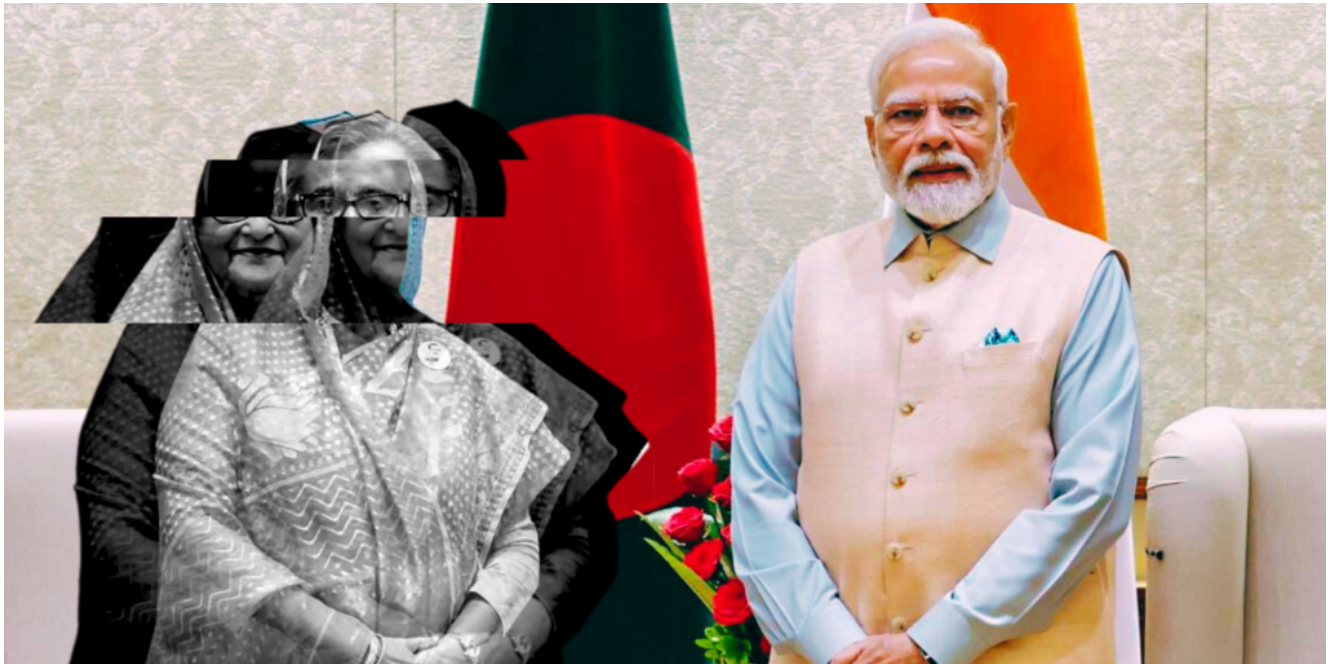


# India-Bangladesh after Hasina

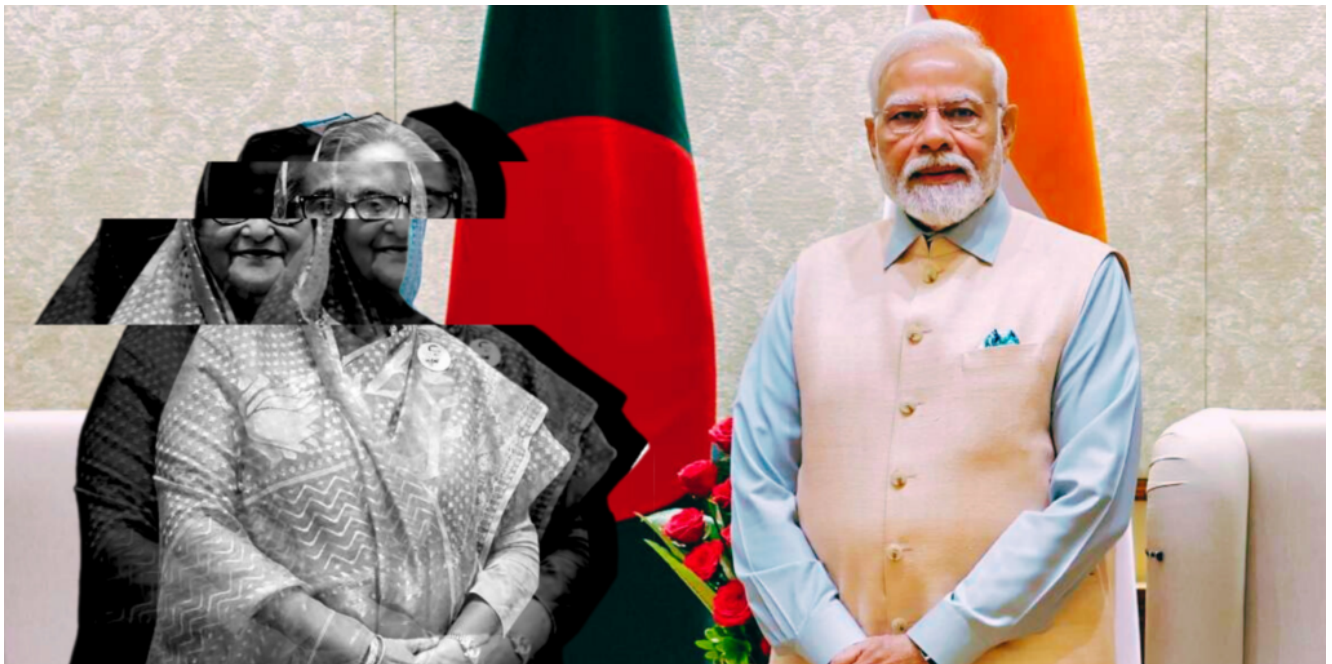
August 14, 2024



## ***Delhi's unfortunate and limiting policy framework***

The ongoing collapse of the previously dominant Awami League, coupled with Sheikh Hasina's hasty 'escape' from the country and the ongoing institutional changes in Bangladesh, has brought an end to India's Bangladesh policy framework of the past 15 years. Until now, India's policy focus has been to ensure Bangladesh does not fall entirely into China's orbit, while relying on Sheikh Hasina to independently address India's justified concerns regarding extremism within Bangladesh. The former Prime Minister's impressive economic record and secular credentials only reinforced the wide gap in terms of India's preferences within Bangladesh. This framework also worked to gradually increase the divide between Delhi and the wider Bangladeshi polity and society. India's own engagement with alternative parties such as the BNP was dependent on Hasina's comfort; and, over time, India's understanding of the parties and Bangladesh politics became increasingly influenced by Hasina's own view and interests. This eventually led to an 'interpretation fog' regarding 'adverse' developments in the country, further [reinforced](#) by

the lack of real options and cognitive bias. While pride and hope had filled the streets of Bangladesh in early August, the mood in Delhi has been much more somber and pessimistic.



In Delhi, there was hope that as Hasina guided Bangladesh towards becoming a middle-income country, the increasing prosperity and stability would naturally counteract revisionist and extremist elements within Bangladeshi society. While the narrative in Bangladesh has been of a hegemonic India engaged in 'crowd control' in a neighboring country through the Awami League, the reality maybe somewhat different; with Sheikh Hasina being more in the driver's seat than is often assumed. The fall of Awami League and Hasina now leaves India with no choice but to gradually construct a new policy framework. Shared economic interests, after all, necessitates engagement. The Indian government's responses to the developments have been careful and measured despite the shrill media coverage. This indicates a willingness to undertake a new approach towards Bangladesh in light of such radical shifts and a delayed appreciation of the true extent of popular angst towards the Awami League and, by extension, India.

***Drivers of future policy***

It is more than likely that India's policy towards Bangladesh will be a function of the following five main factors:

- Delhi's assessment of the nature and orientation of the BNP as it exists today; as well as the other significant actors in the political landscape;
- The direction that the anti-India sentiment takes in the coming months;
- The intensification of targeted attacks on minority groups (mainly Hindus), along with the possibility of setting off a new wave of refugees towards India;
- The coming government's policy towards China and Pakistan; and,
- Potential domestic political reverberations of the crisis within India.

Presently, most of these factors are hard to anticipate and requires a wait and see approach. In the meantime, the most reliable and consequential factor influencing the approach appears to be India's current perception of the BNP. Even as its reservations towards the party are likely to remain very strong, Delhi is likely to adopt a more open-minded lens towards this emergent party that had been almost written-off in previous years.

### ***An ideal but possible scenario***

Perhaps more fundamentally, Delhi is once again in the backseat. If Delhi failed to anticipate the extent of public anger against Hasina, it is equally unlikely to confidently

anticipate the shape of things to come within Bangladesh. After all, Bangladeshis themselves are likely to be unsure about what lies ahead. The liberal intelligentsia in Bangladesh is strongly committed to avoiding a situation similar to the Arab Spring, and there is extensive discussion about the lessons learned from those events.

In the most optimistic scenario, the interim government takes greater control over administration and law and order and is able to conduct elections within the coming months. In this scenario, the BNP emerges as the strongest political party and forms the new government. The BNP thereby adopts a moderate and pragmatic style of politics even as it takes a very assertive stance towards India on certain economic and nationalistic issues. India is likely to be content with such a scenario given that it does not entail a major shift towards Pakistan, or a significant enabling hand to the Jamaat, or any momentum towards renewal of support for insurgencies in the North East. Of these tacit hopes, the BNP's ability to separate itself from the Jamaat will be perhaps the strongest source of assurance for Delhi.

For a decade, BNP officials have sought to convey to Delhi that its policies have been myopic and that Delhi's interests are served by having better relations with the party. In a sense, India has an opportunity to test this hypothesis, i.e., if the BNP is still willing to abide by it. Recent statements from party leaders indicate that the BNP outreach to India is still active, albeit with a much stronger bargaining hand. Bereft of a strong ideology and internal weaknesses, the BNP is likely to lean on its anti-India credentials rhetorically, made all the more tempting by the prevailing public anger against India. Delhi, with its history of engaging non-friendly political parties in the region, is capable of overlooking such public posturing as long as it does not reflect fully in public and foreign policy.

***Delhi's interests and future 'friends'?***

Over time, Delhi may also realize that it has like-minded allies and friends within Bangladesh other than Hasina. Given that the uprising against Hasina was led by progressive and secular forces in the form of the student movement, neither the BNP nor the military is in a position to completely sideline the movement yet. The liberal press and civil society's realism-laden engagement with the meaning of the uprising and its associated dangers is also a welcome sign. This suggests that India can [rely](#) upon such forces to balance the BNP's possible forays into extremism. Delhi does not need to be 'liked' by progressive forces within Bangladesh, as long as the latter shares India's concerns regarding Bangladesh's future political orientation. The wider uprising might have been predominantly driven by hatred towards Sheikh Hasina's personality and rule, but it has also been [against](#) the more well-known autocratic one-party state system that Bangladesh has suffered through for most of its 50 years history. Large sections of the population will be loath to passively witness the subversion of their recent historic achievements by yet another autocratic family and political party. The BNP's terrible [record](#) in terms of deterring and countering extremism and terrorism during its last terms in power (owing to its own cynical politics) is also likely to serve as a useful reminder.

Such relative signs of optimism may nudge India to adopt a more flexible and patient approach towards a new Bangladesh and perhaps a new BNP. India's recent setbacks and unwelcome surprises in its own neighborhood are likely to lead to policy introspection, rather than adherence to set ways of policy and approach. As upheavals in South Asian societies continue and intensify, Delhi will have no choice but to engage with parties and individuals it finds uncomfortable, from Afghanistan to the Maldives and now to Bangladesh. Given that the dust has not settled in Bangladesh, India may have an opportunity to also adopt a new form of approach towards civil society, liberal press, student groups and intelligentsia

within Bangladesh and one that is based on mutual understanding.