife and corruption.<sup>14</sup> These Islamist parties have become even more influential as mainstream parties have failed to meet the public's needs. Islamist groups readily fill the governance gaps and provide social services where the state fails, capitalizing on popular grievances, which has allowed them to advance their radical agendas.



# ECF ASSESSMENT



**Cross-border Encroachment: Relevant.** Porous land borders with India and Myanmar and a 580-km coast open to the Bay of Bengal enable illicit timber, methamphetamine, and human trafficking routes while facilitating insurgent and refugee flows that undercut Dhaka's security control in its southwest and southeast districts.



**Demographic Pressures: Relevant.** Rapid population growth and a youth bulge strain resources, infrastructure, and social services. These pressures heighten economic inequality and fuel mobilizing ideologies, contributing to political instability and social divisions among marginalized populations.



**Divided Societies: Relevant.** Religious and ethnic tensions, particularly involving the Rohingya minority and Islamist groups, create societal divisions that can be exploited to fuel conflict and instability. Intense political rivalry between the AL and BNP creates exploitable divisions.



**Economic Inequality: Highly Relevant.** Although poverty is steadily declining, income inequality is increasing. A small economic elite controls a large portion of the nation's wealth. Low-wage, labor-intensive jobs are pervasive and unstable, e.g., the garment industry, informal services, or subsistence farming, only widening the gap.



**Environmental Threats: Highly Relevant.** Bangladesh faces an increased rate of natural disasters, including cyclones and floods, leading to internal displacement, resource scarcity, and other humanitarian crises.



**Illicit Networks: Relevant.** Transnational criminal networks involved in trafficking drugs, people, and counterfeit goods exploit weak law enforcement and porous borders. These activities fuel local crime, strain the economy, and exacerbate addiction, corruption, and human exploitation.



**Ineffective Government: Highly Relevant.** Endemic corruption, weak institutions, and political instability hinder effective governance, delivery of services, and public resource management.



**Infrastructure Deficits: Relevant.** Inadequate infrastructure, particularly transportation, energy, and sanitation, hinders economic development and resilience to environmental shocks.



**Mobilizing Ideologies: Relevant.** Islamist and nationalist groups, while not pervasive, can take advantage of popular economic grievances and foment unrest in support of their agendas.



**Multiple Sovereignties: Somewhat Relevant.** Pockets of limited state authority exist where non-state actors, e.g., Islamic charities in Cox's Bazar and armed groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts, deliver justice, education or protection. Citizens are forced to negotiate governance with non-state entities.



**Resource Scarcity: Relevant.** Water scarcity, land degradation, and resource competition, particularly in the densely populated delta region, contribute to social and economic tensions.



**"Technification" of Society: Somewhat Relevant.** Bangladesh has seen improvements in digital infrastructure, especially in urban areas, but suffers from inconsistent internet quality, limited rural coverage, weak cybersecurity standards, and insufficient data protection laws.



Not Relevant



Somewhat Relevant



Relevant



Highly Relevant



# DOMINANT CONDITIONS



## Ineffective Government

***Endemic corruption, weak institutions, and systemic political instability severely hinder Bangladesh's federal***

***and local governments' ability to govern, manage public resources, and find long-term solutions to socioeconomic challenges and threats of natural disaster.*** Pervasive corruption throughout political and administrative systems diverts resources from essential public services, worsens poverty, and intensifies economic inequality. Weak institutional capacity further undermines the Bangladeshi government's ability to govern. Government agencies often lack the resources, expertise, and autonomy to implement policies efficiently, leading to delays in implementing public sector projects. Political

instability also intensifies governance challenges: the rivalry between the AL and the BNP frequently results in political gridlock, strikes, and civil unrest. Political and civil instability disrupts economic activities, deters foreign investment, and creates uncertainty, culminating in events such as the student-led protests and a military-led transitional government in 2024. Historically, politically connected business elites, influential landowners, and patronage networks within major political parties have consistently leveraged weak governance, regulatory gaps, and limited oversight to secure personal and group benefits. These entrenched groups are likely to perpetuate this behavior unless the government implements substantial governance reforms and stronger anti-corruption enforcement mechanisms.

### Government effectiveness

# 11.3 percent

(0=lowest – 100=highest)

### Transparency Intl Corruption Perception Index

# 149th

out of 180 countries

### A Closer Look

***Governance problems intensify nearly every other condition, especially economic inequalities, infrastructure deficits, and resource scarcity, as well as fueling ideological movements and environmental problems.*** Weak institutions and corrupt systems hinder the country's ability to develop and prosper. As a result, the government has struggled to implement a long-term economic plan and cannot respond effectively to natural disasters without foreign subsidies. Weak institutions result in unreliable and insufficient infrastructure and limited access to basic resources. Government infighting also stokes racial divides and helps mobilize ideologically driven factions.



## Economic Inequality

***Economic inequalities are pervasive throughout Bangladesh.***

Approximately 85 percent of Bangladesh's workforce operates in the informal sector, which lacks regulation, social protection, and formal financial services, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and with limited opportunities for social mobility.<sup>15</sup> Although Bangladesh reduced its national poverty rate from over 40 percent in 2000 to approximately 20 percent in 2024, and the country has achieved strong annual GDP growth for the past decade, wealth remains unevenly distributed. Furthermore, high-interest microfinance loans trap rural residents in their situations, thus further entrenching the extant poverty.<sup>16</sup> Ethnic minorities face disproportionately high poverty levels and limited access to education and healthcare, perpetuating socioeconomic marginalization, particularly in border areas where diverse ethnic groups struggle against political and economic marginalization in the allocation of resources, such as in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.<sup>17, 18</sup> This urban-rural disparity drives migration to the cities, where informal, nonsecure employment predominates. Women face wage gaps, poor working conditions, and higher unemployment rates than men, despite being essential to industries like garment manufacturing.

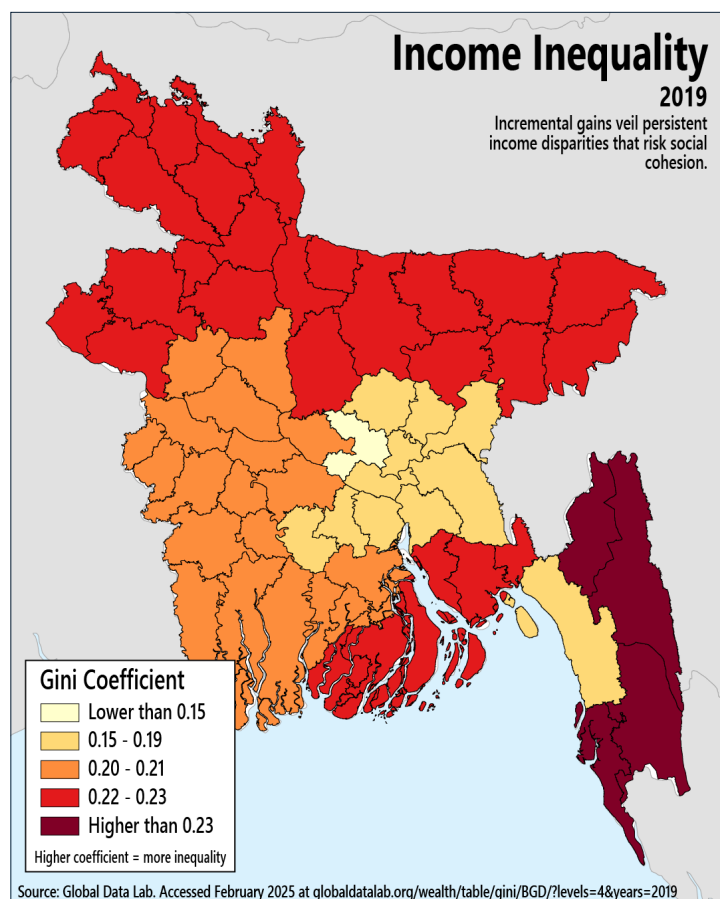


Figure 4: (Source: TRADOC G-2)

Gender disparities in access to education and healthcare also limit women's full economic participation.<sup>19</sup>



### A Closer Look

***Economic inequality prevents social advancement, fosters social unrest, and provides opportunities for malign actors to gain influence. The garment industry and gig economies anchor Bangladesh's trade, augmented by remittances.*** While the country's economy is improving, the trickle-down effects that impact inequality are not improving **the most proximate conditions—specifically, informal employment vulnerability, limited access to education and healthcare, and persistent rural-urban economic disparities.** Economic inequality fuels social unrest—especially between Bengali nationalist groups, Islamic groups, and the political left and right<sup>b</sup>—and undermines government legitimacy, impeding societal progress and leaving the poor vulnerable to further exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>b</sup> Bengali nationalism, Islamist groups such as JI and Hefazat-e-Islam, and socialist movements leverage socio-economic grievances to mobilize public support, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. These groups exploit poverty, unemployment, and dissatisfaction with governance to build political influence through social services and protest activities. External actors and political parties have also used these movements opportunistically, contributing to persistent instability.



## Environmental Threats

**The Global Climate Risk Index consistently ranks Bangladesh among the countries most vulnerable to climate-related crises.**

Situated on the low-lying Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, Bangladesh is particularly susceptible to natural disasters, including cyclones, floods, tsunamis, storm surges, coastal erosion, and subsequent forced displacement. The effects are devastating and intensify existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities. With an average of 1 to 2 cyclones per year, the country regularly experiences widespread displacement, significant loss of life, and extensive economic damage. For example, in 2020 Cyclone Amphan affected over 2.6 million people and caused more than \$13 billion in damages, which required aid from external sources including the UN, USAID, and the EU.<sup>21</sup> Rising sea levels threaten to inundate vast coastal areas, potentially displacing millions and jeopardizing food security as agricultural land becomes saline and unusable.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Bangladesh regularly faces frequent and severe flooding. The annual monsoon season often results in riverine floods that disrupt lives and livelihoods. In 2017, for instance, floods affected over eight million people and damaged approximately 700,000 homes. Landslides present an additional risk, particularly in the hilly regions of southeastern Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup>



### A Closer Look

**Environmental threats amplify economic inequalities, infrastructure deficits, resource scarcity, and ineffective governance.** Close to half the country's population live within 10 meters of sea level. Natural disasters disproportionately impact poorer communities reliant on agriculture and fragile infrastructure, leading to job and income losses that intensify poverty. Environmental pressures also drive migration, straining urban infrastructure and creating new socioeconomic challenges.



**46%**  
**Bangladeshi Citizens**

*living within 10 meters of sea level*

## Major Natural Disasters

2004 - 2024

Bangladesh suffers primarily from cyclone events. These highlight the critical need for resilient infrastructure and disaster preparedness to mitigate ongoing environmental and socioeconomic impacts.

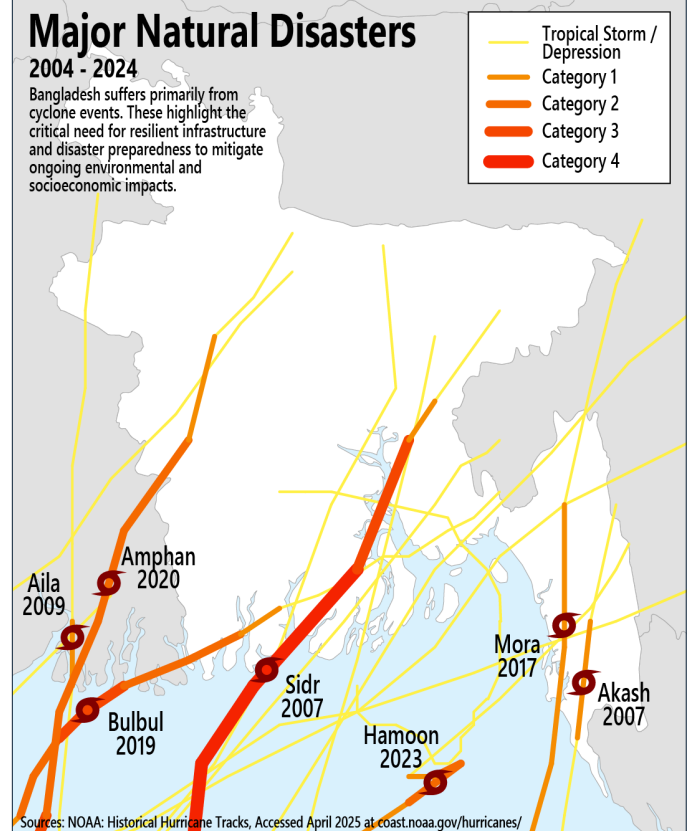


Figure 5: (Source: TRADOC G-2)

## Population in Elevation Zones

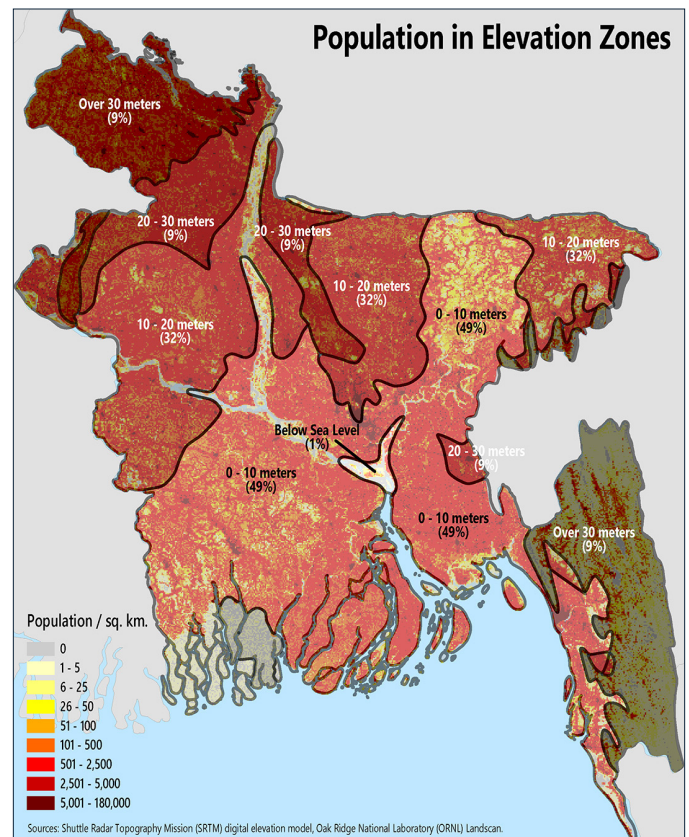


Figure 6: (Source: TRADOC G-2)



# KEY IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIOCULTURAL EXPLOITATION

## For Bangladesh

- **Economic Dependency:** If current trends continue, Bangladesh's economic dependency on Beijing is poised to grow. The period following the next national elections will be particularly critical; weak domestic institutions already constrain the Ministry of Finance's ability to negotiate favorable debt terms, and any post-election political instability could hand China greater leverage. This leverage could extend beyond tariff policy to include the adoption of Chinese digital-network standards, a move that would lock Bangladesh into Beijing's technological ecosystem and create long-term economic reliance on its hardware and software.
- **Political Instability, Security Concerns, and Social Unrest:** Weakly governed or ungoverned areas allow for further rise of Islamic and leftist movements, who displace the government in some areas and hinder economic and infrastructure development efforts.
- **Environmental displacement will surge after each severe cyclone,** with government estimates projecting 1 million new internally displaced people by 2028; this will strain budgetary and security resources and increase requests for U.S., Allied, and partner humanitarian support.
- **Community and Cultural Displacement:** Environmental threats, compounded by ineffective governance and strained public resources, will likely continue to displace communities, weaken social resilience, fuel long-term social fragmentation, and increase distrust in the government.

## For South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region

- **Shift in the Regional Power Dynamics:** India's interest in counterbalancing China in the region using competing investment strategies, especially in areas like Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar, could spark regional tensions between China and India. India is already providing developmental lines of credit, donating radar along the coastline, and establishing rail links to counter Beijing's influence in Bangladesh. New Delhi is likely to accelerate these programs, particularly around 2027, as this marks the first full year following Bangladesh's pivotal graduation from the UN's Least Developed Country (LDC) status. This economic transition will heighten the need for infrastructure investment and intensify regional competition with Beijing, especially if China moves forward with its plans to provide surveillance packages for Chittagong port.<sup>24</sup>
- **Regional Environmental Cooperation:** Environmental challenges, such as flooding and rising sea levels, will strain regional cooperation over shared resources such as potable water, which is already a matter of contention between India and Bangladesh. Shared river management disputes like those around the Teesta and the Ganges are likely to intensify. Any perception that Dhaka is sliding deeper into China's orbit will harden New Delhi's stance on water-sharing and trigger it to press Bangladesh to finalize agreements on border-fencing and provide expanded transit from mainland India to its northeastern states.<sup>25</sup>

- **Migration Pressures:** Increasing environmental threats, coupled with socioeconomic and sociopolitical unrest, may increase migration pressures across South Asia, adding to the region's already complex refugee and migration crises. These issues could spill over into neighboring countries, requiring coordinated regional policies to mitigate long-term destabilizing effects.<sup>26</sup>

### For the United States

- **Challenges to U.S. Strategic Interests and Reduced U.S. Influence:** Bangladesh's reliance on foreign aid and investment, particularly from China, undermines U.S. influence in the region. Bangladesh is in debt to China for critical infrastructure projects, which may afford China even more influence and control, potentially reducing the effectiveness of U.S. diplomatic and economic initiatives.<sup>27</sup>
- **Challenges to U.S. Military Cooperation Efforts:** While Bangladesh and the United States engage in security cooperation, political instability and Islamist group influence create uncertainties around Bangladesh's future security policies. U.S. efforts to combat transnational threats, such as terrorism and human trafficking, may suffer as Bangladesh navigates these competing pressures.
- **Increased Demand for U.S. Humanitarian Aid and Assistance:** The United States has delivered humanitarian assistance after every Category 4 cyclone since 2007; USAID and DoD assets conducted five major relief operations in the last decade, most recently Pacific Angel 2022. Continued or increased tempo is likely as disaster frequency rises. U.S. humanitarian assistance and disaster relief will be vital to Bangladesh's resilience and stability, and U.S. influence in the country.



## METHODOLOGY

### A Grounded Theory Approach to Sociocultural Exploitation in Bangladesh

Adapted Grounded Theory Methodology (AGTM) facilitates a comprehensive analysis of sociocultural conditions to identify patterns and connections within data by moving it through three analytic phases: **Open**, **Axial**, and **Selective analysis**. In the Open phase, data is systematically labeled, which includes collation, segmentation, review, and comparison of data. The goal is to identify key factors related to sociocultural conditions and vulnerabilities. During the Axial phase, analysts establish relationships between the exploiter(s) and the conditions that enable exploitation, using GCKN's Exploitable Conditions Framework (ECF)<sup>28</sup> as a foundation. The ECF helps analysts observe and understand the dynamic qualities of societal structures, the influence of motivated actors, and the vulnerabilities that arise within them. The Selective phase focuses on enhancing the analytical connections, resulting in a narrative explanation of how and why exploitation occurs. The ECF provides a structured means to link vulnerabilities with threat actor activities, thereby supporting security analysis aimed at anticipating, explaining, and mitigating threats to stability and security.

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Page 2. Figure 1: Bangladesh and connecting countries, *maps*, Keith French, OE-I TRADOC G-2, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

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## Author

With over 30 years of experience, **Dr. Marcus Griffin** is a cultural anthropologist and military researcher specializing in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. He excels in planning and assessment, delivering innovative solutions to complex challenges. He provides training workshops in Operational Design, Red Teaming, and Human Terrain, empowering military staff in the information environment. His expertise enhances military and governmental operations through social science research, operational planning, and program assessment.

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