

# PREVENTING A SUNSET IN THE EAST

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## India-Bangladesh Ties After Hasina



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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report dissects the seismic diplomatic rupture between India and Bangladesh following Sheikh Hasina's ouster in August 2024. The report argues that functional cooperation—spanning border security, water sharing, and trade—has been weaponized by political grievances under Muhammad Yunus's Interim Government. This erosion of trust is compounded by Dhaka's geopolitical pivot toward Pakistan and China, fueling New Delhi's fears of a two-front security threat.

Domestically, a volatile transition looms: the Awami League is sidelined, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and new actors, such as the National Citizens' Party, position themselves for the February 2026 elections. Ultimately, the report warns that without immediate intervention, temporary frictions risk hardening into permanent structural impediments. The path forward requires "bleeding valve" diplomacy—the activation of Track II channels to restore good faith before and after the elections. India must diversify its engagement beyond the Awami League to manage the transition, ensuring that the political sunset of the Hasina era does not plunge bilateral ties into permanent darkness.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AL: Awami League
- BCL: Bangladesh Chhatra League
- BGB: Border Guards Bangladesh
- BIGD: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
- BIMSTEC: Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
- BNP: Bangladesh Nationalist Party
- BSF: Border Security Force
- CA: Chief Advisor
- DUCSU: Dhaka University Central Students Union
- ICP: Integrated Check Post
- ICT: International Crimes Tribunal
- IG: Interim Government
- ISI: Inter-Services Intelligence
- IWT: Indus Waters Treaty
- Jel: Jamaat-e-Islami
- JRC: Joint River Commission
- LCS: Land Customs Station
- LPG: Liquefied Petroleum Gas
- MEA: Ministry of External Affairs (India)
- MP: Member of Parliament
- NCP: National Citizens' Party
- NDA: National Democratic Alliance
- NSA: National Security Adviser
- SAARC: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
- SRF: Single Row Fences
- UPA: United Progressive Alliance

## Executive Summary

On August 5, 2024, the strategic landscape of South Asia shifted dramatically when Sheikh Hasina fled Bangladesh, ending a 20-year era of deep partnership with India. Her replacement by Muhammad Yunus's Interim Government (IG) precipitated an immediate erosion of trust, transforming a previously "resolute" alliance into a relationship riddled with mutual suspicion. This report posits that the ensuing friction across border security, water sharing, and trade is not merely technical but fundamentally political; functional sectors are now being leveraged as instruments of retaliation in a fractured diplomatic environment.

This political rupture has destabilized critical cooperation mechanisms. Border management has deteriorated from routine coordination to diplomatic confrontation, with the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) clashing over fencing protocols and exchanging high-level diplomatic protests. Simultaneously, the imminent expiration of the Ganges Water Treaty in 2026 has become a flashpoint; Dhaka fears New Delhi may weaponize water diplomacy, mirroring its recent hardline stance on the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan. Economic ties have also suffered, as both capitals impose "reciprocal" restrictions—from Dhaka curbing Indian yarn imports to New Delhi blocking Bangladeshi garment access—signaling that trade is now subservient to political grievances.

Perhaps most alarming for Indian strategic planners is the geopolitical realignment within Dhaka. The "Pakistan factor" has forcefully re-emerged, characterized by renewed military and intelligence cooperation that undermines India's previous success in isolating Islamabad. Concurrently, the IG has deepened defense and economic engagement with China, including new agreements for the Mongla port, fueling Indian anxieties about a potential two-front security threat on its eastern flank.

Domestically, Bangladesh is facing a volatile transition ahead of the February 2026 general elections. While the Awami League remains formally banned yet structurally resilient, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has positioned itself as a pragmatic government-in-waiting, seeking strategic autonomy without necessarily defaulting to historic anti-India hostility. New actors, including the student-led National Citizens' Party and a resurgent, tactically pragmatic Jamaat-e-Islami, further complicate this landscape.

Ultimately, the report warns that without immediate intervention, temporary frictions risk hardening into permanent structural impediments. The path forward requires "bleeding valve" diplomacy—the activation of Track II channels to restore good faith before and after the elections. India must diversify its engagement beyond the Awami League to manage the transition, ensuring that the political sunset of the Hasina era does not plunge bilateral ties into permanent darkness.

# Introduction

On August 5, 2024, Bangladesh's then-Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, fled the country amid nationwide protests. Hasina, who had taken office for a record fourth consecutive term (fifth overall) earlier in January, had been India's most trusted ally in Dhaka for twenty years. Her abrupt removal, as well as her replacement by Muhammad Yunus as Chief Advisor of an Interim Government (IG), has presented a series of challenges for India-Bangladesh ties that both states are struggling to address. Almost overnight, the bilateral relationship shifted from seemingly resolute and strong to one ridden with mistrust and mutual suspicion. Domestically, Bangladesh's political transition seeks to undo the policies of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League (AL) government and to bring about structural political, social, and economic changes.

Consequently, this same effort has also spilled over bilaterally, given India's historic partnership with the Sheikh Hasina administration and the IG's desire for New Delhi to craft a new approach to Dhaka that recognizes the extent to which Bangladesh has changed. In both efforts, the IG faces mounting challenges. Domestically, Bangladesh's popular focus is now as much on fresh elections as on Yunus' ambitious reform agenda. Bilaterally, the India-Bangladesh relationship has extensive and deep-rooted stakes that act as strong guardrails but also serve as instruments of leverage for either side during periods of political friction or crisis. These stakes span sectors and have created various dependencies on both sides, especially at the local level between Bangladesh's and India's border divisions and states. To analyze these, this report is split into three parts.



*The Students Against Discrimination group holds the "March for Unity" rally in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on December 31, 2024. Source: Mohammad Ponir Hossain/Reuters*

Part I briefly outlines the lead-up to the change in political context in August 2024 and the core sectors of the relationship at stake for both: border security (including fencing and illegal immigration), water-sharing, connectivity, and trade and business. The report argues that, in each of these sectors, the issues and differences are not intractable in themselves. Rather, the source of problems between New Delhi and Dhaka is political. Issues across the different sectors of the relationship represent significant but manageable downstream effects. Hence, the point of intervention to repair/manage India-Bangladesh ties lies principally in the political relationship.

In Part II, the report assesses how Bangladesh's political actors have evolved since August 2024 and their outlook towards India ahead of the February 2026 general elections.

Finally, in Part III, the report highlights that a lack of effort to restore political good faith risks allowing downstream issues to evolve into structural problems. Given Bangladesh's impending elections, both states have opportunities to prevent this outcome before and after the polls.

## PART-I

### The Change in Political Context

Hasina's forced departure from Dhaka on August 5 was the culmination of a range of issues that had simmered before, during, and after the January 2024 general elections. These issues—which included high youth unemployment, the rejuvenation of a controversial quota in the civil service, widespread corruption, and increasing authoritarianism—snowballed by July that year to charge a concentrated student-led mobilization that sought Hasina's resignation.

Like Bangladesh's General Elections of 2014 and 2018, the 2024 election was marred by allegations of rigging and electoral fraud. But the issues with the 2024 polls were especially heightened by the BNP's boycott and by longstanding American interest in Bangladesh's electoral integrity. Indeed, as the Hasina-led AL government's crackdown on the opposition increased, by 2023, Washington showed a willingness to take unprecedented steps. For instance, years after sanctioning Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion in late 2021 for its human rights violations, on 24th May 2023, the US Department of State announced a new visa policy "to support Bangladesh's goal of holding free, fair, and peaceful national elections". These 'sanctions' were ostensibly aimed at any Bangladeshi individual (government, opposition, or otherwise) attempting to interfere in the electoral process and unduly undermine democracy, but were interpreted by the AL as targeting the League itself. In April of that year, Sheikh Hasina explicitly accused the United States of attempting a regime change in Bangladesh. While the elections progressed, with the AL predictably securing a majority in the absence of contestation, mass discontent with the Hasina administration grew. Crucially, India was a prominent voice urging the Biden White House to exercise restraint vis-à-vis Hasina, even as Washington strengthened its punitive measures.<sup>[1]</sup> In a country where suspicion of India's (real or perceived) protection of Sheikh Hasina abounds, such instances only further fueled anti-India sentiment.

By late July 2024, long-simmering protests in Bangladesh turned violent, with (mostly) student protestors clashing with state forces, including riot police, resulting in fatalities anywhere between 100 and 200, based on foreign and local reporting. The Sheikh Hasina government was criticized globally for its heavy-handedness, the latest in a series of criticisms pre-dating the election, when state violence against opposition leaders and workers was the principal concern.

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Specifically, the student protests were triggered by a Dhaka High Court order, on 1 July, which reinstated an older scheme of reservations in government jobs, that carved out 30% of all such jobs for “freedom-fighters” who fought against Pakistan in the Liberation War of 1971, their children, and grandchildren. This contemporarily unpopular form of reservation (which amounts to about 60% of jobs) was scrapped by the Hasina government after the student protests in 2018.

The 2024 protests intensified after a speech by Hasina on 14 July, where she implicitly characterized protestors as “razakars”—a pejorative term to describe those who aided Pakistani forces in 1971 against the Mukti Bahini (literally, Liberation Army, an organised guerrilla resistance force to fight for Bangladeshi independence). A rapid intensification of the protests from this point led the government to impose a curfew by 20 July and to call in the Bangladesh Army to aid the police in riot control.



*Students clash with police during a protest over a controversial quota system for government job applicants, in Dhaka, Bangladesh on Friday, July 19, 2024 [Rajib Dhar/AP Photo]*

However, the Bangladeshi Supreme Court reversed the High Court order on 22 July, capping reservations at 7%. While the government indicated its acceptance of the order by the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the protests were called off only by the 28<sup>th</sup>, with some stability returning to Dhaka after the government restored internet services on 29 July. Protests resumed after the Bangladesh government failed to release student leaders (from the Students Against Discrimination group) who organized and led the initial stir. More violence between the Bangladesh Chhatra League (AL’s student wing) and demonstrators who were on a ‘Long March to Dhaka’ in defiance of a curfew added

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fuel to the anti-Hasina flame, until the Bangladesh Army Chief advised and secured Hasina's safe exit from Dhaka to New Delhi on August 5, 2024.

On August 6, India's External Affairs Minister informed Parliament that Sheikh Hasina had sought "urgent approval" on "short notice" to stay in India, for the short term. Her continued stay in India, as of October 2025, has become a major political point of contention between New Delhi and the Interim Government formed in Dhaka on August 8, with Prof. Muhammad Yunus as Chief Advisor. In August alone, two variables emerged that had an immediate and adverse effect on the bilateral relationship. The first was Hasina's choice to seek refuge in India amidst demands in Bangladesh for her prosecution for state-sanctioned violence against the "July Revolution" participants. The second was the outbreak of anti-Hindu violence in parts of Bangladesh, partially triggered by a broken windows effect amidst a breakdown in law and order. Both Bangladeshi and international sources estimate 1,068 to 2,010 attacks on minorities between August 4 and 20, 2024.<sup>[2]</sup>

For both the IG in Bangladesh and the Union Government in New Delhi, related issues have snowballed, with additional variables emerging over the year; the sectors outlined below have borne the brunt of new political differences.

## **Stakes at Risk in the Bilateral Relationship**

India and Bangladesh share deep historical and cultural ties and emerged from the same colonial geography, resulting in the world's fifth-longest land border. India's role in liberating Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 also meant that India became an inextricable player in Bangladeshi politics and society with interests ranging from border management, security, resource sharing, trade, and connectivity, among several others. As considered below, each of these sectors has been adversely affected by the fresh trust deficit between New Delhi and Dhaka.

### ***Border Security***

Especially in recent years, India's security concerns vis-à-vis its immediate neighborhood have focused primarily on Pakistan and China. Post 1971, apart from spikes in threats during the years that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) ruled Dhaka, Bangladesh has been a source of stability and support for India in the neighborhood.<sup>[3]</sup> In fact, the present Modi-led government in New Delhi (in power since 2014) has had little to no experience in dealing with a hostile and assertive Bangladesh that tests India's red lines. The IG's need to revise Bangladesh's foreign policy decision-making following the AL's departure from power has included a series of rhetorical and substantial developments adverse to India. That these developments were forming a critical mass in India was evident within two months of the IG taking power, when India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh included Bangladesh among the threats to India,<sup>[4]</sup> triggering a backlash in Dhaka.<sup>[5]</sup> Among other aspects, the India-Bangladesh border is the first point of friction between the two states.

### **Fencing and Demarcating**

India shares its longest land border with Bangladesh (4156 km), of which about 3141 km had been fenced by 2024.<sup>[6]</sup> More than half of the total border length is shared between Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. At least till the turn of the century, the Bangladesh Rifles (now the Border Guards Bangladesh or BGB) routinely clashed with India's Border Security Force (BSF) due to ambiguity in border demarcation as

well as security measures which India sought to implement, with such violence resulting in the “barbaric” killing of BSF jawans by the BGB in 2001.<sup>[7]</sup> But, with Sheikh Hasina eventually consolidating power in Dhaka, both states eventually resolved their boundary disputes (with a watershed agreement to exchange enclaves in 2015),<sup>[8]</sup> and differences on the ground between the BSF and BGB have rarely snowballed into violent clashes or diplomatic/political spat between New Delhi and Dhaka in the last 15 years.



*Border Pillar 2058, one of many demarcating India's 4,096-kilometre border with Bangladesh [Pinaki Das/Al Jazeera]*

Essentially, local incidents on the ground lacked the capacity to significantly disrupt broader bilateral ties. This has now changed. Local incidents now carry disruptive potential. While Dhaka alleged the killing of a Bangladeshi minor by the BSF in September 2024,<sup>[9]</sup> and the BSF exchanged fire with Bangladeshi smugglers in October,<sup>[10]</sup> a more serious incident occurred in January 2025 at the Malda section of the border.<sup>[11]</sup> Here, the BSF clashed with the BGB when the latter objected to fencing activity. While the incident on the ground was resolved quickly after the BSF's clarifications to the BGB, Indian construction was halted the next day again by the BGB.<sup>[12]</sup> This evolved into a significant bone of contention at the pre-scheduled BSF-BGB Flag Meeting on 10 January at the Integrated Check Post in West Bengal, where both forces regularly meet to discuss concerns.<sup>[13]</sup> While the BSF press readout from the meeting emphasized the need for cooperation, the BGB's strong objections were noted in the Indian media.<sup>[14]</sup>

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But over the next few days, this developed even further into an active diplomatic spat between New Delhi and Dhaka. On 12 January, Bangladesh's Home Adviser, Lt Gen (retd) Md Jahangir Alam, told the press that India is strictly prohibited from constructing barbed wire fences within 150 yards of the border.<sup>[15]</sup> The interim government in Dhaka summoned the Indian High Commissioner on the same day to express "deep concern" over India's recent border fencing activities, while the Indian HC, again, stressed the need for cooperation.<sup>[16]</sup> The next day, New Delhi reciprocated by summoning Bangladesh's acting High Commissioner to assert that India had "observed all agreements between the two governments and between the Border Security Force and Border Guard Bangladesh."<sup>[17]</sup>

The January incident pertained to the BSF attempting to raise barbed wire Single Row Fences (SRF) in West Bengal along the border. Bangladesh views such activity through the lens of the 1975 India-Bangladesh Guidelines for Border Authorities, which prohibit the construction of "defence structures" within 150 metres of the 'zero-line' at the border. Indian officials usually interpret "defence structures" to mean something other than a barbed-wire SRF, such as concrete towers, pillboxes, trenches, etc.<sup>[18]</sup> Dhaka even allowed fencing within 150m in 2010.<sup>[19]</sup> Moreover, even as the BGB reiterated its demand that India adhere to the 150m limit in 2015, both the BSF and the BGB cooperated the following year to jointly erect a new SRF to secure over 250 villages along the International Border.<sup>[20]</sup> Growing instances of smuggling and trafficking along the border into India's Northeast states were recognised by both capitals, even before violence erupted in India's Manipur.<sup>[21]</sup> By December 2024, the BSF was reporting record levels of attempted smuggling of gold, silver,<sup>[22]</sup> rare fauna,<sup>[23]</sup> cattle,<sup>[24]</sup> and narcotics,<sup>[25]</sup> bolstering the Indian government's rationale to continue fencing activity along borders with both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

On the ground, the BSF-BGB have a relationship that straddles cooperation and contestation based on either side's perception of the other's activity, regardless of political dynamics.<sup>[26]</sup> Indeed, the BGB proactively assisted the BSF in thwarting an attempted smuggling operation at a different section of the border at Kailashahar in Tripura,<sup>[27]</sup> even as the BSF and the BGB clashed in Malda (West Bengal) on the same day. However, as a direct result of growing bilateral political friction, mainstream and social media coverage of issues at the border between the BSF and the BGB has been amplified since late 2024.<sup>[28]</sup> This contributes to an environment of low trust and high suspicion, and reinforces the potential of otherwise resolvable local issues to spark political escalation.

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### **Illegal Immigration**

The India-Bangladesh border, both due to its length and rough terrain at points, has long been susceptible to illegal immigration and human/drug trafficking. Like the issues of border management between the BSF and BGB, this issue has also simmered, independent of the political relationship.

Apart from the imbalance caused in the social structures of Indian states bordering Bangladesh (especially Assam and West Bengal), India's electoral landscape in both border and hinterland states has invariably been animated by the issue of "illegal immigration", especially from Bangladesh. For instance, 25 years ago, a Task Force on Border Management (Godbole Committee) had declared that "there is an all-round failure in India to come to grips with the problem of illegal immigration". In that year alone, the Task Force estimated that about 3 lakh Bangladeshi nationals were entering India illegally each year.<sup>[29]</sup> Presently, there has been a considerable drop in absolute numbers. While the UPA government (2004-2014) itself deported close to 90,000 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants between 2005 and 2013,<sup>[30]</sup> the incumbent NDA-led government has adopted qualitatively more assertive means with a rejuvenated "push back" policy.<sup>[31]</sup>

This is especially as the ruling party's election pitches for several state elections have focused overwhelmingly on the question of illegal immigration and its adverse effects on India's electorate. Notwithstanding its polarizing nature and often overblown statistics presented by political groups, the issue has led to institutional efforts to identify and 'push back' Bangladeshi migrants from the country,<sup>[32]</sup> especially in states such as Assam.<sup>[33]</sup>

Following Hasina's departure, and parallel to increasing anti-Hindu violence in Bangladesh, this anti-immigrant focus has increased since August 2024. India's active policy of 'pushing back' Bangladeshi immigrants has also led to frustration within Bangladesh's military and civilian establishments.<sup>[34]</sup>

Additionally, the persecuted Rohingya minority of Myanmar has formed a special subset of the 'illegal immigration' issue, falling into the category principally due to India's lack of a Refugee Law. Collectively, the lack of internal legal protections, increasing numbers of Rohingya in India since the Myanmar military's 'cleansing operations' of 2016, and India's strong ties with the Tatmadaw, have resulted in a fraught relationship between the Rohingya

residing in India and the Indian state. While India seeks to deport Rohingya immigrants to Myanmar, the primary route of influx for most of the Rohingya in India has been through the porous India-Bangladesh border (especially at the Petrapole-Benapole zero-point).<sup>[35]</sup>

In Bangladesh, the Sheikh Hasina administration shifted from initial enthusiasm in accepting the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar to heightened concern over their growing numbers.<sup>[36]</sup> Apart from Bangladesh itself, then exploring measures to move the Rohingya into special camps, Dhaka actively sought to co-opt New Delhi in

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addressing the issue and potentially forcing the Rohingya back to Rakhine state in Myanmar.<sup>[37]</sup> Unlike the question of Bangladeshi immigrants, however, the Rohingya question has featured continuity in India-Bangladesh relations despite Hasina's departure. This is principally because Yunus, like Hasina, has also asserted that repatriating the Rohingya to Myanmar is the only solution for Bangladesh's national security.<sup>[38]</sup>



*Police officers detain alleged undocumented Bangladeshi nationals after they were arrested during raids in Ahmedabad, India, April 26, 2025. Source: Amit Dave/Reuters*

## Water Sharing

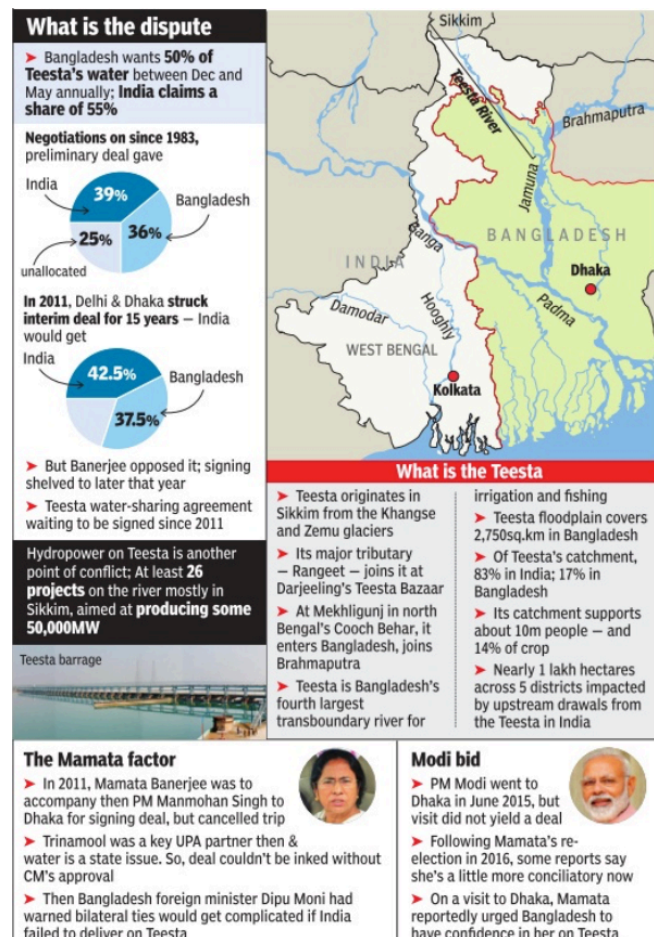
With 54 transboundary rivers, water sharing and river management have long been a challenge between India and Bangladesh. Even with Hasina at the helm in Dhaka, both states took years to settle outstanding issues. While the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty (signed by the first Hasina administration in 1996) has served as the foundational water-sharing arrangement between the two states, disputes over other rivers, such as the Kushyara River, were effectively resolved only by 2022.<sup>[39]</sup> Additionally, India and Bangladesh resolved all outstanding maritime boundary disputes and reached a significant Land Boundary Agreement by 2015, settling the contentious issue of Indian and Bangladeshi enclaves that fell within each other's territories. However, the Ganges Water Treaty is set to expire in December 2026, and the Teesta River issue (which both states struggled with and failed to resolve by August 2024) remains an extant problem in bilateral ties. New Delhi and Dhaka were set to hold focused discussions on both issues. After Hasina's visit to India in June 2024, an Indian technical team was to visit Bangladesh for a "mega-project" to conserve and manage the Teesta's waters, while both states were to begin technical discussions on the renewal of the Ganges Treaty.<sup>[40]</sup>

Like border issues, which have dedicated forums for discussion and resolution, water sharing has usually been discussed at the technical level by the India-Bangladesh Joint River Commission (JRC), with oversight at the ministerial level. Like the BSF-BGB flag meetings, the JRC has continued to meet to discuss issues related to transboundary rivers and preparations for the renewal of the Ganges Treaty, despite the political shift in Dhaka.<sup>[41]</sup>

With regard to the Teesta, the dispute between India and Bangladesh is at least 40 years old, dating back to a 1983 temporary arrangement between New Delhi and Dhaka to share the Teesta's waters (36% of the dry-season flow to Bangladesh, 39% to India) that failed to develop into a permanent treaty.<sup>[42]</sup> A 2011 attempt (allocating 37.5% to Bangladesh) also failed after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed the deal and refused to implement it.<sup>[43]</sup> Despite numerous reiterations of their intention to resolve the issue in multiple meetings between PMs Modi and Hasina, the dispute remained unresolved.

Now, amidst the churn in Bangladesh's political landscape, the Teesta's status is an additional plank on which Bangladeshi parties seek to base their politics. In February 2025, for instance, the Teesta River Protection Committee in Bangladesh held a 48-hour protest across the five districts in the country where the Teesta flows.<sup>[44]</sup> The demonstrations were organized by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Rangpur Organizing Secretary, Asadul Habib Dulu.<sup>[45]</sup> While the demonstration was focused on the bilateral dispute and fair water-sharing arrangements, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam took aim at three actors—India, the Awami League, and the interim government — for their lack of commitment to the issue.<sup>[46]</sup>

Hence, it is evident that, like other issues, the Teesta dispute can also become a political instrument for Bangladesh's political parties. In any case, Bangladesh has frequently blamed India for several decisions as the upper riparian, such as when Dhaka accused India of opening the Dumbur Dam on the Gumti river in Tripura in August 2024 and asserted that it worsened the floods of that month in Bangladeshi districts (a claim which India rejected as a cause for increased flooding).<sup>[47]</sup>



India-Bangladesh Teesta Water Sharing Dispute  
Source: Civils Daily

But this alone does not indicate any positive or negative for the Teesta dispute, which remains deadlocked on the Indian side, given the entrenched position of West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee and the lack of center-state reconciliation on the issue.

It is the benign issue of extending the Ganges Treaty that arguably carries more potential for political tension. India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) with Pakistan in April 2025 triggered a ripple effect on Bangladesh's perceptions. While India suspended the IWT on national security grounds (due to continued Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India), New Delhi has long sought to amend the IWT to address increased consumption needs, climate change, outdated provisions, and the Treaty's dispute settlement mechanism.<sup>[48]</sup>

Vis-à-vis the Ganges Treaty, Bangladeshi water management experts now warn that India could use the treaty as a potential “weapon” if political tensions heighten.<sup>[49]</sup> Indeed, India has already been communicating to Bangladesh that the Ganges Treaty must also be renegotiated to accommodate increasing developmental needs. While India was prepared to extend the Ganges Treaty for another 30 years, the IWT development with Pakistan in the West now appears to have influenced the Indian position on the Ganges Treaty in the East; “the situation changed drastically”, as an MEA official involved in India-Bangladesh talks asserted in June.<sup>[50]</sup>

India's latest demands, including an additional 35,000 cusecs for the Kolkata Port Trust's feeder canal during the lean season, are supported by the West Bengal government. This represents a unified stance, which is in contrast to the Teesta negotiations. Given India's consolidated position and Bangladesh's likely resistance to such modifications, treaty renewal would have posed significant challenges even under continued AL rule in Dhaka. However, the current political upheaval in Bangladesh, compounded by deteriorating bilateral trust, heightens the risk of deeper friction between the two nations. This scenario becomes particularly problematic if Bangladesh fails to establish a stable elected government by December 2026, as any treaty modifications negotiated by an unelected administration would be inevitably rejected by Bangladeshi political parties, regardless of the Interim Government's genuine commitment to bilateral dialogue.

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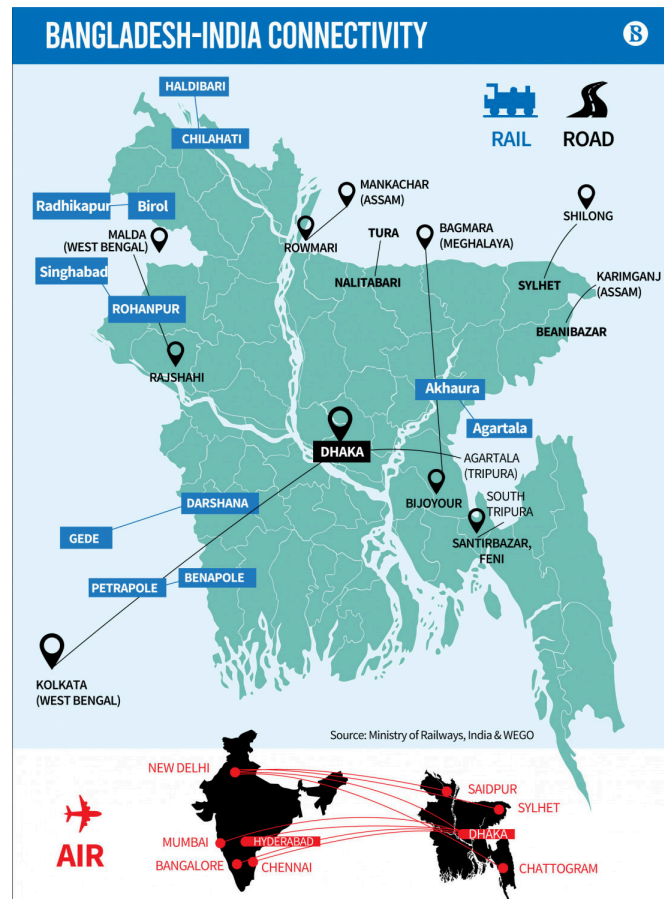
## Connectivity

Connectivity has been a key feature in India-Bangladesh cooperation over the last decade. India's development portfolio in Bangladesh crossed \$8 billion in the last eight years under Sheikh Hasina, with a significant focus on connectivity projects.<sup>[51]</sup> Most significantly, India's completed transport connectivity projects with Bangladesh include the Radhikapur-Birol, Haldibari-Chilahati, Gede-Darshana, Petrapole-Benapole, and Akhaura-Agartala rail links, as well as port rail connectivity between Khulna and Mongla.<sup>[52]</sup> However, a core connectivity need for New Delhi pertains to linking India's mainland to its Northeastern states.

Since the early 2000s, it has been in New Delhi's interest to explore a better transport corridor to the country's landlocked Northeastern states, which are presently reliant on the narrow ‘chicken's neck’ corridor in West Bengal. Given Bangladesh's long border with these states, India has consistently sought to garner Bangladesh's interest and cooperation for the project, which would involve Dhaka granting India access to

the Chittagong (Chottogram) and Mongla ports. Prior to 2009, when Hasina was more vulnerable to the BNP, implementing such an arrangement with India was difficult. Even discussing such projects with India often led the BNP to claim an infringement of Bangladeshi sovereignty.<sup>[53]</sup> By 2008/2010, India sought to bypass Bangladesh entirely and re-route the transit corridor through Myanmar, by developing the Sittwe port as part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project. However, India evidently continued to test Bangladesh's interest in allowing Indian goods to the Northeast to transit through Mongla/Chittagong even in 2011.<sup>[54]</sup>

A decade later, while India made significant progress in developing the Sittwe and inland river ports, crucial road connectivity between Myanmar's inland ports and Zorinpui in India's Mizoram state remained incomplete. Large-scale fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine province (through which the Kaladan project passes) hindered work, and a fresh civil war in the country since 2021 has slowed progress even further. On the other hand, by 2023/24, the Sheikh Hasina administration had garnered sufficient political capital to offer access to both Chottogram and Mongla ports to India, with India Ports Global Limited even securing operating rights to a terminal in Mongla port in July 2024.<sup>[55]</sup> Around the same time, in Myanmar's Rakhine province, it had also become evident that the Tatmadaw had lost effective control of territories through which the Kaladan project passes, to the Arakan Army—an ethnic armed organization with a checkered relationship with India.<sup>[56]</sup> This only added more rationale for India to explore an independent route through Bangladeshi ports, even as work on Kaladan continued.<sup>[57]</sup>



Source: *The Business Standard*

However, a month later, with the end of the Hasina administration, India's equations for the Kaladan project/transit connectivity to the Northeast changed again. Throughout 2025, India has sought to fast-track construction of the Paletwa-Zorinpui road network, despite Myanmar's ongoing conflict, indicating India's loss of faith (for a second time) in the Bangladesh route to the Indian Northeast.<sup>[58]</sup> Notwithstanding the pendulous trajectory of India-Bangladesh connectivity, the geographical realities of both states ensure that connectivity remains a key interest for India in Bangladesh, with investment being subject principally to political appetite. Like other issues, however, the connectivity question is also best answered by an elected government in Dhaka, which can claim greater ownership of significant decisions vis-à-vis foreign policy and Bangladesh's relationship with India.



## Trade, Business, and People-to-People Ties

India and Bangladesh share robust trade and business ties, shored up by industry partnerships and shared history. In FY2023-24, bilateral trade reached \$12.9 billion;<sup>[59]</sup> Bangladesh was India's largest trading partner in South Asia, and India was Bangladesh's second largest trading partner in Asia. However, the modalities that enabled both states to reach record trade numbers became vulnerable to mutual suspicion and political hostilities following August 2024.

By April 2025, growing rifts between New Delhi and Dhaka sparked a new approach from Dhaka. In that month, the Interim Government placed fresh restrictions on yarn imports from India through land ports, which are vital to Bangladesh's ready-made garment export sector.<sup>[60]</sup> While Yunus justified the restrictions by highlighting the need to preserve fair trade practices and to prevent under-pricing, India retaliated by ending a transshipment facility it had extended to Bangladeshi exports to third states in 2020.<sup>[61]</sup> India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) attributed this decision to economic reasons: "significant congestion...logistical delays and higher costs" for Indian exporters.<sup>[62]</sup> But subsequent statements also made it clear that India was responding to Yunus' earlier remarks in Beijing, where he asserted that India's Northeast states were landlocked and that Bangladesh was the "only guardian of the ocean".<sup>[63]</sup> In India, these comments set off alarm bells due to perceptions of Bangladesh enabling the Chinese threat to the Corridor.<sup>[64]</sup>

On 18 May, about eight days after the Yunus-led IG banned the Awami League from formal politics,<sup>[65]</sup> India moved to restrict the import of Bangladeshi garments to the Kolkata and Mumbai sea ports. The restrictions had immediate and unforeseen impacts on Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector,<sup>[66]</sup> for which India is one of the fastest-growing markets (with exports valued at around \$700 million annually).<sup>[67]</sup> Since about 93% of these shipments use land ports at the India-Bangladesh border, India's fresh restrictions are effectively seen as a non-tariff barrier by Bangladeshi exporters.<sup>[68]</sup>

Indian government sources told the media that these measures were a response to Dhaka imposing similar barriers on Indian yarn and rice, and that the bilateral trade relationship would now be on "reciprocal terms".<sup>[69]</sup> Trade ties, in particular, have long benefited from the special privileges India granted to Bangladesh (such as the transshipment facility).<sup>[70]</sup> However, these new issues are a microcosm of the new bilateral dynamic, in which Dhaka's economic or geopolitical choices (which it deems necessary) elicit a response from New

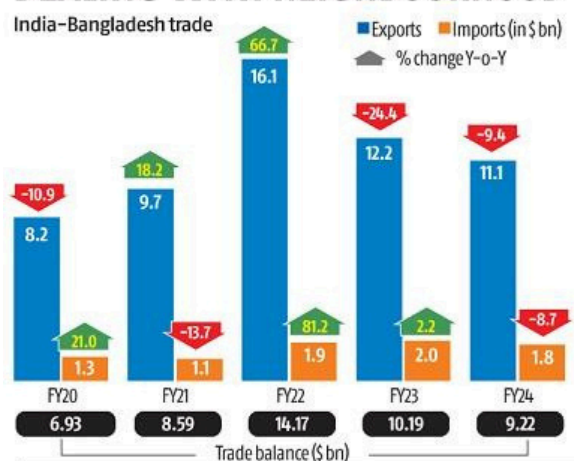
Delhi, which considers any special privileges earlier extended to Dhaka as untenable. Unlike the India-Pakistan relationship (where trade is virtually non-existent) or India-China relations (where India's trade deficit amounts to over \$90 billion),<sup>[71]</sup> India holds significant economic leverage over Bangladesh. Political issues—such as Bangladesh's concerns with Hasina's continued stay in India and her public statements against the IG,<sup>[72]</sup> as well as India's concerns over the security of Bangladeshi Hindus—catalyse the rift.<sup>[73]</sup>

The historic depth of the trade relationship means that the real effects of deepening political trust deficit will take time to manifest. However, the fact that Indian exports to Dhaka fell by 10.8% and imports by 7.45%<sup>[74]</sup> between May 2024 and 2025 indicates the possibility of a deeper downturn in the future if both states continue to use trade as their principal means of political protest.

Similarly, medical tourism, which has historically been a core avenue of people-to-people ties in India-Bangladesh relations, has also been adversely impacted. Given that rapid changes in visa issuance are usually a marked feature of South Asian political conflicts, the number of Indian visas issued for general purposes to Bangladeshi citizens dramatically decreased from September 2025 onwards (estimated daily visa appointments dropped from over 7,000 to approximately 500-700).<sup>[75]</sup> However, this steep drop in the usually high volumes of visas issued for medical purposes has especially affected people-to-people ties. The uniquely urgent and sensitive reasons that prompt Bangladeshis to seek such visas have naturally led them to seek Chinese medical visas instead, despite higher logistical and travel costs than for Indian visas.<sup>[76]</sup> However, the structural economic and logistical conveniences that India provides are geographically unparalleled (for urgent medical visa seekers); Bangladesh usually accounted for about 70-75% of medical visas issued by India prior to August 2024, before dropping to 30-35% after August.<sup>[77]</sup> This means that, here too, an improvement in political ties and the eventual resumption of standard visa volumes are likely to lead to a natural restoration of people-to-people ties.

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## DEALING WITH NEIGHBOURHOOD



Source: The Business Standard

## **Northeast India-Bangladesh Trade**

A key impact of the strong economic partnership between India and Bangladesh across decades has been the creation of robust infrastructure to ease trade modalities and facilitate smoother inflows and outflows at each Land Customs Station (LCS) or Integrated Check Post (ICP). These LCSs and ICPs are concentrated in India's five Eastern/Northeastern states—Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Mizoram, and Meghalaya—which share borders with Bangladesh. The market needs in each of these states have long been adapted to trade with Bangladesh, creating natural pressures against larger, more expansive trade curbs.

For instance, Tripura, which witnessed trade worth INR 2482.47 crore with Bangladesh in FY2021-2024, continues to import fish, LPG, edible oil, food products, and crushed stone from Bangladesh as these items are outside the trade curbs imposed by New Delhi for land ports.<sup>[78]</sup> By May 2025, Tripura's Fisheries Ministry asserted that its imports from Bangladesh continued unaffected, despite the state facing a shortage of about 30 to 31 tons of fish to meet consumer demand.<sup>[79]</sup> Even as Tripura focuses on long-term expansion of its production capabilities, its current needs remain import-dependent. Bangladeshi conglomerates such as the Pran Group are well integrated with Indian markets, with production facilities in India, such as the one in Bodhjungnagar, Tripura.<sup>[80]</sup>

While there have been no significant adverse effects from trade restrictions on food products due to sufficient pre-existing stocks, these restrictions have severely cut economic activity at land ports such as Petrapole (in West Bengal), which alone accounted for about 60% of land-based imports from Bangladesh.<sup>[81]</sup>

India's trade restrictions on Bangladesh have invariably disrupted local economies, even as the breadth of the items traded means a complete trade ban is unlikely. However, local economic needs are subservient to political interests, meaning that the direction of adjustment and adaptation in these Northeastern states will be to look to alternative sources of import or to improvements in domestic capacity rather than to put pressure on New Delhi to reverse its existing restrictions on Bangladesh.

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## **Political Distrust as a New Source of Friction**

The sectors of the India-Bangladesh relationship listed above have been affected by the downturn in bilateral ties. Issues in these sectors do not account for the downturn. The source is categorically political, with each state now able to leverage these sectors as political instruments. This recognition presently exists among stakeholders in the bilateral relationship. For instance, the chairman of the Federation of Indian Export

Organisations described India's decision to impose trade curbs on Bangladesh as a "political" decision taken by the government, "most probably in retaliation for the Bangladesh government's stand on stopping the import of cotton yarn from India".<sup>[82]</sup> Similarly, the General Secretary of the Tripura Chamber of Trade and Business also rationalized the center's decision as one required by India's national interest, which "comes first above all else".<sup>[83]</sup>

For India, its actions against Bangladesh represent its strong dissatisfaction, particularly with Dhaka's new geopolitical choices. These include Dhaka's relationships with Pakistan and China, as well as its actions against Sheikh Hasina. The latter is a domestic variable in Bangladesh's politics, but its inextricable bilateral connection with India makes it also a foreign policy issue.

### ***Bangladesh's Geopolitical Choices***

On April 29, a Yunus aide and retired Bangladesh Army officer asserted that if India attacked Pakistan, Bangladesh should occupy India's Northeastern states.<sup>[84]</sup> Even as the Yunus government distanced itself from these comments by May 2, on the nights between May 7 and 10, India and Pakistan engaged in their latest military escalation, with an intensity unseen in decades. While Bangladesh did not directly feature in the crisis, Indian strategists and security forces aired concerns about Bangladesh as a new variable, unseen in the history of India-Pakistan crises since 1999.



*Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Asad Alam Siam (left) receives Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, second from left, at Dhaka airport on August 24, 2025 [Handout/Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs via AFP]*

During and after the crisis, India intensified security along the India-Bangladesh border,<sup>[85]</sup> and the Indian Army conducted an integrated field exercise in states bordering Bangladesh, dubbed 'Teesta Prahar'.<sup>[86]</sup> Prior to this, and a day after the Pahalgam terror attack (on April 22),<sup>[87]</sup> the Bangladesh Air Force had conducted its most expansive exercise in recent years, dubbed 'Akash Bijoy 2025'.<sup>[88]</sup> Observing the exercise at Uttam Khandker Air Base, Yunus emphasized that amidst a "constant threat of war", Bangladesh needed to be prepared; the lack of it would be "suicidal." "This is such a situation where victory is the only option", he added.<sup>[89]</sup> The Indian exercises were held near the Siliguri Corridor—the 'chicken's neck' that connects India's mainland with its Northeast—an area of high strategic sensitivity for India vis-à-vis China.

The Pakistan factor in India-Bangladesh ties is significant. In August 2024, India lost an ally in Dhaka whose politics were built on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's anti-Pakistan, pro-secular legacy, severely hampering any chances of a rapprochement between Dhaka and Islamabad.<sup>[90]</sup> Now, in a marked reversal of earlier Bangladeshi policy, both states are cultivating a new defence and intelligence relationship. Pakistan's ISI sent a high-level delegation to Bangladesh led by now-NSA Lt Gen Asim Malik in January 2025,<sup>[91]</sup> followed by a senior Bangladeshi General making a rare visit to Pakistan later that month.<sup>[92]</sup> Dhaka and Islamabad also held their first foreign office consultation in 15 years on 18 April,<sup>[93]</sup> and Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, was set to visit Dhaka,<sup>[94]</sup> until Pakistan's fresh military crisis with India led to a postponement.<sup>[95]</sup> Moreover, across 2024 and 2025, Chief Advisor Yunus' meetings with Pakistani leaders and officials have frequently featured concerted calls to revive the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which has remained dormant since the cancelled 2016 SAARC Summit in Islamabad. Note that in that year, Dhaka withdrew from the SAARC Summit following India's own withdrawal due to a spate of Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks in 2016 in India's Pathankot and Uri.



*Pakistan's army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, right, meets with Lieutenant General SM Kamrul Hassan, principal staff officer of the Bangladesh army, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in Jan 2025. [Handout/Inter-Services Public Relations]*

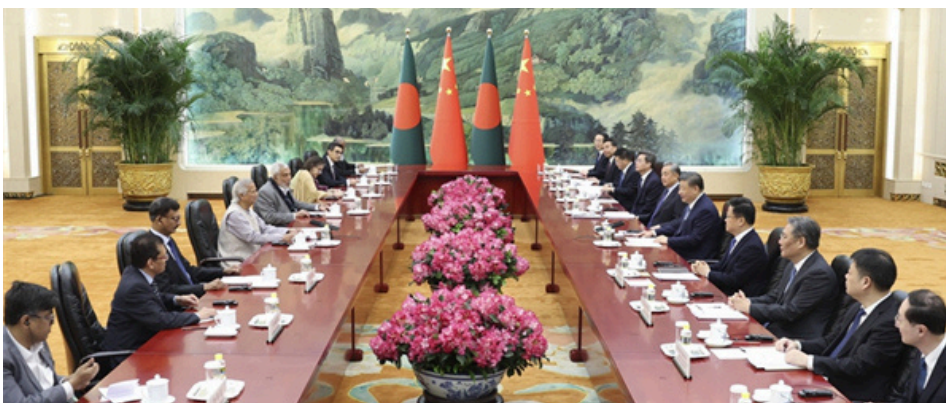
In just the last four months before the 2025 crisis, Pakistan had re-entered India's security calculus through Bangladesh,<sup>[96]</sup> disrupting India's focus on a 'de-hyphenation' with Pakistan across the last five years.<sup>[97]</sup> Now, post Pahalgam, India's concerns vis-à-vis terrorism also extend to Bangladesh, where Pakistani diplomats now also have visa-free access.<sup>[98]</sup> Along with the nature of the shift, the pace and scale of Pakistan's re-entry into Bangladesh are largely unanticipated developments. It is evident, however, that populist anti-Hasina sentiments and expressions have also generated an appetite for a revised understanding of Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, reducing hostility to make room for reconciliation.

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While Dhaka's new relationship with Islamabad is a shift in character, its relationship with China has witnessed a shift in tone; Yunus' Beijing remarks testified to his break from Hasina's approach to Beijing. Unlike Yunus, Hasina had "ensured that (robust) economic cooperation with China never undermined Dhaka's relationship with New Delhi" as former Bangladeshi diplomat Wahiduzzaman Noor also maintains.<sup>[99]</sup> It is this sensitivity that enabled Hasina to oversee China's emergence as Bangladesh's largest trade partner without treading on New Delhi's red lines. Even without immediate substantial changes, Yunus's remarks decimate India's older comfort/acquiescence with the Bangladesh-China relationship.

Moreover, the substance in the Bangladesh-China relationship has increased since March 2025, when the Bangladesh IG signed eight new MoUs and one deal on economic and technical cooperation with China.<sup>[100]</sup> The MoUs included commitments to cooperate on the translation and production of classics and cultural heritage, on news exchanges, and in the media, sports, and health sectors.<sup>[101]</sup> More importantly, in addition to establishing the China Industrial Economic Zone in Bangladesh, China and Bangladesh signed an agreement to modernize and expand the Mongla port.<sup>[102]</sup> By June, India's Economic Times was reporting that China had offered Bangladesh "a concessional loan of \$400 million for undertaking the upgradation of Mongla Port."<sup>[103]</sup> In that same month, China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh held their first trilateral foreign office summit, heightening India's new threat perceptions from its Eastern neighbour.<sup>[104]</sup> May 7-10 had already proved to India that China's defence cooperation with Pakistan is both deep and extensive. Adding Bangladesh to the equation risks crossing India's red lines, further eroding mutual goodwill.

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*Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Bangladeshi interim government's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, capital of China, March 28, 2025. [Photo/Xinhua]*

## Bilateral Political Equations

While the August 2024 change in government in Dhaka was the direct result of a domestic uprising, its immediate additional consequence was the creation of a new and prominent bone of contention between India and Bangladesh—Sheikh Hasina seeking and receiving asylum in New Delhi.

In December 2024, Bangladesh formally requested that India extradite former PM Sheikh Hasina, a request India acknowledged receiving.<sup>[105]</sup> The 2013 Extradition Treaty<sup>[106]</sup> between the two states, which the IG now seeks to enforce, was originally envisaged and ratified by the Sheikh Hasina government. The Treaty's amendment in 2016, also under Hasina's administration, was intended to expedite the extradition of any person of interest to Bangladesh (political or otherwise).<sup>[107]</sup> Arguably, the IG's December push for extradition was an expression of dissatisfaction with India's inability/unwillingness to accommodate the middle ground that Yunus implicitly offered on the 'Hasina question'. Earlier in September, Yunus had asserted that "If India wants to keep her until the time Bangladesh (government) wants her back, the condition would be that she has to keep quiet."<sup>[108]</sup> Indeed, in December itself, Sheikh Hasina released another message, denouncing Yunus' administration as undemocratic. However, in the same month, India's Foreign Secretary gave a briefing to India's Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, where he expressed India's most categorical acknowledgement of Bangladesh's concern, until then. The FS asserted that India did not endorse Hasina's criticism of the IG and acknowledged that the issue remains a "pinprick" in the India-Bangladesh relationship.<sup>[109]</sup> Further, the FS also asserted both that Sheikh Hasina was using "private communication devices" (implying India's lack of agency/control) and that India's relationship with Bangladesh was not limited to a "single political party" but was rather focused on the "people of Bangladesh" (implying India's desire to move on from the Awami League with the IG and BNP).



*Images and cartoons related to ousted Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina are seen pasted on a board inside her former official residence, which is being turned into a museum as a lasting reminder of her rule [File: Munir Uz Zaman/AFP]*

However, while Sheikh Hasina's bellicose rhetoric continued, Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (whose institution Hasina had overseen for the trial of 1971 war criminals), issued at least two arrest warrants for Hasina herself and 45 other Awami League leaders for their acts committed before and during the July 2024 uprising.<sup>[110]</sup> By November 2025, the ICT (featuring new judges appointed by the IG) convicted and sentenced Hasina to death.<sup>[111]</sup>

Among other things, this has proved the ability of Hasina-era institutions to be leveraged by the IG against the former Prime Minister, increasingly reducing the possibility of her voluntary return to contest elections or otherwise. Today in Bangladesh, the Army is arguably the only institution that still retains an element of continuity from the Hasina era. Moreover, while the military has extensive experience in joint exercises with the Indian Army,<sup>[112]</sup> its current chief remains General Waker-uz-Zaman (Hasina's distant relative). In Bangladesh, the Army under General Zaman has adopted a pragmatic posture; first allowing Hasina a safe exit and subsequently cooperating with the IG while also keeping it in check whenever certain redlines seem to be crossed. The latter is reflected in the Army Chief's strong rebukes of several policy measures sought by the IG, such as a US-sponsored humanitarian corridor or the (initially) planned conduct of elections later than preferred by the military. Moreover, the Army's contributions to maintaining law and order in Bangladesh during the transition have provided the institution with significant leverage over the IG, while also highlighting the IG's inherent weakness and reliance on the military for stability.

Essentially, while there is limited space for New Delhi to engage actors such as the Bangladesh Army directly, it is evident that a key avenue for diffusing tensions remains between India and Bangladesh. Indeed, on the issue of Hasina's stay in New Delhi, India's position has steadily evolved to acknowledge that options to resolve it exist. In October 2025, the Indian Foreign Secretary asserted that matters related to Sheikh Hasina are "judicial and legal" in nature (referring to Dhaka's December 2024 extradition request) and would require "consultations" with Bangladesh, indicating an openness to discussions.<sup>[113]</sup> This position assumes greater significance when compared to India's stated position in February 2025, when the MEA submitted to Parliament that Bangladesh's extradition request for Hasina pertained to crimes she allegedly committed "before she came to India" and that New Delhi had not responded to Dhaka's request.<sup>[114]</sup>

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As Bangladesh's political parties and Yunus himself hinted in December, should India succeed in restricting Hasina's political speeches/messages, it would arguably remove a core, sensitive source of mistrust and discomfort, delaying or removing the demand for extradition. This avenue is also less contingent on the IG serving as a temporary negotiating partner, as the benefits would accrue to any successive government in Dhaka. Moreover, even if it does not trigger a reversal of their mutually hostile measures, it would certainly increase confidence in bilateral interactions. Regarding this possibility, as well as others, it is evident that the issue of Hasina's stay in India is amenable to effective diplomacy and negotiations in good faith.

## PART-II

### Evolution of Bangladesh's Political Actors

In the India-Bangladesh relationship today, the lack of trust is the key motivation/wellspring for each party's desire to escalate pre-existing sources of friction politically. It is in this arena where diplomatic efforts should be principally directed. However, Bangladesh's internal landscape has shifted with older actors having evolved and newer actors taking charge. The country's political landscape has been dominated largely by a single political force (Awami League) for more than a decade. While other legacy political and ideological forces were pushed to the periphery and saw their political influence decline, their institutions and organizations were weakened but not demolished. This equation was reversed after 15 years, in August 2025, leading to changed circumstances for key political players in Bangladesh.

#### *The Awami League*

Between August 2024 and 2025, both the Awami League and its institutions, cadre, and prominent supporters lost access to Dhaka's formal decision-making architecture. More importantly, over 12 months, the AL has been subject to a systematic ostracization and political reprisal campaign, often through measures instituted by the AL-led government against opponents.<sup>[115]</sup>

The Yunus-led Interim Government (IG) effectively lent support to such ostracization by formally banning the Awami League from political activities in May 2025. The AL continues to command support in several rural and suburban parts of Bangladesh, as well as more concentrated support in Gopalganj District (Both Mujib's and Hasina's ancestral home and core political base).<sup>[116]</sup> A significant part of the League's cadre and local leadership has been forced to operate underground and rely on less overt networks of influence. While the AL's operational space has been severely restricted and it faces determined efforts by several stakeholders in the IG to restrict it further, the AL remains vital, far from being wiped out after Hasina's exit, as some had reasonably speculated in August 2024.

Prominent Bangladeshi newspaper editorials, such as The Daily Star, maintain that the Awami League, which is more a “multigenerational institution” than a party, has “much to answer for.” However, the IG's actions, like banning the party, will effectively serve the AL's ends by turning it “from the oppressor to the oppressed.”<sup>[117]</sup> Crucially, despite having been forced to leave Bangladesh, Hasina, as AL supremo, continues to issue public addresses that are disseminated and popularized by both the AL diaspora and within Bangladesh.<sup>[118]</sup> The League has also continued its socio-political activity, issuing repeated calls for protests, demonstrations, and ‘hartals’ (boycotts)

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against the IG and its judicial/political clampdown on Hasina and the AL.<sup>[119]</sup>

AL leaders, both domestically and internationally, insist that the party remains integral to Bangladesh's political future.<sup>[120]</sup> Sheikh Hasina's successive statements from India underscore this position, serving dual purposes: they assert the AL's continued relevance within Bangladesh despite claims of its removal from power, while simultaneously outlining the party's aspirations for future political engagement. Notably, in a September 2025 interview, Yunus suggested that lifting the ban on the AL's political activities was still possible, adding that only their activities (and not their legal status as a political party) were suspended "for the time being" and that the ban could be rescinded "anytime".<sup>[121]</sup> This occurred even as Bangladesh's Law Adviser stated that removing the ban was not an immediate possibility.<sup>[122]</sup>

Notwithstanding the likelihood that the AL will remain prohibited from political activities until the elections, removing the ban would only bolster the credibility of the IG as an impartial actor and would not emulate the AL's own methods prior to August 2024. Even the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), despite being the AL's historic *bête noire*, has favoured allowing the AL to contest Bangladesh's upcoming elections to avoid "repeating Hasina's misdeeds".<sup>[123]</sup> However, as Indian journalists travelling from Dhaka noted in CSDR's interactions, the League's activities since August 2024 have not occurred at the scale expected from a party that is Bangladesh's largest (on paper), even if formally ostracized – pointing to a lack of proactivity amongst its cadre that had possibly settled in while Hasina was in power.

### **Bangladesh Nationalist Party**

While the AL drew strength and legitimacy from revolutionary fervor and Mujib's leadership in the fight for independence, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) emerged from the post-revolutionary upheaval in the newly established state as an alternative political force to the AL. As an opposition party, the BNP organized its politics against what it perceived as Mujib's overreach in politics, culture, and social norms.<sup>[124]</sup>



*Activists from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) gather on the streets calling for a general election, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Wednesday, May 28, 2025. The BNP has had a decades-long alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami, which it is now breaking [Mahmud Hossain Opu/AP Photo]*

This opposition logic necessitated a political line for the BNP that was more amenable (and not hostile) to individuals and ideologies seemingly aligned with older East Pakistan-era norms. For instance, the BNP has worked to create space for and legitimize Islamist actors such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel) that the AL fought tooth and nail against.<sup>[125]</sup> The same logic of opposition politics (with a degree of inherent ideological motivation) also pitted the BNP against the AL's 'pro-India' policies, which the BNP deemed harmful to Bangladesh's sovereignty.<sup>[126]</sup>

The extensive suppression of BNP activities under AL rule since 2009 meant Hasina's departure raised expectations of immediate political opportunities for the BNP, particularly through early elections. Naturally, the BNP has consistently preferred early elections, seeking to leverage both the remnants of anti-Hasina sentiment in the country and to assert the need for political leadership given the glacial pace of the IG's reforms. The fact that anti-Hasina sentiments have indeed endured even after her August 2024 exit was evident in subsequent demonstrations calling for the Bangladeshi President's resignation in October, when he claimed that he does not have documentary evidence of Sheikh Hasina's resignation.<sup>[127]</sup>

“Despite being a large legacy party, the BNP is now effectively a third force, having seen its principal adversary exit the formal political space and now forced into a marriage of convenience with new political forces that have succeeded the AL in the interim. Its present struggle is to maintain its pre-existing positions against Hasina, deny the leaders of the IG any potential to become an enduring political force, and define itself anew in Bangladesh's current chaos-ridden polity.

Yet the reality that a broader socio-political movement—not just the BNP—drove Hasina from power in August 2024 has fundamentally altered the party's position.<sup>[128]</sup> The BNP now confronts both unprecedented challenges and opportunities in a nation undergoing comprehensive transformation across all sectors. By May 2025, tensions between the BNP and the Interim Government had reached open hostility, driven by the party's frustrations over delayed elections,<sup>[129]</sup> the government's incorporation of student leaders into key positions,<sup>[130]</sup> and sluggish reform efforts in a country still marked by instability.<sup>[131]</sup>

However, despite being a large legacy party, the BNP is now effectively a third force, having seen its principal adversary exit the formal political space and now forced into a marriage of convenience with new political forces that have succeeded the AL in the interim. Its present struggle is to maintain its pre-existing positions against Hasina, deny the leaders of the IG any potential to become an enduring political force, and define itself anew in Bangladesh's current chaos-ridden polity. Despite inherent contradictions, this position provides sufficient grounds for the BNP to adopt pragmatic positions vis-à-vis Bangladesh's foreign policy, particularly its relationship with India.<sup>[132]</sup>

Crucially, the AL's weakening in the Bangladeshi polity has also allowed the BNP to be more attentive to its own contradictions with the Jel.<sup>[133]</sup> This is addressed further in the following section.

## *The Jamaat-e-Islami*

The Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel) is an Islamist ideological, socio-cultural, and political force that has deep roots in colonial South Asia. During and after the region's violent partitions, the Jel set itself up in both wings of Pakistan as well as India. While not a strictly political force conceptually, its philosophy/advocacy of a more Islamic way of life has historically been inextricably connected with Pakistan's political foundations, necessitating a similarly rigorous campaign in the country's eastern Bengali-dominated wing.

While Mujib made a concerted effort to decimate the Jel's spheres of influence in Bangladesh, Hasina's subsequent politics focused on prosecuting the Jel for their role in supporting the Pakistan Army against Bangladesh's Mukti Bahini. Years before a formal ban on the Jamaat's political activities in 2024 (like Mujib's ban on the Jel in 1972), the AL also oversaw the creation of an International Criminal Tribunal in Dhaka for trying those (including the Jel) for their role in aiding the Pakistan Army's war crimes against the Bangladeshi people in the lead up to and during the 1971 war.<sup>[134]</sup>



*Jamaat leader ATM Azharul Islam, second from left, after he was released from prison in Dhaka on May 28, 2025 [Munir Uz Zaman/AFP]*

The BNP, on the other hand, has shared a complicated relationship with the Jamaat.<sup>[135]</sup> While its cadre has often sparred with the street power that the Jel can bring to bear, it has usually accommodated and legitimized the Jamaat in its political alliances. Between 1991 and 2009, when Dhaka's premiership rotated between the BNP and AL, the former empowered the Jel by sharing cabinet positions and key roles in government.

Presently, after years of focus on self-preservation under the AL government, the Jel post August 2024 has found a second wind. The Muhammad Yunus-led IG lifted the ban on the Jel a mere 20 days after forming the Interim Government in August 2024,<sup>[136]</sup> and the Jamaat re-registered as a party by June 2025.<sup>[137]</sup> In the year since, the Jamaat has secured key informal roles in the Yunus-led transitional administration but remains focused on securing its space in Bangladesh's social, cultural, and political institutions. Note that the Jamaat is the spiritual spearhead of the wave of anti-minority (mostly anti-Hindu) violence that engulfed Bangladesh after Hasina's exit.<sup>[138]</sup>

It is crucial to note that the Jamaat has historically not been driven by its electoral strength, and its direct influence in Bangladesh's legislature has been minimal in terms of the number of seats; its electoral success peaked in 1991 with 18 seats.<sup>[139]</sup> Rather, the Jamaat has always occupied itself with spheres of influence to create an Islamic welfare state at all rungs of society.

However, today, while the Jel remains loyal to its historic ideology, it also seeks to adopt a pragmatic tone. In this effort, it faces greater challenges than even other parties opposed to the AL, such as the BNP. Unlike the Jamaat, which contests the AL's nationalist politics, the BNP seeks to own the nationalist space rather than remove it. Such visceral differences continue to pose challenges for the Jamaat.

In January 2025, the Jel's student wing, Chhatra Shibir, criticized Bengalis for their role in the 1971 Liberation War against Pakistan, a testimony to Jel's continuing fundamentalism. [140] However, the publication sparked condemnations and intense protests from both the BNP and AL, with the Chhatra Shibir rescinding it and issuing a public apology, a testament to their newfound pragmatism.<sup>[141]</sup>

Further evidence of this pragmatism was evident in the Jel's reaction to their unprecedented victories in multiple student elections across Bangladesh. In elections such as those for the Dhaka University Central Students Union, which were (effectively) held for the first time since 1990, the Jamaat's victory was sweeping and historic. While these results represented students' desire for an alternative to legacy parties (continuing the anti-establishment trends of campus politics) rather than a preference for Islamist policies, the Jamaat's response was uncharacteristic. Victorious Jamaat-backed student leaders visited and paid their respects at the 1971 Liberation War Martyrs' Memorial, adding that students will have the right to question them anytime.<sup>[142]</sup> More significantly, the Jamaat's Assistant Secretary General asserted on September 14 that denying the 1971 Liberation War would mean denying the nation of Bangladesh itself,<sup>[143]</sup> which was interpreted by the Bangladeshi press as the Jel moving closer to admitting its mistake,<sup>[144]</sup> but by others (such as NCP convener Nahid Islam) as a "PR movement" which is "calculated political deception".<sup>[145]</sup>

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The Jel's student union victories do not reflect the state of the Jamaat's popularity amongst Bangladesh's broader electorate, and parties such as the BNP have avoided committing to formally ally with the Jel for the 2026 elections. BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed explicitly ruled out such a possibility as recently as August, even though he stated that the BNP is in talks with other "Islam-oriented" parties.<sup>[146]</sup>

However, the Jamaat's increased pragmatism and confidence following campus victories have made it a formidable force in shaping Bangladesh's politics. Moreover, the BNP's student body (Chhatra Dal) was the principal loser in the DUCSU elections, which saw over 400 candidates registered, including by other student-led parties.<sup>[147]</sup> The elections also showed that even those student leaders who were part of the July 2024 uprising had moved away from their initial demands for depoliticizing campuses. Despite the small electorate, the tightly packed ballot list and the scale of the Jamaat's victory undoubtedly affect the BNP's own calculus for the 2026 polls.

### *The Interim Government and the National Citizens' Party*

Among all other political actors in Bangladesh, the Interim Government and the National Citizens Party represent the newest political forces of the country.

First, there is the Interim Government (IG), a transitional administration that is technically extra-constitutional, since Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina removed the Constitution's provisions for caretaker governments. The IG's legitimacy was judicially established by the Bangladesh Supreme Court.<sup>[148]</sup> Led by Nobel Laureate and Hasina's ally-turned-adversary Muhammad Yunus as Chief Advisor,<sup>[149]</sup> the IG is composed mostly of independent academics, economists, bureaucrats, and officials in charge of key ministries. While the Chief Advisor himself took charge of 27 ministries and divisions,<sup>[150]</sup> the IG also holds several special advisory roles.



*A delegation of the National Citizen Party (NCP) holds a meeting with the Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus at the State Guest House, Jamuna, on 22 October 2025. Photo: CA Press Wing*

Domestically, the IG's stated priority is threefold, as characterized by Yunus: reform, trial (of those responsible for violence against protestors in July 2024), and elections.<sup>[151]</sup> To advance the ambitious, widespread reform of Bangladesh's institutions, Yunus formed six commissions as early as September 2024. This includes reforms in the judiciary, public and police administrations, the anti-corruption commission,

Bangladesh's election system, and its constitution.<sup>[152]</sup> However, despite the IG's earlier stated commitment to undertake reforms in three months, these reforms are proving difficult to execute, with Yunus first asserting that elections in Bangladesh cannot be held before April 2026.

In May 2025, domestic pressure on Yunus to hold elections by December 2025 included calls from both the Bangladesh Army Chief and the BNP, leading to pushback within the IG.<sup>[153]</sup> However, by August 2025, Yunus announced that elections would be held as early as February 2026.<sup>[154]</sup>

Essentially, the Yunus-led IG has sought to strike a balance within Bangladesh's fractured political space. However, Yunus's and key IG leaders' independent assertions about Bangladesh's future have ensured constant friction with political parties that are growing increasingly uneasy and impatient. Yunus himself threatened to resign in May 2025, revealing multi-directional pressure from other actors accusing him of slow-pedaling reforms/elections.<sup>[155]</sup> Arguably, the student base that led the July 2024 protests itself represents a pressure point for the IG, given fresh student dissatisfaction with the IG's July Charter for reforms.<sup>[156]</sup>

More importantly, in line with his domestic predicament, Yunus' foreign policy choices have also sought to break with key approaches under the former Hasina administration. This has necessarily included a toning down of Dhaka's 'pro-India' posture and a revival of older relationships deemed political taboos, such as ties with Pakistan. This, along with Yunus' strengthening of Bangladesh's relationship with China (which was already deepening under Hasina), has ensured that the 12-month period since August has led to friction with India across sectors, covered in earlier sections of this report.

Second, the National Citizens Party (NCP), formed in February 2025 with Nahid Islam at the helm; Islam quit the IG to focus on the new party that month. The NCP leadership comprises student leaders from the Students Against Discrimination movement, as well as other fresh political faces.<sup>[157]</sup> The party, which seeks to contest elections in all 300 constituencies, has called for a "second republic" in Bangladesh with a new constitution.<sup>[158]</sup>

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The strong, seemingly inextricable relationship between key members of the IG and the newly formed NCP has meant that the interim government risks becoming more politically colored than a neutral transitional administration. This is anathema for parties such as the BNP. Even as the political trajectory of the NCP is

nascent, it is in the BNP's interest to prevent the IG's policies from benefiting the NCP, whose convener Nahid Islam) was one of the key faces of the movement that brought Yunus in as CA (with the consent and support of the Bangladesh military). These perceptions of partisan leanings have also led the BNP to call for the IG to sack key members, including the National Security Adviser (Khalilur Rahman), the Local Government Adviser (Asif Bhuiyan), and the Information Adviser (Mahfuz Alam).<sup>[159]</sup>

However, Yunus' attempts to strike a balance by accommodating the BNP's demands (especially for early elections) have also led to allegations of political bias by both the new (NCP) and old (Jel) parties. Yunus' decision to hold elections in February 2026 was viewed by the NCP and Jel as a concession to the BNP, which both parties accused Yunus of having 'special affection' for a party.<sup>[160]</sup> New parties such as the NCP arguably require longer gestation periods to convince the electorate sufficiently to secure more seats in Bangladesh's Parliament. Elections in February 2026 imply that the NCP, as a political party, will contest its first polls less than a year after its establishment.

## PART-III

### Post-Elections Bangladesh

Bangladesh's Election Commission has announced that the country will hold elections on February 12, 2026. While these elections are already loaded with unprecedented stakes, given the scale of Bangladesh's transition, the Chief Election Commissioner has announced that the election will be accompanied by a referendum on the 'July Charter' – a first for the Bangladeshi electorate.<sup>[161]</sup> Naturally, legacy parties such as the BNP have welcomed the poll date announcement; the AL termed it illegal (due to the ban it faces), and the NCP and Jamaat continue to hope the date will be pushed. Most importantly, however, political violence continues in Bangladesh, which has injected further uncertainty over whether the polls will be free, fair, and secure.<sup>[162]</sup>

In the current pre-poll phase, almost all of Bangladesh's major political players (old and new) are testing variations of pragmatic positions, all focused on securing a favorable electoral outcome. This is occurring despite what appear to be fundamental disagreements between the parties. For instance, the NCP and Jel presently favor a new constitutional setup with elections based on proportional representation instead of the extant first-past-the-post system.<sup>[163]</sup> Apart from the fact that the IG's legitimacy to effect such a significant constitutional change is suspect,<sup>[164]</sup> parties such as the BNP remain staunchly opposed to such changes on account of the Bangladeshi voters' unfamiliarity with such systems.<sup>[165]</sup> However, the NCP is not clearly aligned with the Jel (despite similar positions on several

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issues) and maintains communication with both the Jamaat and the BNP to keep its post-poll options open, even as they assert their loyalty to a 'centrist' position.<sup>[166]</sup> Moreover, Bangladeshi analysts also maintain that a joint effort (no matter how ideologically uncomfortable) by all non-legacy parties, such as the NCP, Jel, Islami Andolon, and the Khilafat Andolon, cannot be ruled out.<sup>[167]</sup> Additionally, the BNP's increased calls to remove the ban on the AL also leave open the possibility (no matter how improbable) of a BNP-AL combine if the latter contests the polls and secures a significant number of seats despite the events of July/August 2024.<sup>[168]</sup>

The unprecedented nature of Bangladesh's current political landscape, the emergence of new political forces, the possibility of novel political alliances, and varying degrees of political reorientation by legacy parties collectively paint a picture of what post-February 2026 Bangladesh will look like, which is unclear. A limited voter survey by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) in August 2025 showed that close to 50% of Bangladesh's electorate was undecided about their political choice (a 10% jump from an earlier October 2024 survey).<sup>[169]</sup> Moreover, the Bangladesh Election Commission's announcement that the 15 million-odd Bangladeshi diaspora will also be able to participate in the 2026 polls further modifies the character of the electorate.<sup>[170]</sup>

Notwithstanding this uncertainty, assuming the formation of a BNP-led government post-February is analytically convenient. Even in limited surveys such as BIGD's, the BNP secured the highest percentage (12%) among respondents who chose a party.<sup>[171]</sup> The Jamaat and NCP can still succeed in garnering a significant presence in the 350-seat Jatiya Sangsad; the BNP itself has publicly admitted its weakness in 150 constituencies where it has struggled to field the right candidates.<sup>[172]</sup> However, the party's internal surveys and electoral experience lend greater credibility to the assumption that the BNP, in some form or another, will participate in Bangladesh's next elected government.

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Should this assumption hold true, India will face a BNP-led Bangladesh for the fourth time since 1979, when the party won its first general elections under Gen Ziaur Rehman. However, unlike the latter two BNP governments, which were led by Khaleda Zia, the party is presently steered (de facto) by Tarique Rehman. Distinct from Zia's political legacy, Rehman has remained in self-imposed exile since 2008, even as he has maintained grassroots support through constant communication with the BNP's cadre and potential constituents.<sup>[173]</sup> While considering Dhaka's future foreign policy orientation, the BNP's position can reasonably be assumed to be an aggregate of the varying positions articulated by other stakeholders, such as the IG, NCP, and even the Jel. At its core, this position effectively calls for greater strategic autonomy for Bangladesh. Functionally, compared with the high point of India-Bangladesh ties over 15 years under Sheikh Hasina, this naturally means a more calibrated approach to India. For perspective, the BNP's potential future positions on key sectors assessed in Part I are pictured below:

<b>Border Security</b>	Historically, Khaleda Zia's BNP-led government of 2001-2006 oversaw the worst period of border tensions between India and Bangladesh, with several killings occurring due to repeated clashes between India's Border Security Force and the then Bangladesh Rifles (now BGB).[174] In the years since, the BGB and BSF have shown an ability to cooperate for mutual benefit, regardless of the political dispensation in Dhaka. Even as a non-AL party can be expected to reassert Bangladesh's own interpretation of the 1975 Border Guidelines, issues with border management are expected to be resolved through existing mechanisms. The BNP's willingness to politically escalate any issue will depend on the broader bilateral relationship.
<b>Water Sharing</b>	The issue of water-sharing is arguably the most susceptible to political escalation. Among the other parties, the BNP has made the Teesta dispute a key plank to consolidate popular support and has repeatedly asserted its intent to demand fair terms from New Delhi. Rehman asserted in February 2025 that the Hasina-era 'one-sided agreements with India' need to be re-evaluated, specifically relating to water-sharing.[175] Should the Teesta's lack of resolution continue, and in the absence of mutual political trust, the BNP could also harden its position on the Ganges Treaty.
<b>Connectivity</b>	Apart from the BNP's historic opposition to granting India access to Bangladeshi ports such as Mongla and Chittogram, the party has not opposed bilateral connectivity projects. Given the potential removal of the BNP's opposition logic, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the BNP could also be open to changing course on port access, especially as it can now take greater ownership and control of such an agreement.
<b>Trade and Business</b>	Bangladesh's economic relations with India are significantly guarded by market needs. [176] While it is unlikely that either Bangladesh or India will rescind their recent adverse measures restricting certain trade modalities and items anytime soon, the restoration of political goodwill between New Delhi and Dhaka can allow for the resumption of older trade modalities (with or without modifications).
<b>Geopolitical Choices</b>	Bangladeshi political leaders such as Tarique Rehman have promised a 'Bangladesh First' foreign policy with "Not Dilli, Not Pindi" (not India and not Pakistan).[177] However, in effect, any increase in Bangladesh-Pakistan ties (even if it occurs alongside a resurgence in India-Bangladesh ties) is likely to affect New Delhi's security calculus adversely. On May 7, after India struck terror camps in Pakistan as a response to the Pahalgam terror attack, Tarique Rehman condemned "military attacks" and urged "stakeholders to show restraint." [178] This latter policy articulation, in particular, was arguably a microcosm of the BNP's broader foreign policy preferences and the inherent challenges they pose for India.
<b>Bilateral Political Equations</b>	Bilaterally, a core abiding concern for most political actors in Bangladesh, including the BNP, is Sheikh Hasina's continuing political rhetoric from New Delhi. Even for an elected government with popular legitimacy, which would be less vulnerable to Hasina's accusations, the question of trying Hasina for the incidents of July 2024 will remain important. However, there is also a possibility that should Hasina's bellicose rhetoric cease, the BNP will avoid continuing to use it as a bone of contention (beyond its own rhetorical focus). Notwithstanding the needs of the tribunal, the BNP's political logic can also allow it to tolerate Hasina staying out of Bangladesh to prevent re-energizing the AL.

## Conclusion: The Need for ‘Bleeding Valve’ Diplomacy

The India-Bangladesh relationship has remained robust through most of their shared history since 1971. This strength largely stemmed from the partnership between New Delhi and Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka, with new stakes created across sectors. Yet, the same source that delivered economic gains also drew criticism of India’s lopsided partnership with the AL, especially as the AL grew increasingly authoritarian at home. India’s closeness with Bangladesh manifested in concessional lines of credit worth over \$8 billion, cross-border electricity trade (Bangladesh currently imports over 1,160 MW of power from India), and numerous infrastructure and developmental projects, among others. Indian border states share deep cultural and economic ties with Bangladesh, providing additional guardrails for the relationship. Bilateral trade increased by 600% between 2009 and 2024.<sup>[179]</sup>

Over time, however, the AL’s domestic authoritarianism generated internal discontent that inevitably spilled over into India. This pressure culminated in August 2025 with the backlash in Dhaka against the AL. Vis-à-vis India, it only intensified further, given Hasina’s refuge in New Delhi and her continued denunciation of Dhaka’s current political actors.



*Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Bangladesh’s Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus in Bangkok in April 2025, during his visit to Thailand for the BIMSTEC Summit. Source: The Indian Express*

This alone does not necessarily imply that India and Bangladesh were bound for an irreconcilable rupture on August 5; the bilateral relationship is too deeply interwoven for that. The real risk lies in how non-political sectors are now being affected by the erosion of political trust, which could create lasting structural impediments. To prevent this, both sides must establish channels—“bleeding valves”—to release pressure and restore good faith through sustained interaction among policymakers, strategic communities, industry representatives, and political leaders.

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Arguably, New Delhi has already recognized the need for such an approach, accompanied by expressions of good faith, as when PM Narendra Modi publicly expressed his “deep concern” about the health of BNP supremo Khaleda Zia in December 2025, which was received warmly by the BNP leadership.<sup>[180]</sup> Former but influential practitioners in India’s strategic community also consistently advise a calibrated and pragmatic approach to Bangladesh. For instance, a former Foreign Secretary and current Rajya Sabha MP asserted in December 2025 that India must balance immediate pressures with a long-term vision and recognize that “how we treat partners during moments of adversity shapes the partnerships available to us in moments of stability”.<sup>[181]</sup>

Bangladesh’s freshly volatile political landscape and the inclination of new actors to make loose but inflammatory statements that are antagonistic to India, will invariably cause fresh friction between Dhaka and New Delhi – such as when NCP leader Hasnat Abdullah alleged that India was involved the murder of another leader, and threatened that Bangladesh could cut off India’s access to the “seven sisters” in December, 2025.<sup>[182]</sup> India responded by summoning the new Bangladeshi High Commissioner to reject such narratives and to call for the safety of Indian diplomatic missions and posts in Bangladesh.

<sup>[183]</sup>

“**While border management, water sharing, trade, and connectivity remain important, the drivers of issues in each of these sectors lie in the political equation between New Delhi and Dhaka and in how they recognize, accept, and adapt to each other’s redlines (or do not). Under the Hasina-led AL, both India and Bangladesh could leverage increased political trust to manage them.**

But both India and Bangladesh evidently recognize the political nature of the current friction and evidently remain committed to resolving issues through “constructive dialogue.” When PM Narendra Modi and Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus met for the first time on April 4, 2025, on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC Summit, India’s read-out from the meeting reiterated the importance of discussions “in the interest of their long-standing and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship.”<sup>[184]</sup> While border management, water sharing, trade, and connectivity remain important, the drivers of issues in each of these sectors lie in the political equation between New Delhi and Dhaka and in how they recognize, accept, and adapt to each other’s redlines (or do not). Under the Hasina-led AL, both India and Bangladesh could circumvent historical issues and leverage increased political trust to manage them. However, this trend has reversed itself under the IG.

On water sharing, New Delhi should reassure Dhaka of the distinction between its positions on the IWT with Pakistan and the GWT with Bangladesh. The continued meetings of the Joint Rivers Commission should be leveraged to generate good faith. Here, the India-Bangladesh relationship benefits from continued avenues of interaction and engagement, unlike the India-Pakistan relationship, which is hampered by political friction.

However, India’s concerns about Bangladesh’s geopolitical choices, particularly its rejuvenated relationship with Pakistan, are difficult to address, regardless of the level of political trust between New Delhi and Dhaka. This is especially as the original locus of India’s security threats does not lie in Dhaka, but in Islamabad. This insecurity has justifiably worsened since the Pahalgam terror attacks and the India-Pakistan crisis of April/May 2025. Any future elected government in Dhaka is also likely to downplay or dismiss India’s concerns, and assert that Dhaka’s relationship with Islamabad is a function of Bangladesh’s own strategic autonomy (similar to India’s).

Similarly, being fresh out of a clash with Pakistan that New Delhi viewed as fighting a China-Pakistan 'fusion', India presently recognizes China's increased influence in South Asian conflicts. This means that, despite the recent thaw between New Delhi and Beijing since December 2024, deepening Bangladesh-China relations will naturally create new threat scenarios for Indian military planners, with China integrally involved with two neighbours on India's West and East. Even so, India could adapt its conciliatory approach toward Beijing and apply it to Dhaka. With a smaller, culturally proximate neighbour, such an approach could yield greater dividends and mitigate the fallout of Bangladesh's ties with Pakistan and China.

Ultimately, neither country's core perceptions of the other are likely to shift dramatically. This implies that the only practical avenue of intervention is at the bilateral political level, with more efforts required to increase trust between Indian and Bangladeshi political actors. India's initiative to do so and Bangladesh's ability to reciprocate will arguably act as the best bleeding valve for both states to engage in good faith, as it will also reflect India's ability to move beyond the AL as its sole partner in Bangladesh.

Even if a future BNP-led government is interested in nourishing ties with Pakistan (given past precedent), the BNP will arguably be equally interested in strong ties with India. Given the pragmatic position vis-à-vis India that the party has adopted over the last year, the AL's exit has likely diluted the BNP's historic compulsions to combine its pro-Pakistan character with an overt anti-India

disposition. New Delhi too has shown willingness to reach out to the BNP to forge a new relationship ahead of its potential return, reducing risks for Track II interactions before and/or after Bangladesh's 2026 elections. It is imperative that such efforts to address bleeding valves be conducted both before and after Bangladesh's elections. If the country's political transition concludes while bilateral relations remain strained, temporary frictions may harden into structural problems.

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