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## Assessing India-Bangladesh relations in an evolving scenario

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### Abstract

In this paper I have attempted to analyse evolving issues in India- Bangladesh relations after Sheikh Hasina was ousted from the country, and the coming of a temporary government under the aegis of Muhammad Yunus as the situation doesn't seem to favour India in days ahead.

Along with many other similarities, India and Bangladesh share a rich historical background, the same language, and a common culture. A comprehensive alliance based on mutual respect, equality, sovereignty, and understanding is a testament to the extraordinary nature of bilateral relations. This partnership has become a model for bilateral ties in the area and outside. As evidence of the continuing nature of this connection, there has been a surge in bilateral interactions between the two nations in the first half of 2024. January 2024 saw the historic election of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to a fourth straight term. On January 8, 2024, upon her reelection as Bangladesh's prime minister, Prime Minister Modi spoke over the phone and reiterated the two nations' people-centred cooperation. Later on, Hasina was forced from office as a result of a violent student demonstration calling for changes to the nation's reservation system for government employment. This happened after street fights and police shootings without cause, which claimed the lives of numerous students. Hasina, who fled into India on the evening of August 5, 2024, has been provided temporary residence in the country until she decides her future. This is a serious challenge for India given that for over 15 years, there was a government largely sympathetic to Indian sensitivities. Now, it has to reassess its policies towards Bangladesh in an emerging scenario.

**Keywords:** Culture, bilateral relations, mutual respect, cooperation, challenge, sympathy, policy

### Introduction

The bilateral ties between the two South Asian neighbours, the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Republic of India are referred to as Bangladesh-India relations. India's military intervention in support of Bangladesh's independence after the Bangladesh Liberation War, the two nations formally established diplomatic relations in 1971 when India recognised an independent Bangladesh (previously known as East Pakistan). Bangladesh and India celebrate Friendship Day on December 6 to honour India's recognition of Bangladesh and their ongoing friendship. Bangladesh and India are two of the most ethnically and culturally connected nations. The 4096 km land border between the two nations is the longest that India has with any of its neighbours. They are bordered by the sea as well. In addition, 54 rivers are shared between the two nations. The same Nobel laureate, novelist, and poet, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote the national hymn for both countries. One may argue that Bangladesh and India have an innate bond.

India and Bangladesh commemorated the 50th anniversary of their bilateral relations in 2021. The contribution that India made to the independence struggle in Bangladesh is well acknowledged and appreciated. So, India benefits from goodwill in Bangladesh.

### Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This article uses a qualitative method to examine how India's policy towards Bangladesh has been effective through time. It aims to investigate how Bangladesh's policy has changed in emerging situations and what internal, structural, and personal causes motivated such revolution. To explain how the evolution of relations happened. The paper uses both primary and secondary sources of information to examine India's foreign policy towards Bangladesh. Primary sources include statements made by members of ruling regimes in each of these

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countries, the text of signed treaties, and official communiqués released by governments. Scholarly publications, editorials, and news stories that widely address the topic of India-Bangladesh relations are notable examples of secondary sources. This political development in Bangladesh has been studied in the context of the neo-realist theory of international relations. It has been assessed regarding its impact on India's geostrategic aspect.

### **Background of India-Bangladesh Relations**

The contemporary Indian and Bangladeshi republics are connected by civilisational, cultural, social, and economic ties. Many things connect the two nations, including a love of music, literature, and the arts, linguistic and cultural ties, and a shared history and legacy stemming from the Bengal region. During the colonial era, both countries were ruled by the British Raj. The national anthems of modern-day Bangladesh and India were composed in 1905 and 1911, respectively, by Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore of colonial India. The Bengal region was divided into East Bengal, which became the Dominion of Pakistan, and West Bengal, which became the Dominion of India, after the 1947 partition of British India along religious lines. Following the One Unit Scheme's implementation, East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan, and in 1971, the Bangladesh Liberation War took place, leading to the country's independence from Pakistan. Because of its strong ally status, the Indian Republic engaged in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. There is no doubt that Bangladesh's establishment as an independent state would not have been possible without the support of the Indian people and government. Despite India's long-standing non-alignment policy, on March 27, 1971, charismatic leader and Prime Minister of the time Indira Gandhi showed her unwavering support for Bangladesh's independence movement by opening the border and setting up camps for refugees close to the border in the Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and West Bengal in an effort to give Bangladeshi refugees a safe haven.

The Mukti Bahini (Freedom fighter) insurgents were also provided with training and ammunition by the Indian government. The entire nine-month Bangladesh Liberation War was supported diplomatically and politically by the government of Indira Gandhi. Indira Gandhi toured extensively over the world to personally rally support for Bangladesh. On July 25, 2011, she was given the Bangladesh Freedom Honour medal posthumously in recognition of her valiant efforts during the Bangladesh Liberation War and her remarkable leadership skills in handling a complicated regional conflict involving major international forces. Indira Gandhi is the only person to have received Bangladesh's highest state honour to date. It is the highest state award granted to non-natives. On March 19, 1972, India and Bangladesh signed "The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace," popularly known as the Indira-Mujib Treaty, for 25 years following Bangladesh's independence. Respecting each other's independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty while avoiding meddling in domestic affairs served as the foundation for the treaty.

However, relations deteriorated starting in the middle of the 1970s as a result of Bangladesh's greater participation in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, stronger relationships to other Muslim countries, and preference for

Islamic identity above the nation's ethnolinguistic heritage. In the 1980s, the two nations formed distinct Cold War coalitions, further souring their bilateral ties. They developed stronger bilateral ties and trade as South Asia's economy began to liberalise. In 1996, the historic Ganges Water Sharing Treaty came to an end. Bangladesh and India are strong strategic allies in the fight against terrorism. Additionally, they are South Asia's biggest trading partners. with the Awami League's 2009 resurgence and its subsequent triumphs in 2014 and 2019. Since then, relations between Bangladesh and India have steadily improved. Both nations have changed throughout this phase from being neighbours to partners in prosperity.

Both nations agreed to a land boundary accord and a Teesta water-sharing deal during India's UPA II government. Nevertheless, Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee of West Bengal objected, making the arrangement unfeasible.

Bangladesh collaborated with India to address security concerns, combat terrorist organisations, and quell insurgency. A convention on extradition was struck in 2013, and Bangladesh sent some extremists to India. A Land Boundary Agreement was concluded in 2015, which strengthened ties between the two nations even more. The long-pending and divisive question of the two nations' land border demarcation was settled by this agreement. The Radcliff Commission said that Bangladesh possessed 55 enclaves on the Indian side (7,000 hectares) and India owned 111 enclaves on the Bangladeshi side (15,000 hectares). The 100th Amendment to the Constitution (2015) resolved the matter. On both sides, conclaves were swapped. The option to keep their current nationality or obtain a new one was offered to citizens.

Since the Modi administration has a clear policy for Bangladesh, the "Neighbourhood First Policy" (NFP) has served as the bigger framework for discussing Modi's Bangladesh policy. Amid the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation's impasse, the NFP offers a fresh opportunity to rekindle India's diplomatic ties with its neighbours (SAARC). The fact that India finally ratified the land boundary agreement with Bangladesh after decades of waiting and accepted the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) decision in favour of Bangladesh is evidence of its sincerity over the NFP. The two neighbours have been working together more in many areas over the past few decades. These include energy supply, trade, strategic alliances, and connectivity.

### **Changing Equations of India-Bangladesh Relations**

The removal of Sheikh Hasina, the former prime minister of Bangladesh, with whom India had developed close relations, is seen by analysts as a strategic loss for New Delhi, which may witness its influence diminish in a nation that was its closest friend in South Asia.

In an area where it faces Pakistan and China across disputed borders, New Delhi needed to maintain stable relations with Bangladesh, with which it shares the longest land border. Hasina resigned on 05 August 2024, following student-led demonstrations against employment quotas that turned into a campaign to remove a leader seen accountable for authoritarianism and democratic regression. She flew to India, where she is staying at the moment. Both nations established close economic connections during her leadership. Hasina has also clamped down on Islamic extremist organisations that launched assaults in the

northeastern states of India from their sanctuaries in Bangladesh.

Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate, has assumed leadership on 08 August, 2024 of the nation and start the process of organising elections. After being under house imprisonment for years, Khaleda Zia, the head of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has been freed. Analysts predict that as Bangladesh faces a political vacuum in the upcoming months, China would be able to establish a bigger presence there and thwart New Delhi's attempts to limit its influence in South Asia. Hasina considered India's sensitivities in the area while enlisting Beijing's investment and joining China's Belt and Road Initiative. It was believed that Dhaka would be essential in assisting in containing China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. An administration that supported China came to power in the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives in November, 2023.

Establishing connections with opposition groups that are anticipated to fill Bangladesh's political void will be India's first priority. However, experts predict that it won't be simple for a nation whose tight ties to Hasina and her Awami League Party have strained relations between the general public and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which has a history of tense relations with New Delhi.

India was regarded as Hasina's most steadfast ally during her 15-year term. In contrast to the United States and the United Kingdom, who declared that the January elections that reinstated Hasina were not free and fair, India did not contest the validity of the results. Many in Bangladesh believed that India's quiet was hurting their nation's democracy.

Analysts in New Delhi claim that there are worries about a deterioration of the solid ties that the two nations have established. They have established road and rail link projects, increased bilateral trade to roughly \$13 billion, and inked a land boundary agreement to resolve border disputes over the last ten years.

In the meantime, tales of intermittent violence against minorities, particularly Hindus immigrating from Bangladesh, present an immediate issue for New Delhi. Indian External Affairs Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar praised efforts by different factions to guarantee their safety in a statement made in Parliament but he added, "India will naturally remain deeply concerned till law and order is visibly restored."

Yunus has made a calm appeal. He stated in a message that "if we take the path of violence, everything will be destroyed," urging people to prepare for the reconstruction of the nation.

Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, a spokesperson for the BNP, criticised India's provision of temporary refuge to Hasina, describing her as "the most wanted person in Bangladesh" for various alleged crimes. Despite these accusations, Indian officials, including Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, have maintained that Hasina's plans are her own to decide.

### **Evolving Issues**

**India's strong support for Hasina:** India is currently in a difficult situation as a result of New Delhi's steadfast backing for Hasina over the previous ten years, which resulted in little engagement with Bangladeshi opposition

organisations. It will be challenging to address the present anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh, and significant diplomatic efforts would be necessary to regain lost ground.

**Future of transit:** Under the new administration in Dhaka, transit and transshipment agreements with Bangladesh might be changed. For improved logistics delivery to its Northeast, India needs these. To guarantee their continuity, New Delhi must cooperate with the temporary government.

**Jamaat-e-Islami & Pakistan factor:** Jamaat-e-Islami most certainly has some sway over Dhaka's temporary government. Ultimately, it is said that foot troops from Jamaat participated in the demonstrations against Hasina. As demonstrated by the previous BNP-Jamaat government in Bangladesh, India's relationship with Jamaat has not been harmonious. Furthermore, Jamaat might allow Pakistan to re-enter Bangladeshi politics, something Hasina had steadfastly opposed. This will therefore affect the security of India's border with Bangladesh.

**The China challenge:** China has the financial means to assist the post-Hasina government and has been actively attempting to increase its influence in Bangladesh. Significant challenges from a strong Chinese presence in Bangladesh could leave India strategically surrounded by hostile or uninterested neighbours: China and Pakistan to the west and north, a communist-led government in Nepal, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to the far west, the Maldives in the Indian Ocean that are hostile to India, and a possible threat from Afghanistan.

Bangladesh's evolving developments will probably fuel this battle. The decision made by Bangladesh's President Mohammed Shahabuddin to free Begum Khaleda Zia, the head of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is one of them. In 2018, Zia, the widow of a former military officer who became president, was imprisoned due to allegations of corruption. She collaborated with members of Bangladesh's Islamist parties while serving as prime minister from 1991 to 1996 and again from 2001 to 2006. During her time in office, she did not express any special affection for India. Given that she is probably near the military establishment, New Delhi will be on the lookout for her future movements.

### **Conclusion**

Despite Bangladesh's proximity to India and the strong ethnic and cultural bonds between the two nations, the Modi administration was unprepared for the intensity and breadth of the hostility directed towards Hasina—its preferred partner in Dhaka. India is currently dealing with a regional issue that may affect its international and domestic policies. India has to work to keep its influence in Dhaka from sharply declining till law and order is restored in Bangladesh. The strength of India's relations with Bangladesh is in jeopardy due to the likelihood of the BNP and some of its Islamist allies regaining power and China filling the void. India has two serious problems now that Hasina has resigned. First and foremost, India has to be concerned about the Bangladeshi administration that would take power. When elections are eventually held, it is unlikely that the party would be able to mount a return given the severity of the Awami League government's repression. There is currently a great deal of risk to the cordial ties that

New Delhi and Dhaka had during Hasina's administration. At best, India can try to preserve some influence in Bangladesh by reaching out to the military institution there, but given how the military has always seen New Delhi, this won't be an easy feat. Second, any future government that takes a more pro-Chinese stance will particularly apprehension in India. The circumstances in Bangladesh are swiftly evolving. In the upcoming days, there will be more questions that need to be addressed. Reiterating our cordial feelings for the people of a close and significant neighbour while also stating that we are waiting and observing to see how things will evolve is the tried-and-true diplomatic response to this. so, let's observe and wait.

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