

## Bangladesh: Changing Tides

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### Political Crisis

The recent politico-civic crisis in Bangladesh has raised serious concerns for India. The turmoil, which began as a student protest against the government's policy to reinstate the quota system for the families of 1971 Liberation War veterans, subsequently escalated into a significant political crisis, resulting in the removal of Sheikh Hasina from the chair of Prime Minister (PM) on 05 Aug 2024.<sup>[1]</sup> The deteriorating situation in Bangladesh forced Hasina, who was in power since Jan 2009, to take refuge in India. She faced several allegations, including authoritarianism, corruption, media censorship, intimidation of political opponents, suppression of the opposition, election manipulation, favouritism, and human rights violations from opposition parties, international organisations, and Western powers. Soon after her removal as the PM, Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate from Bangladesh, assumed charge as the head of the interim government on 08 Aug 2025.

### India-Bangladesh Relations

India has made significant progress towards fostering an enduring strategic partnership with Bangladesh following its historical liberation from Pakistan in 1971. The nation is at the converging point of India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, 'Act East' policy, Security and Growth for All in the Region doctrine, the Indo-Pacific vision, and has been an indispensable partner in the development of the northeastern region.<sup>[2]</sup> Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, while India ranks as Bangladesh's second largest trading partner in Asia.<sup>[3]</sup> Notwithstanding the allegations surrounding Sheikh Hasina, bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh remained robust, progressive, and conducive to collaborative initiatives throughout her tenure as PM. She adeptly navigated the complex dynamics between India and China, striving to address India's security concerns while fostering regional stability. The two nations share multifaceted cooperation in border management, economic and defence collaboration, infrastructure and connectivity expansion, cultural exchange, agricultural research, power and energy partnerships, and human resource development. Under Sheikh Hasina's administration, several major joint initiatives were forged, including the joint inauguration of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline on 18 Mar 2023, and the unveiling of three India-assisted development projects: the Akhaura-Agartala cross-border rail link, the Khulna-Mongla Port rail line, and Unit-II of the Maitree Super Thermal Power Plant. Additionally, joint efforts led to improvements in border management mechanisms, the rehabilitation of six pre-1965 rail links, the operationalisation of the agreement for the usage of Chittagong and Mongla Ports in 2023, and enhanced cooperation in the start-up sector, reflecting the depth and strength of the India-Bangladesh partnership. The Government of India has extended support to Bangladesh by providing three lines of credit totalling USD 8 bn to promote infrastructure development, financing 93 High Impact Community Development Projects in excess of USD 50 mn, as well as offering 'Suborno Jayanti Scholarships' to students.<sup>[4]</sup> During the state visit of the former PM of Bangladesh to India on 21-22 Jun 2024, a joint declaration was issued for a shared vision for peace, prosperity, and development. The two PMs recognised India and Bangladesh as indispensable partners in realising respective national development visions of 'Viksit Bharat 2047' and 'Smart Bangladesh Vision 2041'.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Concerns for India

India shares its longest border, measuring 4,096.7 kms, with Bangladesh. Any political strife in Bangladesh, along with the involvement of India's northern and western adversaries in the country's internal affairs, carries strategic, economic, and security ramifications for India. Recent developments in Bangladesh have underscored several nuanced issues: Did India fail to comprehend the situation in Bangladesh? Were proactive measures taken to safeguard India's national interests? Was any foreign power involved in destabilising the country? Sheikh Hasina had reportedly accused the United States (US) of trying to depose her as she had refused to surrender the sovereignty of Saint Martin Island.<sup>[6]</sup> In Apr 2023, during a speech in the Bangladeshi Parliament, she asserted, "The US has the capability to topple governments in any nation, especially in Muslim countries".<sup>[7]</sup> The above-mentioned questions will remain unanswered for the general public. However, the fact remains that at this stage, India has lost the 'Information War' in Bangladesh, having failed to comprehend the evolving political situation and the repercussions following Sheikh Hasina's resignation. The political turmoil in the country was evident during the Jan 2024 parliamentary election, which was marred by controversy, including accusations of fraud and irregularities. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and its allies secured 224 out of 300 contested seats, and that too in the absence of any significant political opposition.

The present situation and emerging developments in Bangladesh under Muhammad Yunus are adding to New Delhi's apprehensions. He has publicly condemned India's asylum to Sheikh Hasina and appealed the Indian Government to restrain Hasina from making any political statements during her stay in Delhi.<sup>[8]</sup> He implored the nation's political leaders to overcome their divisions and unite against what he described as 'Indian Aggression'.<sup>[9]</sup> The interim government in Bangladesh has exhibited increased bonhomie with Pakistan, a lack of response to numerous violent assaults on Hindus and other minorities by extremist factions, and inaction in addressing arson, looting, and vandalism targeting the residences, businesses, and temples of minority communities. The worsening situation is further underscored by the demolition and arson of the iconic Bangabandhu Memorial Museum and the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, as well as the arrest of the spokesperson of Bangladesh Sammilita Sanatan Jagran Jote on sedition charges. The ruling power has also hindered the construction of border fence, levelling allegations that India is violating the bilateral agreement.<sup>[10]</sup> India's concerns regarding the deteriorating situation in Bangladesh include the rise of Islamic radicalism and terrorism, illegal immigration and smuggling across the international border, increasing Chinese and Pakistani influence, a potential surge in insurgency and an influx of minority refugees in the Northeast, uncertainty over Indian investments, and the adverse impact on joint infrastructure projects in Bangladesh. Anti-India sentiments in the country have reached an unprecedented level.

### **Options for India and Conclusion**

India must utilise diplomatic (including back channel diplomacy), informational, and economic instruments while proactively engaging with the interim government and the political adversaries of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh. The centre of gravity for the information war remains the Bangladeshi populace. Multiple groups in the country harbour perspectives that are critical of India. The nationalists argue that India's involvement in the 1971 war was primarily to extend its influence over Bangladesh, further its economic interests, and enhance access to the northeastern states. The pro-Chinese Left claims that India's objective was to establish Bangladesh as a colony to extract raw materials. The radical Left perceives India as an expansionist force, while the Islamists assert that India's main intent was to dismantle Pakistan as a 'Muslim Homeland'. In addition, many object to the characterisation of '1971 Liberation of

Bangladesh' as 'India-Pakistan War'. This segment of population undermines India's contribution in the creation of Bangladesh and perceive India as the source of their internal problems.<sup>[11]</sup> The fault lines in Bangladesh, spanning religious, economic, political, intellectual, sociological, and civil-military dynamics, need to be leveraged. The Indian government must strategically craft narratives to shape favourable perceptions. Additionally, India's domestic media must be regulated to prevent the spread of content that could fuel anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh.

Concurrently, New Delhi must effectively communicate its security concerns regarding the rise of Islamic radicalism and terrorism in Bangladesh, as well as the exploitation of this situation by Pakistan and China, to its strategic partners, especially the US. India must enhance its soft power and people-to-people engagement while working to reshape its hegemonic perception in Bangladesh. The current situation in Bangladesh remains volatile and uncertain, warranting strategic patience. However, India cannot afford to lower its guard. A politically and economically stable Bangladesh is in India's best interests.

## Endnotes

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