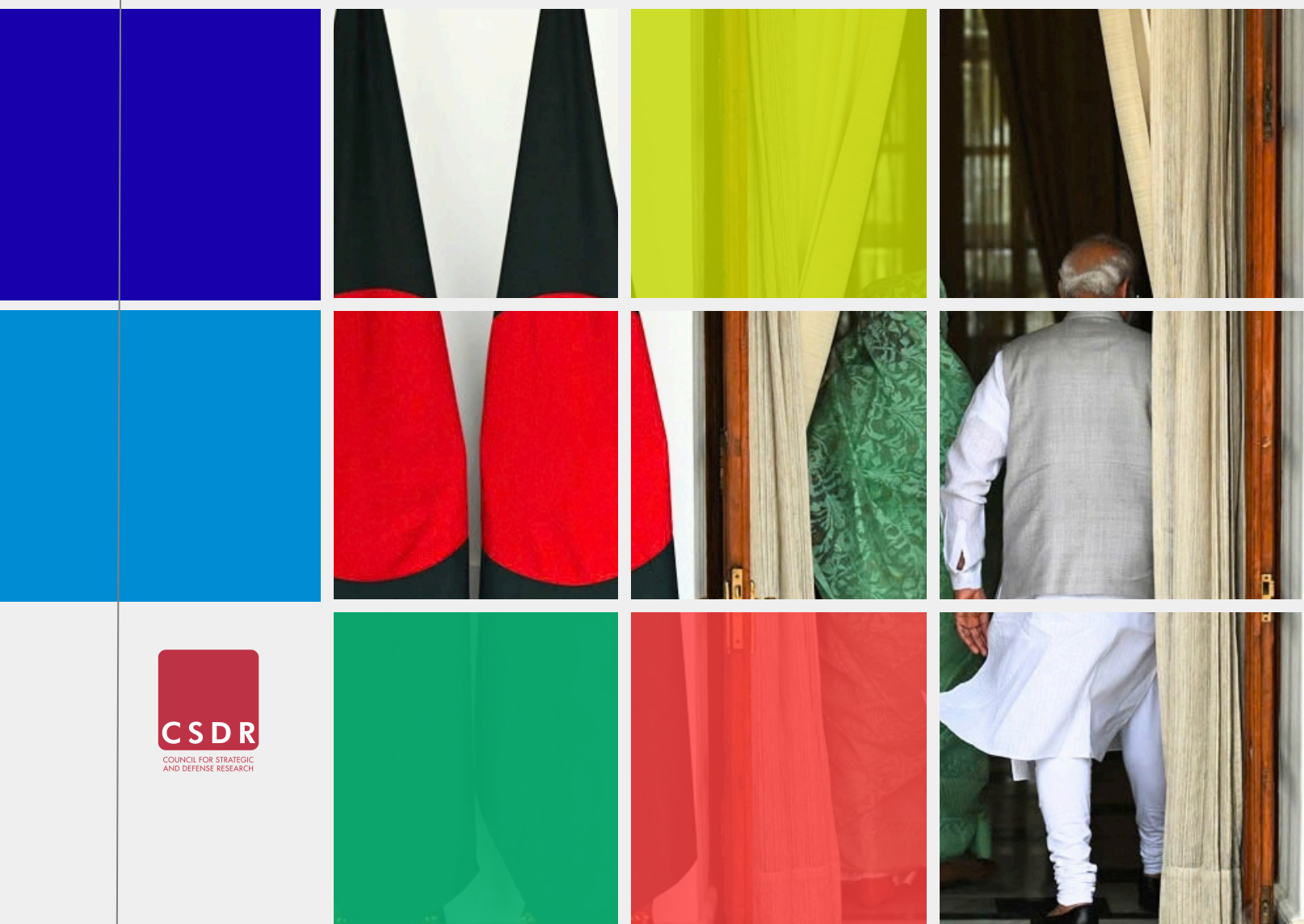


A Broken Mirror

How India Mistook Unstable Asymmetry with Bangladesh for Stability

IMPACT ESSAY

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ABOUT THIS ESSAY

This essay examines why the India-Bangladesh relationship, which New Delhi regarded as stable and deeply aligned until August 2024, broke down so completely and so quickly. Drawing on Brantly Womack's theory of asymmetric relations, it argues that stability between a larger and a smaller state rests on two reciprocal conditions: the larger state's acknowledgment of the smaller state's autonomy, and the smaller state's deference to the larger state's core sensitivities.

It traces the relationship through three periods. Until 2008, Bangladesh's electoral oscillation between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) gave India an authentic reading of how its acknowledgment was being received. Between 2008 and 2024, Sheikh Hasina's capture of the electoral system severed that feedback loop, so that her deference to New Delhi no longer reflected Bangladeshi consent. Since 2024, the pent-up instability has surfaced in Dhaka's over-assertion of autonomy and in India's reluctance to recognize the change.

The central argument is that the asymmetry India perceived as stable between 2008 and 2024 was inherently unstable because of two factors: appropriated agency, where the Hasina government's deference exceeded the mandate Bangladesh's electorate had given it, and unstable stability, where India's assessment of its own acknowledgment was corrupted by its reliance on that government's feedback. A durable relationship now requires India to ensure that such an appropriation of agency does not recur.

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Summary

1 India and Bangladesh share an inherently asymmetric relationship. Until August 2024, this asymmetry was seemingly stable under the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League administration in Dhaka. However, the breakdown of the India-Bangladesh relationship after August 2024 and the rise in anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh since then show that the pillars of that asymmetry were inherently unstable.

The essay analyzes the lack of stability by relying on Brantly Womack's work on China and Vietnam, which shows that stability in an asymmetric relationship is determined by two factors: the larger state acknowledges the smaller state's autonomy and decision-making space, while the smaller state defers to the larger state's status and core sensitivities. Domination by the larger state provokes resistance; defiance by the smaller state provokes punitive hostility. This essay adds an intervening variable to Womack's framework: the agent empowered to express acknowledgment or deference, which in electoral democracies like Bangladesh is the elected government. If that agent acts beyond its electoral mandate and appropriates powers beyond it, then either state's assessment of whether its acknowledgment or deference is working to keep asymmetry stable becomes corrupted.

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3 Between 1972 and 2008 the bilateral relationship was stably asymmetric despite occasional violent friction. This was mainly because Bangladesh's governments oscillated between deferring more (Awami League) and less (BNP-Jamaat) to India. However, a rotation of rule between two parties (interspersed with periods of military rule) ensured that the Bangladeshi electorate consistently had opportunities to validate or reject either party's positions, and India adapted to each shift accordingly. Overall stability did not fundamentally break down. This breakdown occurred principally following the 2008-2024 period of Hasina's premiership, which this essay explains using the following two lenses:

- **Appropriated Agency (2008-2024)** – During these years, Bangladesh viewed the Hasina administration's deference to India as ultra vires its agency, especially after the tainted 2014 elections. This incrementally created a perception in Bangladesh of excessive deference by the smaller state to the larger, as the AL appropriated the agency of a fairly elected government. Developments such as the 15th Amendment of 2011 to abolish the caretaker system, and the 2014, 2018 and 2024 elections being held without any

guarantee of fairness, a rise in enforced disappearances, the Digital Security Act, and the suppression first of the Jamaat-e-Islami and then of the BNP collectively worsened the effects of appropriated agency. Consequently, the Awami League's deference to New Delhi also came to be seen as exceeding the agency which Bangladesh's electorate had granted it.

- **Unstable Stability (2008-2024)** – Since India's reading of whether it sufficiently acknowledged Bangladesh's sovereign interests rested on Hasina's feedback and the AL's deference, it celebrated bilateral ties and saw Hasina's deference as proof of India's sufficient acknowledgment. However, in Bangladeshi popular perceptions, this was a compromised feedback loop, with India's acknowledgment directed toward the AL's interests rather than the Bangladeshi population (even if New Delhi believed otherwise). The unresolved Teesta dispute, border killings such as that of Felani Khatun, the Adani Godda and Rampal power arrangements, and the Chattogram-Mongla transit deals all came to be read as extensions of the Awami League's interests rather than of Bangladesh's as a result of inherent instability. This tainted even those deals and agreements which objectively yielded mutual benefits.

Since August 2024, the instability has become overt as the party-appropriating agency has been removed from the electoral equation, and Bangladesh has sought to correct the AL government's strategic direction. This led to a period of low deference from Bangladesh, even as India sought high acknowledgment, responding with reciprocal punitive economic measures after each adverse action by the Interim Government in Dhaka. Following the February 2026 election, however, a low-stakes stability, characterized by low acknowledgment and low deference, has taken hold in the India-Bangladesh relationship, avoiding hostility without strategic alignment.

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Dhaka's deference to India's strategic sensitivities has fallen sharply; Hasina's presence in India has become a single-point test of Indian acknowledgment, and the BNP government (pressed daily by the Jamaat-e-Islami and by popular discourse to prove its distance from the Awami League) has placed 101 agreements with India under review. This is even as both capitals show signs of pragmatism and incrementally revive relationship-management mechanisms that Womack deemed essential for stability in the China-Vietnam case.

It is uncertain how long Bangladeshi society will take to deem the acknowledgment-deference equation sufficiently balanced. However, India evidently cannot expect high-stakes stable asymmetry without mitigating the effects of the 2008-2024 period. In the short-to-medium term, India must ensure that, regardless of the relationship's material stakes and whether it falls or grows, it guards against future actors appropriating agency in Bangladesh. This risk remains even with the BNP-led government, as it did with the Awami League, especially as the BNP itself is now being seen (or being portrayed by the Jamaat, in opposition) as the new 'India-friendly' party. Despite Bangladesh's traditional politics of revenge and the geopolitical influence of China and Pakistan, India must focus on maintaining stability in asymmetry to prevent a protracted breakdown of ties with a state key to India's national security.

Introduction

In the 55 years of Bangladesh's independent existence, its relationship with India has been a defining feature of its strategic discourse; "You cannot draw the map of India without drawing the map of Bangladesh", Nobel Laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus said in January 2025.¹ Until August 2024, when Yunus took over as de facto interim Prime Minister (Chief Advisor to an

Interim Government, IG) in Dhaka, the state-to-state relationship between India and Bangladesh enjoyed a period of high strategic trust and significant geopolitical alignment.² By August 2024, however, the bilateral relationship had broken down at its most fundamental layers, to the point that Indian strategic discourse struggled to reconcile itself even with Bangladesh's characterization of the events which brought about that change in mid-2024 as a 'revolution'.³ Since then, Bangladesh has displayed a high degree of distrust towards India, to the extent that the government elected in Dhaka in February 2026 finds itself compelled to give space to anti-India sentiments and rhetoric, even as it attempts to rebuild state-to-state relations. Even as official statements from both states continue to speak of warmth and depth in bilateral ties, a lingering undercurrent of strong distrust and unresolved demands (especially from Dhaka) is evidently preventing the relationship from returning to its pre-2024 state.

The relationship between India and Bangladesh has long been asymmetric by default, given India's economic, military, geographic, and geopolitical superiority as the larger state. Coupled with the circumstances of Bangladesh's birth (and India's inextricable enabling role in it), this relationship has long struggled to establish an enduring framework of interaction that accounts for unforeseen shifts within either state and prevents a large-scale breakdown of bilateral ties. Traditional realists would view this as an inevitable outcome of structural asymmetry: the larger state sacrifices the smaller state's interests at the altar of its own security and geopolitical priorities, while the smaller state naturally views the larger state's actions through a lens of paranoia. Essentially, the smaller state is hyper-attentive to every ambiguous move by the larger power and reads it as a calculated test of its sovereignty, while the larger state remains inattentive to this sensitivity and views its smaller neighbor through strategic templates alone. Brantly Womack, among others, studied the centuries-long relationship between China and Vietnam to argue that asymmetry alone does not make instability or conflict between larger and smaller states inevitable, and that such relationships can be inherently stable.⁴ He argues that for asymmetry to be stable, the smaller state must acknowledge the superior status, strategic weight, and core sensitivities of the larger state, while the larger state must respect the sovereign domestic independence, boundaries, and decision-making space of the smaller state. When the larger state seeks domination, it provokes mortal resistance from the smaller state; when the smaller state defies or acts with hubris, it provokes punitive hostility from the larger. Womack assessed the historical arc of Sino-Vietnamese relations to argue that through several phases of shifting regimes, imperial dynasties, and ideologies (from tributary systems to brief periods of intense communist brotherhood, followed by the 1979 border war and Cambodia conflicts), the fundamental asymmetry has remained constant: China is the massive power, and Vietnam is the smaller neighbor. Despite China's immense size, it has rarely been able to permanently dominate or assimilate Vietnam, while Vietnam has been unable to permanently remove the Chinese 'threat' to its sovereignty. However, as a function both of bilateral differences and of the geopolitical



"You cannot draw the map of India without drawing the map of Bangladesh."
Muhammad Yunus, January 2025

shifts of the 1980s (the breakup of Soviet-led blocs), Vietnam realized it could not shake China's geopolitical shadow, while China realized that crushing or controlling Vietnam economically or militarily was prohibitively costly and counterproductive to its strategic interests. This led to a period of 'mature asymmetry' (post-1991) in which Vietnam mitigates its vulnerability by offering Beijing diplomatic deference and economic partnership, while fiercely guarding its domestic political autonomy and national sovereignty. Beijing, in turn, accepts Vietnamese independence and utilizes institutionalized channels, party-to-party ties, and economic integration to keep friction manageable. For Womack, this dynamic necessarily required mechanisms for conflict management and resolution (especially in the South China/East Seas). Ultimately, Womack distills the requirements for a stable

asymmetric relationship into two main elements: the larger state acknowledges the autonomy of the smaller state and respects its sovereign domestic independence, boundaries, and decision-making space, and the smaller state defers to the superior status, strategic weight, and core sensitivities of the larger state.

Admittedly, Womack's assessment of China-Vietnam cannot be directly transplanted to the India-Bangladesh relationship, given crucial contextual and historical differences, despite similarities over a longer timeline (Bangladesh was once part of India, as Vietnam was part of China). However, his final distillation of the requirements of stable asymmetry is especially well suited to understanding the relationship's breakdown since 2024, informed by events since Bangladesh gained sovereignty in 1971. That the breakdown was essentially one of an asymmetric relationship between a larger state (India) and a smaller state (Bangladesh), in which the former's recognition of the latter's autonomy was insufficient, was evident in recent remarks by Riaz Hamidullah, appointed Dhaka's top diplomat in New Delhi in May 2025 and tasked with navigating an unprecedented period in India-Bangladesh ties. Asked how one person (Sheikh Hasina, who has been in exile in India since August 2024) could hold up a bilateral relationship, High Commissioner Hamidullah asserted: "If you don't understand dignity, mutual respect and the trust of people, if this is not addressed...if the aspirations of the demography in Bangladesh are not understood, it would get difficult for any country to move. If I am in my mid-50s today, my friends and peers below me make up 88% of Bangladesh's population, as young as that. And if you find that I have trampled your rights or if I brutalized things...then there is little room for any other discussion."⁵

This essay argues that asymmetric stability in the India-Bangladesh relationship existed with varying consistency until 2008, with adverse effects (when stability was absent) and mutual benefits (when it was present) alternating according to geopolitical and domestic context. This is demonstrated foremost by the electoral oscillation between Sheikh Hasina (seen as more deferential) and Khaleda Zia (seen as less deferential), which shows that popular preference for either was not fundamentally eroded by the other's dominance during any electoral cycle. In the 2008-2024 period, however, what India perceived to be a stable asymmetric relationship was inherently unstable, owing to two core factors related to Dhaka. The first is what



The smaller state is hyper-attentive to every ambiguous move by the larger power and reads it as a calculated test of its sovereignty, while the larger state remains inattentive to this sensitivity and views its smaller neighbor through strategic templates alone.

this essay terms Appropriated Agency – the Hasina administration’s deference to New Delhi (rather than defiance) being viewed as ultra vires of her office’s agency, especially after the tainted 2014 elections, creating a perception of excessive deference by the smaller state. The second is what the essay terms Unstable Stability: India’s perception of stability in the asymmetry runs contrary to underlying instability, creating a perception of deficient acknowledgment by the larger state.



What India perceived to be stable asymmetry contained a strong undercurrent of instability, which boiled over in 2024.

Essentially, the space for Bangladesh to turn deference into defiance (in the event of a perceived lack of acknowledgment by the larger state) was curtailed by Hasina’s dominance of electoral institutions and the Awami League (AL) undoing the electoral choice that Bangladeshis had enjoyed until 2008. Hence, only after 2024 does Womack’s ‘deference’ yardstick truly become applicable again, as Dhaka overasserts a position of defiance and frames it as compensation for years of insufficient acknowledgment by the larger state, compounded by the Hasina government’s over-deference.

This essay therefore adds an intervening variable to Womack’s theory: the agent in the larger or smaller state which is empowered to express acknowledgment or deference, respectively. In electoral democracies, this agent is invariably the elected government, which assumes the power to articulate the state’s sovereign choices. If this agent’s mandate is misaligned with the larger socio-political needs of the state it represents, then any assessment by either state of whether its acknowledgment or deference succeeds in ensuring stability becomes corrupted. In the India-Bangladesh context, the agent’s position became questionable in Bangladesh, leading to a dramatic shift in power in 2024. Between 1972 and 2008 at least, India and Bangladesh arguably did enjoy a stable asymmetry (despite its violent and often extreme manifestations) with Bangladesh oscillating between agents who deferred to India to a greater or lesser degree depending on their domestic calculus and geopolitical compulsions: Awami League-led governments deferred to Indian strategic interests, while Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)/Jamaat-e-Islami-led governments categorically undermined such deference (partly owing to the logic of their opposition to the AL). Between 2008 and 2024, however, even as trust in the state-to-state relationship suggested an equilibrium between India’s acknowledgment of Bangladeshi autonomy and Dhaka’s deference to New Delhi’s strategic sensitivities, the agent which determined this equilibrium in Dhaka became dissociated from the democratic structures that had empowered it to manage the asymmetry from Bangladesh’s end. This meant that India’s acknowledgment of Dhaka’s autonomy was, in effect, perceived as low during this period, even as New Delhi assessed it as high based on the Hasina administration’s feedback. In turn, what India perceived as stable asymmetry contained a strong undercurrent of instability that boiled over in 2024. This essay therefore principally analyzes the 2008-2024 period to inform a better understanding of the post-2024 relationship.

Between 2024 and 2026, then, despite India’s incrementally increasing acknowledgment of Bangladesh’s needs, Dhaka’s deference to India’s strategic sensitivities fell significantly, causing actions and reactions across sectors of the relationship which signaled a marked break in stability. At present, the relationship is at a stage where New Delhi’s fresh acknowledgment is not being met by reciprocal deference from Dhaka, given the latter’s continued need to undo the effects of the 2008-2024 period. The following typology sorts these periods

roughly into four categories to argue that stability in the relationship can involve periods of either high or low acknowledgment and deference (depending in turn on the strength of sectoral cooperation). It is imbalance between the two that causes instability.

Typology of the India-Bangladesh asymmetry

	High Acknowledgement	Low Acknowledgement
High Deference	Stable Asymmetry (1971-2008, post-2026 Expectation)	Unstable Asymmetry (Hasina Govt 2008-2024)
Low Deference	Unstable Asymmetry (2024-2026)	Stable Asymmetry (Post-February 2026)

Stable Asymmetry with Periods of High/Low acknowledgment/Deference – Until 2008

The nature of Sheikh Hasina’s politics between 2008 and 2024 was inextricably linked to a Bangladeshi tendency towards ‘overcorrection’ that was evident from the founding moment of the state. Born out of a hard-fought liberation struggle and with Indian military, diplomatic, and political aid, Bangladesh’s early leaders grappled with the challenge of building a new state in a polarized environment. While Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remained popular, his preference for centralizing power and sidelining democratic avenues for alternative political expression (in the interest of immediate national unity), as well as his attempted purge of all Pakistani elements from Bangladesh’s military and polity, drew significant domestic criticism.⁶ Here, India’s considerable support to Sheikh Mujib – a function of close collaboration during the liberation struggle and war – was the source of a lingering suspicion that, having broken away from Pakistan, Bangladesh would now exercise its sovereignty with special consideration for Indian interests. While Mujib’s assertive push for secularism within Bangladesh was not contested, its articulation seemed to remove scope for inclusivity in national assertion and to erode Bangladesh’s Muslim identity, creating a fear that this would repeat Pakistan’s erosion of Bangladesh’s Bengali identity. Bangladesh sought the agency to retain both as its core identity, which required the assertion of ‘Bangladeshi nationalism’ rather than the strict contours of India’s secularism or Pakistan’s Islamism. Notwithstanding the incomparable brutality of Pakistan’s anti-Bengali measures (replete with genocidal acts during Operation Searchlight), this popular need for agency would arguably assert itself against any force pulling too hard in one direction. In the early 1970s, this had also become tied to Mujib’s personalized rule, which amplified its adverse effects. While Mujib’s assassination represented an

extreme internal course-correction in Bangladesh, Zia-ur-Rahman's subsequent measures also reflected an overcorrection, entrenching the politics of revenge in which the Sheikh Hasina-Khaleda Zia contest played out until 2008. In these years, neither deference to India nor its absence crossed a threshold in Bangladesh that would overpower India's general popularity. 'Suspicion' of the larger power remained an undercurrent that required political activation, which the BNP traditionally provided in its opposition to the Awami League, and which periods of Hasina's rule balanced. Hence, in these years, the India-Bangladesh relationship witnessed periods of both high and low acknowledgment by India's and Bangladesh's autonomy, as well as high and low deference (depending on the government in power).



Bangladesh sought the agency to retain both as its core identity, which required the assertion of 'Bangladeshi nationalism' rather than the strict contours of India's secularism or Pakistan's Islamism.

Early developments such as the 1972 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace included consultation clauses widely read in Dhaka as constraining Bangladesh's independent foreign-policy space, and hence as Indian non-acknowledgment of Bangladeshi autonomy. Conversely, Zia-ur-Rahman's revision of Bangladesh's secular constitutional clauses and his courting of Islamic-bloc ties were treated in India's strategic discourse as a hostile, Pakistan-tilted realignment rather than as an assertion of Bangladeshi autonomy. Yet while Delhi read the post-1975 Zia-era pivot as betrayal, the subsequent Khaleda-Hasina period did not see a fundamental breakdown in India-Bangladesh ties, with both sides offering acknowledgment and deference across key developments. This was especially evident during BNP/Jamaat rule, when deference was constrained but New Delhi recognized it as temporary. This recognition, and the oscillation of political power between the two 'Battling Begums', ensured that the Bangladeshi electorate's 'fear' of a second dependence (on India, as on Pakistan before 1971) never materialized to the point of eroding the fundamentals of the relationship, however sharply New Delhi and Dhaka clashed during periods of BNP/Jamaat rule.

For perspective, while the 1996 Ganges Treaty (under Prime Ministers Deve Gowda and Hasina) has been cited by Bangladeshi commentators themselves as the clearest instance of India accepting a binding, negotiated constraint on a resource it physically controls upstream,⁷ it was Khaleda Zia's proactive negotiation of such an arrangement with Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992 which paved the way for the 1996 accord under Hasina (a marker of good faith on Khaleda Zia's part which contemporary Indian writers have noted).⁸ Subsequently, India's role in the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord under Hasina (though vehemently opposed by the BNP) did not trigger any large-scale anti-India discourse in Bangladesh, especially since India's actions reflected an inherent interest in Bangladesh's domestic stability (notably through the disarmament of the Shanti Bahini, which removed a potential bargaining chip for India). Moreover, just as India's acceptance of Zia-ur-Rahman's initiative to create the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1981-85 was viewed positively in Dhaka as a sign of India's openness to a sovereignty-respecting model of regional engagement (which also contributed to stable asymmetry), India's engagement with Khaleda Zia through SAARC in 2005 and bilaterally in 2006 strengthened the perception of Indian acknowledgment. Essentially, while the BNP-Jamaat-led periods in Dhaka did see violent breakdowns in bilateral ties (especially owing to brutal fighting between Bangladeshi and Indian border forces) and created a natural preference in New Delhi for the Awami League, neither the AL nor the BNP was viewed as setting the normative standard

for ties with India. Both sides retained enough popular goodwill to justify their positions, and India’s actions were seen as reactions to each. For instance, despite periods of friction under Khaleda Zia in the early 1990s and early 2000s, both periods of Hasina’s rule in the late 1990s and late 2000s saw popular support for her preference for a more cooperative relationship with New Delhi. Specifically, the marked growth in India-Bangladesh ties during her first term benefited the Bangladeshi business community, creating an economic framework that closely integrated Bangladeshi businesses with those in India’s border states (especially West Bengal). Consequently, while New Delhi developed a natural political preference for dealing with the Awami League, India’s assessment of whether it sufficiently acknowledged Bangladesh’s need for autonomy still hinged on whether the BNP or the AL was in power, and on whether the response was defiance or deference.

From liberation to review: the relationship’s turning points, 1971-2026

- Stable asymmetry, 1971-2008
- Appropriated agency and unstable stability, 2008-2024
- The exposed underbelly, 2024-2026

1971 Bangladesh wins independence with Indian military, diplomatic and political aid	1972 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace; its consultation clauses read in Dhaka as constraining	1975 Mujib assassinated; Zia-ur-Rahman’s overcorrection entrenches the politics of revenge	1996 Ganges Water Treaty signed under Hasina, built on Khaleda Zia’s 1992 opening to Narasimha Rao
2008 Awami League returns to power; Hasina hands over ULFA leaders in January 2009	2011 15th Amendment abolishes the caretaker system; Teesta deal collapses; Felani Khatun killed at the border	2014 BNP boycotts the general election; AL wins 127 of 153 uncontested seats	2018 The “midnight election” returns Hasina for a third consecutive term
Aug 2024 Hasina ousted by popular demonstrations; Yunus heads an Interim Government; Hasina in exile in India	Nov 2025 Caretaker system restored	Feb 2026 BNP wins a parliamentary majority; Awami League barred from contesting	Sept 2026 Dhaka places 101 agreements with India, including the Chattogram/Mongla transit deal, under review

2008-2024: Appropriated Agency

The Hasina administration’s deference to New Delhi (rather than defiance) was viewed as ultra vires of her office’s agency, especially after the tainted 2014 elections, creating a perception of excessive deference by the smaller state. Sheikh Hasina’s politics in the post-2008 period emulated Mujibur Rahman’s, with modern effects: a more effective authoritarianism and institutional capture pursued through constitutional means (rather than Mujib’s broad-stroke actions, such as his ban on all opposition political parties in 1975).

In this period, the seeds of Hasina’s appropriation of agency were sown mainly through her manipulation of Bangladesh’s electoral system, which had seen significant tumult and required amendment. For the Awami

League, the preferred instrument became the 15th Amendment to the Constitution in June 2011, which abolished the non-partisan caretaker government system that had overseen elections since 1996. Despite the need for greater stability during transitions of power, Bangladeshis viewed this as removing a neutral mechanism that had made prior transfers of power credible, replacing it with an arrangement in which the incumbent party oversaw its own re-election. Both the principal political opposition (the BNP) and civil society in Bangladesh today view that amendment as the first direct enabler of the disputed 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections. In January 2014, the BNP boycotted the general election, which was held without caretaker oversight.



That the caretaker system was restored in November 2025, some 15 months after Hasina's exit, reflects the degree to which its abolition was viewed as the AL's original sin.

Despite low turnout and election-day violence, the AL won 127 of 153 uncontested seats and 234 seats overall.⁹ By the 2018 election, the one-sided nature of Bangladesh's election apparatus had become more pronounced, with the exercise itself referred to in Bangladesh as the “midnight election”: a rigged contest which returned Hasina to power for a third consecutive term, with the AL-led Grand Alliance taking 288 of the 300 directly elected seats, through large-scale pre-dawn ballot-box stuffing and voter intimidation, among other tactics.¹⁰ With the same characteristics recurring in the January 2024 election, Bangladesh's electorate had gone through three consecutive elections without any guarantee of fairness. The restoration of the caretaker system in November 2025, some 15 months after Hasina's exit, reflects how the AL viewed its abolition as its original sin.

While the rigging of Bangladesh's election apparatus became the foundation of popular opposition to Hasina (opposition that cannot be quantified, given the absence of fair polls), two other elements nourished it.

The first was the AL's willingness to use authoritarian instruments to sideline opposition to government measures, in an atmosphere where opposition parties were already effectively debarred from elections. Between 2009 and 2024, systematic enforced disappearances and the detention of individuals in centers colloquially referred to as “aynaghar” (house of mirrors)¹¹ by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the police, and Bangladeshi intelligence evidently became more common. A December 2024 Commission of Inquiry reported that it recorded 1,913 complaints (758 verified), estimated the true total could exceed 4,000, and found evidence implicating Hasina personally in specific cases.¹² The RAB itself was sanctioned by the United States in December 2021 over allegations of more than 600 disappearances since 2009 and nearly 600 extrajudicial killings since 2018.¹³ The AL government, especially through the RAB, showed a strong inclination towards the use of force, witnessed across numerous instances but most notably in 2018, when the government responded to a road-safety demonstration with police and Chhatra League (AL student wing) crackdowns, mass arrests, and internet slowdowns. This recurring tendency would eventually become a flashpoint in July 2024.

Alongside its crackdown on opposition activists and politicians, the AL government also took a hard line against critics in the media and the economy. The government's liberal use of instruments such as the Digital Security Act (DSA, 2018), later replaced by the Cyber Security Act (2023), led to the arrest of over 1,500 people; under the Act, 229 journalists were sued, of whom 56 were arrested.¹⁴ The Act's provisions criminalized vaguely defined offenses such as "hurting religious sentiments" or "tarnishing the image of the nation". An infamous and oft-cited case in Bangladesh is that of the writer Mushtaq Ahmed, who died in prison custody in February 2021 after being denied bail six times.¹⁵ Similarly, after the 29 March 2023 arrest of Prothom Alo journalist Shamsuzzaman Shams under the DSA over an article on the cost of living, Hasina told Parliament on 10 April 2023 that Prothom Alo is "the enemy of Awami League, democracy and the people of the country".¹⁶ This was widely covered as a direct assault on Bangladesh's largest and most credible independent daily. On the economic front, apart from Hasina's documented dislike of Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus (which was out of step with national sentiment), incidents such as the 2012 Padma Bridge scandal¹⁷ as well as the 2016 Bangladesh Bank heist¹⁸ exposed severe institutional weaknesses in financial oversight, or rather a culture of irregularities which flourished under weak Awami League-era financial regulation.

The second was the AL's overbearing focus on countering Islamist elements in Bangladeshi society, in particular the Jamaat-e-Islami and those involved in pro-Pakistani activities during the liberation struggle. This focus manifested itself through a series of actions, but was first prominently marked in May 2013, when the RAB, police, and Border Guards Bangladesh cracked down on a Hefazat-e-Islam rally demanding a blasphemy law in Bangladesh.¹⁹ The fatalities resulting from the crackdown meant that, even though such Islamist elements did not command sizeable support among most Bangladeshis, the heavy-handedness of the state triggered concerns that the AL was using the counter-Islamist premise to act against other legitimate voices. Already, Hasina's focus on prosecuting pro-Pakistan partisans through the International Crimes Tribunal between 2010 and 2013 had produced mixed opinions, with support for such prosecutions co-existing with suspicions that Hasina was using secularist framings to target the political opposition as well. More importantly, by 2022-23 the Awami League had also ensured that the Jamaat-e-Islami was kept out of the political fray, eventually extending this to the BNP by cracking down on the party's ability to organize.²⁰ That Hasina also extended this logic to Pakistan itself (downsizing ties with Islamabad), further fed perceptions of the AL's unreciprocated deference to India's strategic concerns.

By 2023 at the latest, Bangladeshi discourse and international commentary made it clear that the AL-led government in Dhaka no longer exercised legitimate authority underwritten by fair elections, which would have signaled popular faith in Hasina's government. By extension, all of Hasina's deference to India (regardless of the degree of India's acknowledgment of Bangladeshi autonomy) occurred in an environment where no true test existed for whether Bangladesh perceived such acknowledgment positively beyond the Awami League's base. For all its faults, the pre-2008 Bangladeshi electoral cycle (coupled with a neutral caretaker government that oversaw transitions of power) allowed the Bangladeshi electorate sufficient



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choice, which was in turn reflected in India-Bangladesh ties. As the next section shows, after 2008, the perceived stability in the asymmetry was divorced from Bangladesh's larger socio-political landscape, in which India's acknowledgment was viewed as an acknowledgment of the AL's needs rather than of Bangladesh's autonomy.



All acts of deference by Hasina to India occurred in an environment where there was no true test of whether such acknowledgment was perceived positively within Bangladesh beyond the Awami League's base.

2008-2024: Unstable Stability

India's perceived stability in asymmetry being contrary

to underlying instability, creating the perception that the larger state acknowledged it insufficiently. Because India's assessments of both its own acknowledgment of Bangladeshi autonomy and Dhaka's deference had become entrenched in the Awami League's interests (as popularly perceived in Bangladesh), even India's celebration of India-Bangladesh ties across the political, social, and cultural spectrum fueled an undercurrent of resentment. This manifested itself both at the rhetorical level (such as Bangladeshi characterizations of its own efforts in 1971 as primary, in contrast to Indian framings which prioritize India's role as the 'liberator') and at the material level, with economic and political agreements with India viewed as an extension of the Awami League's interests. Arguably, the same agreements would have been viewed differently (regardless of how different they might have looked) had they been concluded between New Delhi and a government in Dhaka which represented Bangladesh's popular interests, and which would therefore have been a more empowered and accurate source of Bangladesh's deference to the larger power. Hence, while India saw itself as meeting the need to acknowledge Bangladeshi interests, its partnership with Sheikh Hasina (especially at the personal level) reduced how much Bangladesh recognized this as acknowledgment. Similarly, Hasina's deference to New Delhi compounded the long-term adverse effects of this dynamic, making it near-inevitable that, absent mitigating action, underlying instability would overtake asymmetric stability at the state-to-state level. That India both cooperated with Hasina's government and celebrated its actions, and endorsed the 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections, combined with perceptions of India protecting the Hasina administration from further punitive action by the United States (especially in 2023)²¹ – all of which contributed to a significant corruption of how each side perceived large-state acknowledgment and small-state deference.

Arguably, this dynamic took hold early in Hasina's post-2008 tenure. Her first act after taking power in January 2009, handing over insurgent United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) leaders sheltering in Bangladesh, was seen as an immediate, high-cost security concession to India, which India did not reciprocate in other areas, such as the Teesta water-sharing dispute. While both sides had settled on a near-final 37.5%/42.5% sharing arrangement that was ready for signature during Manmohan Singh's September 2011 Dhaka visit,²² its collapse owing to the opposition of then-West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was read in Bangladesh as the larger state's domestic federal interests structurally overriding the smaller state's national interests. Hasina's failure to bypass the roadblock, despite at least six summit-level meetings in India, entrenched this view.

In Bangladeshi discourse, India's inability to resolve the Teesta dispute was compounded by New Delhi's effective refusal to allow Bangladesh to dredge and manage the Teesta with Chinese cooperation (principally because of India's security concerns about a Chinese presence near the Siliguri Corridor). Combined with a worsening of discourse on India in Bangladesh after the 2011 killing of 15-year-old Felani Khatun at the border, this arguably generated greater dissatisfaction within Bangladesh over the degree to which the larger state was willing to acknowledge the smaller state's autonomy and reciprocate its deference.²³



Its failure to act more forcefully, while continuing border-level cooperation with India ever since, was taken as proof of its 'concessions' to India.

On border killings specifically, a robust working mechanism between India's Border Security Force (BSF) and Bangladesh's Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) did not prevent such incidents from recurring (even as it kept the political fallout manageable, given the high political trust between New Delhi and Dhaka). Crucially, the 2014 election prevented India from assessing the connection between the Awami League's actions vis-à-vis India and Bangladeshi popular support for them. The Felani Khatun incident continues to be cited in Bangladesh as one of the earliest pieces of evidence: even though the Awami League condemned the incident in 2011, its failure to act more forcefully, while continuing border-level cooperation with India ever since (especially after the tainted 2014 election), was taken as proof of its 'concessions' to India.²⁴ In Bangladesh's post-2024 environment, Khatun's father further alleged that the Hasina administration had "pressured us that we were never allowed to speak on this matter (sic)".²⁵

In fact, most of the Interim Government's acts of 'undoing' vis-à-vis India between August 2024 and February 2026, as well as the larger discourse in Bangladesh since (to which the BNP-led government is highly sensitive), have focused on India-Bangladesh agreements concluded under Sheikh Hasina after 2014, even though India believed at the time of their signing that they represented sufficient acknowledgment of Bangladesh's sovereign assertion and autonomy.

India's view that these agreements were justified on their merits for Bangladesh (especially as Hasina herself touted them as such) prevented any mitigation of the underlying instability. Transit arrangements and power-sharing agreements between India and Bangladesh mirror this pattern: India's strategic discourse focused on the objective benefits of such agreements for both states, while the Bangladeshi lens (outside government) remained focused on the AL-led government's appropriated agency. Agreements such as the Adani Godda power purchase agreement from 2017 (described by Transparency International Bangladesh as one-sided, opaque, and discriminatory)²⁶ and the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant, both celebrated power-sharing arrangements established under Sheikh Hasina,²⁷ were placed under a broad "re-evaluation" by the Yunus-led IG in 2024.²⁸ That the 'agency' question predominated over other variables was especially evident in the case of the Maitree Plant at the Rampal Power Station, which has yielded substantial dividends for Bangladesh. While the plant is Bangladesh's principal power generator (fairly consistently meeting around 11% of Bangladesh's electricity demand),²⁹ the post-2026 BNP government heeded long-standing environmental concerns (voiced fiercely at the plant's inauguration in 2016) and moved to cancel a planned second coal-fired unit at Rampal in favor of a solar power plant.³⁰ Similarly, when the Adani Godda plant in Jharkhand (operational since 2023, and the subject of long-standing concerns in Bangladesh) temporarily shut down in

September 2026 owing to a technical disruption, the BNP's Acting General Secretary claimed that the unit had been shut down because Prime Minister Tarique Rahman had declined to attend the 2026 BRICS Summit in New Delhi (a decision which, he said, was an assertion of Bangladesh's "independence and sovereignty").³¹



Transit arrangements and power-sharing agreements between India and Bangladesh are a microcosm of this pattern.

The BNP itself has long made a similar sovereignty-based case against granting India transit and trans-shipment rights through the Mongla and Chattogram ports (for better connectivity between India's mainland and its Northeast, through Bangladesh). This issue also serves as the clearest yardstick for the evolution of the AL's appropriation of agency and its contribution to the underlying instability across Hasina's 2008-2024 tenure, despite India's perception of stable asymmetry. Even before the AL's appropriation of agency in 2008, Hasina had long shown a predisposition to grant India access to these ports (despite differences in operational outlook). However, in her first term in power (1996-2001) and immediately after 2008, Hasina remained wary of (and sensitive to) the BNP's protests over granting India access to Bangladeshi ports. It was Hasina's inability to circumvent domestic opposition in Bangladesh that led India, in part, to explore the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) through Myanmar, with the same objective of improving connectivity to India's north-eastern states. While the KMMTTP itself became newly vulnerable to Myanmar's civil war, domestic opposition to the idea in Bangladesh grew incrementally, especially as opposition to Hasina's politics snowballed with each election held without fair processes and with the AL's general authoritarianism. This meant that even in 2015, when Hasina oversaw a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India committing to progress on Indian transit access to both Mongla and Chattogram,³² the BNP's statements expressly pointed to the subversion of Bangladeshi sovereignty. Nevertheless, Hasina's commitment to the project deepened alongside the growth of the opposition, with a formal Standard Operating Procedure (SoP) in 2019 granting India access to four routes through Mongla and Chattogram,³³ and the SoP's operationalization beginning in 2023.³⁴ The degree to which India had misjudged the nature of the acknowledgment-deference feedback loop in 2008-2024 was evident in the BNP placing the Chattogram/Mongla agreement under review in September 2026, along with 100 other regional cooperation, connectivity, and economic agreements with India.³⁵ Hence, while the connectivity projects initiated in those years earned objective praise from third parties (such as the World Bank)³⁶ and seemed (in India's view) to be sufficiently addressing Bangladeshi sensitivities, they contributed significantly to the perception of marked instability in the asymmetry.

Given the scale of diplomatic activity between 2008 and 2024, the same characterization applies to several other sectors of cooperation, all tainted by a mismatch between the interests of the larger and smaller state, owing to a corrupted intervening agent and India's faith in that agent's credibility. By 2024, the combination of appropriated agency and unstable stability had arguably crossed a point of no return, with popular demonstrations forcing Hasina's ouster. In the months leading up to Hasina's exit, it became evident that both justified resentment at India's non-recognition of the AL's excesses and fabricated disinformation campaigns (reciprocated by similar campaigns in the Indian mainstream and social media) had caused a large-scale inversion of how both states viewed the asymmetry in the bilateral relationship.

2024-2026: The Exposed Underbelly

In August 2024, after Hasina's exit, the underlying instability in the asymmetry (and its intensity) became overt after more than a decade as an undercurrent.³⁷ Almost overnight, India faced both a sharp and active downturn in Bangladeshi sensitivity and deference to New Delhi's strategic concerns and a proliferation of Bangladeshi narratives which made India complicit in Hasina's crimes: an image of India far removed from its image as the liberator of 1971 (on which the Indian media continued to focus). While Bangladesh's new IG sought to articulate Dhaka's new foreign policy posture as one focused on autonomy (which necessarily meant a reorientation of any position taken by the AL), India's reflexive interpretation of any Bangladeshi assertion was to entrench a narrative of betrayal, as reflected in positions taken by non-government strategic analysts. While Bangladesh itself witnessed a strong broken-windows effect across 2024 (with attacks on Hindu minorities and threats to Indian diplomatic missions), Hasina's de facto asylum in India became a novel single-point litmus test of the degree to which India would acknowledge post-2024 Bangladesh's autonomy. New Delhi and Dhaka's actions and reactions across hitherto entrenched sectors of cooperation (coupled with another manifestation of Bangladesh's politics of revenge) in 2024 and 2025 are well documented. Moreover, adverse characterizations of Bangladeshis across India's media and political landscape (especially during elections in Indian border states) sharpened dissatisfaction in Bangladesh over India's ability to acknowledge (and account for) Bangladesh's independent assertions. Notably, the communalization of India's electoral discourse and adverse characterizations of Bangladeshis had emerged as an issue even while Hasina was in power, with her proactive pushback on such issues adding another layer to the unstable asymmetry.

The effects of this decade of unstable asymmetry, perceived as stable, have grown strong enough to override the discourse around sectoral cooperation, even in areas where both states stand to benefit. Specifically, three core issues have contributed to this: Hasina's continued stay (and political activity) in India; Bangladesh's rejuvenated relationship with Pakistan; and old questions over water sharing (Teesta) combined with new challenges surrounding the impending expiry of the Ganges Water Treaty in December 2026.³⁸ Following fresh elections in Dhaka which returned a BNP majority in Parliament (with the Awami League banned from participating), both New Delhi and Dhaka have shown fresh signs of pragmatism. BNP leaders have consistently reiterated the need for positive ties with New Delhi and India's integral role in Bangladesh's foreign policy, while New Delhi has been

quick (both before and after the February 2026 elections) to engage the BNP and build fresh political bridges. This included the unprecedented move of appointing a political leader as India's new High Commissioner to Bangladesh in April 2026,³⁹ one of whose first acts after taking office in June was to resume visas for Bangladeshis to India.⁴⁰ More important for Womack's theory of stable asymmetry, India and Bangladesh have also begun to resume engagement through multiple mechanisms of cooperation (several of which were effectively



Hasina's de facto asylum in India became a novel single-point litmus test of the degree to which India would acknowledge post-2024 Bangladesh's autonomy.

suspended in 2024-2026), as well as to create new ones.⁴¹ India has also continued energy cooperation with Bangladesh, especially amid the unprecedented geopolitical churn caused by the disruption of global oil supplies from the United States' war on Iran.

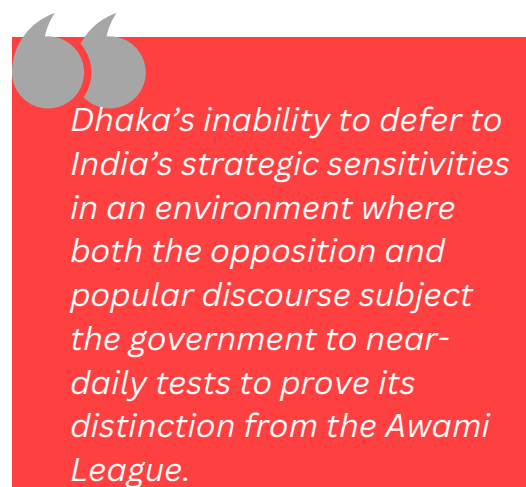
However, owing to the peculiarity of the India-Bangladesh relationship highlighted at the outset, this pragmatism (complemented by the resumption of engagement mechanisms) does not by itself imply a stable asymmetry with a high acknowledgment-deference loop, for two reasons in particular:

- New Delhi's inability to recognize the overriding potential of the 15-year mismatch between its perception of asymmetric stability and Bangladesh's underlying instability (articulated in Bangladesh as India's refusal to recognize the August 2024 "Monsoon Revolution"). Hasina's continued stay and activity in New Delhi reinforce and keep this perception of India's inability alive.
- Dhaka's inability to defer to India's strategic sensitivities in an environment where both the opposition (the Jamaat-e-Islami) and popular discourse subject the government to near-daily tests to prove its distinction from the Awami League and to resist its own temptation to re-appropriate agency. Bangladesh's politics of revenge also prevents the BNP from fast-tracking reconciliation and creates new incentives for the BNP to retain anti-India elements in its politicking to prevent the opposition from monopolizing that space.

Both these elements can manifest themselves (and have done so) across sectors, from localized incidents at the border drawing immediate political and diplomatic attention to Hasina's press conferences from New Delhi generating fresh waves of anti-India discourse in Bangladesh. Collectively, this also produces the following combination:

- Low acknowledgment in India of any special consideration for Bangladesh as a smaller state, with the Ministry of External Affairs asserting in August 2026 that the relationship with Bangladesh would be based on "mutuality of interests and reciprocity".⁴²
- Low deference in Bangladesh to India's strategic concerns, as Dhaka continues to reassert its autonomy, pursues a fresh relationship with Pakistan (and deepens existing ties with Beijing), and brings to bear for India precisely those security concerns which New Delhi had actively sought to prevent under Hasina's rule.

More simply, India cannot expect stable asymmetry without mitigating the effects of the unstable asymmetry since 2008. India's new, more realistic relationship with Bangladesh will need to retain space for friction, albeit with less violent energy than the shifts of the 1972-2008 period, as a stable asymmetry with low stakes (and low acknowledgment and low



Dhaka's inability to defer to India's strategic sensitivities in an environment where both the opposition and popular discourse subject the government to near-daily tests to prove its distinction from the Awami League.

deference) plays out. However, a “reciprocal relationship” will not emerge unless stability in the asymmetry is proactively built (failing which, Dhaka’s post-2024 over-correction might continue). As India and Bangladesh navigate their new core issues in an environment of low strategic trust, both states will likely have to prioritize sustaining a stable asymmetry. Rather than seeking significant progress in strategic ties (with or without the Hasina years as a benchmark), New Delhi is likely to avoid strong acknowledgment while Dhaka avoids strong deference, creating asymmetric stability that lacks strategic alignment but also avoids active conflict and hostility.



India must ensure that the appropriation of agency does not recur in the long term if stability in the asymmetry is to be preserved.

Conclusion

In sum, from New Delhi’s point of view between 2008 and 2024, the litmus test of whether India had successfully acknowledged Dhaka’s autonomy became the priorities of the Hasina-led Awami League government, and not Bangladesh’s larger socio-political and democratic institutions, which the AL government overrode. Essentially, the Awami League government appropriated more agency to drive India’s choices vis-à-vis Bangladesh than Bangladesh’s electorate had allowed it. This naturally yielded corrupted results in New Delhi’s assessment of the positive impact of its actions. Yet India (especially in the 2008-2024 period) failed to recognize the corrupted nature of the assessment, or rather tolerated it on the assumption that the immediate benefits accruing to New Delhi would allow it to mitigate any long-term cost. India’s pre-2008 experience with the BNP/Jamaat governments further informed this approach, while Bangladesh’s politics of revenge made its adverse effects inevitable. Now, under the BNP government, as both New Delhi and Dhaka work to avoid conflict and hostility, India must ensure that the appropriation of agency does not recur in the long term if stability in the asymmetry is to be preserved.

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