Implications of Assam's NRC - India's Neighbourhood and Bangladesh

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What is the issue?

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- The last date for filing claims and objections for Assam’s National Register of Citizens (NRC) has been extended by the Supreme Court by 15 days from December 15, 2018.
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- The outcome of the NRC exercise has implications for India’s ties with Bangladesh.
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Why is Bangladesh significant for India?

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- According to the latest available Bangladesh government estimates of 2009, more than 500,000 Indians were working in Bangladesh.
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- More recently, Bangladesh was reported to be among the highest source of remittances to India, behind the UAE, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the U.K.
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- Many Indian citizens are securing employment opportunities in Bangladesh through MNCs, NGOs and trading activities.
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- Most of them are employed in advantageous jobs in Bangladesh while Bangladeshis in India are largely employed in low-paying jobs.
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- More importantly, it is to be noted that there are legal as well as illegal Indian immigrants in Bangladesh too.
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What is the tussle?

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- The government maintains that the NRC is an administrative task overseen by the Supreme Court, and not a political one.
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- However, some members of the ruling party have been making hateful anti-migration and anti-Bangladeshi comments.
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- This reflects poorly on the prevalent positive relationship between Bangladesh and India.
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- Also, Indian PM has assured the Bangladesh government that those excluded from the NRC will not be deported.
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- But Bangladesh has so far been silent on the issue, terming it as an ‘internal matter of India’.
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- Notably, Bangladesh is already at the extremes in terms of use of resources and manpower to host Rohingya refugees.
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- So it would not be acceding to a request of taking back Bengali-speaking Muslims in case deportation is initiated.
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How is India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy performing?

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- The ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy of the Government of India seems to be undergoing a transformation in the recent period.
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- **Nepal** - Nepal, once a time-tested ally of India, has tilted towards China.
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- This is particularly since the 2015 Nepal blockade barring the entry of fuel, medicine and other vital supplies.
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- Nepal now has been given access to four Chinese ports at Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang.
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- This is in addition to access to its dry (land) ports at Lanzhou, Lhasa and Xigatse, as well as roads to these facilities.
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- These seem to be ending India’s monopoly to Nepal's trading routes.
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- **Bhutan** - The India-Bhutan relationship has also been strained.
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- This is witnessed ever since India temporarily withdrew subsidies on cooking gas and kerosene in 2013, constraining bilateral ties.
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- The Doklam stand-off of 2017 reinforced Bhutan’s scepticism towards Chinese expansionist plans across the region.
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- Simultaneously, this landlocked kingdom has been underlining its aspiration to affirm its sovereignty.
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- E.g. it has stepped out of India’s diplomatic influence, as evidenced by its withdrawal from BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) motor vehicles agreement
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- **Bangladesh** - With China making inroads into South Asia and India’s backyard, Bangladesh has been the most trusted ally of India.
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- On the security front, it has cooperated in India’s crackdown on insurgents.
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- With close cooperation with Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), a number of training places and hideouts of these insurgents (in Bangladesh) has been reduced to almost zero.
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- Annual bilateral trade is set to cross the $9 billion mark, making it India’s biggest trading partner in South Asia.
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- In addition, Bangladesh has facilitated connectivity with the Northeast by allowing the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports.
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- However, the following issues remain unresolved, being irritants in the relationship -
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i. the Teesta water-sharing issue
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ii. non-tariff barriers on Bangladeshi exports
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iii. border killings
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- **Others** - The India-China power play has also cast its shadow over Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the last few years.
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What do these imply?

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- The NRC compilation exercise has sparked a debate around its political, economic and humanitarian consequences.
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- The issue threatens to disturb the equilibrium in India-Bangladesh ties.
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- Any deportation of those not in the NRC list is not only politically unwise but also risk inciting unrest across the region.
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Source: The Hindu

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