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Regd. Address:
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The 'India Factor' in Bangladesh Politics: Implications for Bilateral Relations

Smruti S Pattanaik*

Abstract

India–Bangladesh ties have long been shaped by geography, history, and domestic political contestation within Bangladesh. Notwithstanding periods of deep cooperation under the Awami League (AL) governments, the relationship has been marked by recurring tensions rooted in unresolved bilateral issues, competing political narratives, and regional geopolitics. This article examines how Bangladesh's internal political dynamics, particularly the contrasting approaches of the AL and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have influenced bilateral relations with India. It argues that Bangladesh's internal political polarisation often translates into a zero-sum perception of relations with New Delhi, complicating efforts to build a stable, mutually beneficial partnership. It further assesses how recent political upheavals and rising anti-Indian sentiment pose new challenges for bilateralism.

Key Words: India–Bangladesh relations, Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Domestic political polarisation, Connectivity, Counterterrorism, Strategic balancing, Trust deficit



Introduction

As one of India's closest neighbours, Bangladesh remains vital to the economic development of its Northeastern states, just as India is indispensable to Bangladesh, which is geographically surrounded by India on

three sides, underlining a deep mutual dependence. Yet, the exit of Sheikh Hasina on 5 August 2024, following a student-people (*Chatra-Janata*) uprising and her decision to seek refuge in India, has cast a shadow on bilateral relations. While the interim government headed by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus

* Smruti S Pattanaik, is Research Fellow, MP-IDSA, New Delhi, India.

The views expressed here are her own.

has repeatedly demanded her extradition to Bangladesh to face justice, it has banned her Awami League (AL) party following protests by the National Citizens Party (NCP) in May 2025 outside the official Jamuna residence of Chief Advisor of the interim regime Yunus in Dhaka, with Hefazat-e-Islam, a coalition of Qawmi madrasa-based clerics and Islamist activists, founded in 2010, known for its street power, threatening to join the protest.

The absence of AL from scheduled general election on 12 February 2026 due to the ban has prompted the contesting political parties to jostle to capitalise on the League's vote bank with the hope of enhancing their electoral prospects and increasing their popular vote share. Although the Yunus-led interim administration has proposed several institutional and political reforms through appointed reform commissions and established a Consensus Committee to initiate dialogue with all political parties, except the AL, to implement these reforms, consensus remains elusive as parties seek to prioritise their own political agendas. Despite these difficulties, the Yunus administration has presented the reform process as a means to return to a multiparty democracy. India, meanwhile, underlined its

expectation from Bangladesh when the Indian Foreign Secretary said, "India is firmly in favour of free, fair, inclusive, and participatory elections in Bangladesh. And it is in favour of these elections being held at the earliest possible time."¹ While this drew a sharp reaction from Dhaka², it also underlined that a turbulent neighbourhood would directly impact India's security.

In the aftermath of the AL regime's ouster, anti-Hasina and anti-India narratives almost became synonymous.³ Well-placed analysts and several media outlets blamed India for Hasina's prolonged tenure in power. Interestingly, those who are critical of India for standing with Hasina and often accuse India of interfering in Bangladesh's internal affairs are, ironically, the same people who, before Hasina's ouster, wanted New Delhi to dislodge her from power and exert pressure on her to conduct a free and fair election. In international relations, nation-states always prioritise pursuing their own interests, yet surprisingly, Bangladesh's political elites often expect India to take a side in the country's domestic political balancing. Therefore, Hasina's refuge in India only amplified pre-existing anti-Indianism, which has historically been part of Bangladesh's domestic politics.

This sentiment manifested itself in several ways. For instance, the floods caused by overflowing rivers soon after Hasina's ouster were blamed on New Delhi, while social media circulated fabricated images, such as that of a baby girl almost drowning in flood water, to incite anger against India.⁴ More seriously, during the uprising, jails were broken by the protestors, allowing hardened criminals including terrorists to flee, raising concerns not only about stability within Bangladesh but also its implications for India given the porous border. According to the Bangladesh police, "17 jails came under attacks since 19 July, leading to the escape of over 2,000 inmates. Of them, more than 900, including 70 militants, are still on the run."⁵

Although some political forces, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), described the August uprising as "second revolution"⁶ and the NCP termed it as the birth of a "second republic",⁷ the movement was accompanied by widespread violence against religious minorities, Awami League workers and sympathisers, whose houses were looted and burned. In addition, police stations were attacked, forcing law enforcement personnel to flee. India condemned attacks on minorities, but statements by several advisers to the interim regime signalled that

bilateral relations were entering a difficult phase and would have to traverse a challenging time. For instance, interim administration adviser Mahfuz Alam posted a map on his social media account showing India's Northeast as part of Bangladesh. The Indian Visa Application Centre was attacked, prompting New Delhi to close it temporarily and restrict visa issuance to the medical and student categories. The Indian Cultural Centre in Dhanmondi was also vandalised, all in the pretext of venting ire. Such violence continues to be condoned by the interim regime.

Despite these tensions, both countries made efforts to re-engage diplomatically. India invited Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus to the third Voice of the Global South Summit, which was held virtually on 17 August 2024. It was followed by several meetings, including one between India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Bangladesh's Foreign Adviser Md. Touhid Hossain in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2024. Others include India's Foreign Secretary's visit to Dhaka (09 December 2024) and Bangladesh Foreign Adviser's visit to Delhi (in early January 2025). Additionally, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Advisor

Muhammad Yunus met on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC summit in Bangkok on 4 April 2025. Yet developments over the past year suggest that the interim regime is less focused on strengthening ties with India and more inclined towards a policy of strategic balancing.

As Bangladesh moves towards elections and democratic restoration, several constants continue to shape bilateral relations. The two countries share more than 4,000 kilometres of porous border that straddles rivers, mountains, and plains, cutting across villages and communities and posing serious security challenges to border management. The rise of regressive forces and cross-border extremist networks continues to be a shared challenge. Bangladesh in the past has witnessed country-wide bomb blasts and suicide attacks in 2005, hackings of bloggers and the Holey Artisan café terror attack in 2016. The domestic debate on bilateral relations, unsettled transborder issues, and Bangladesh's expectations from India sometimes assesses bilateralism as a 'zero-sum game'. This article examines the domestic dimensions of politics and their influence on bilateral relations, as well as the efforts of both countries to make the relationship a 'positive sum game,' which is mutually beneficial and advances the national

interests of both countries. It also critically analyses India's relations/engagement with both major political parties – the BNP and the AL – to understand their approach to India.

Domestic Politics, Patronisation of Indian Insurgents and Radical Islamists: BNP's Chequered History?

The Awami League returned to power in December 2008 against the backdrop of two years of rule by a military-backed caretaker regime. The party won 270 seats in the 300-member National Assembly, known as the *Jatiyo Sangsad*, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was reduced to just 30 seats. Soon after assuming power, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared a zero-tolerance policy towards terrorism and unequivocally stated that Bangladeshi soil would not be allowed to be used for terrorist activities against any country. True to her words, her government handed over the leaders of Indian insurgent groups who were sheltered in the country during the previous BNP regime.

This singular gesture of AL deepened bilateral trust and underscored Dhaka's commitment to New Delhi's security needs, a commitment the previous BNP

regime undermined. Bangladesh's cooperation proved crucial in stabilising India's Northeast, with the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT-Bishwamohan faction) notably surrendering to Tripura police following sustained pressure.⁸ As the Director General of India's Border Security Force (BSF) said, "Whenever we have information about exodus or insurgents of the north eastern states in Bangladesh, we share the information and immediate raids are undertaken (by the Border Guard Bangladesh)."⁹

In contrast, the BNP's record reflects a consistent pattern of providing a safe haven to Indian insurgent groups, thereby contributing to prolonged instability along India's northeastern border. This posture was rooted in the party's broader ideological and political outlook towards India. As early as 1997, Begum Khaleda Zia publicly stated in Feni that Bangladesh would support independence movements in India's northeastern states.¹⁰ The BNP's antagonism also extended to bilateral agreements. Although Bangladesh has never formally sought a review of the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty, the BNP repeatedly threatened to annul it if it returned to power. Similar opposition was witnessed against the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord

and Sheikh Hasina's 51-point Memorandum of Understanding with India in 2011, with the opposition routinely accusing her of "selling the country," being a "slave of India," and entering into secret security arrangements with New Delhi.¹¹

The BNP's tenure from 2001 to 2006 was marked by severe political violence. Sheikh Hasina survived a grenade attack during a political rally on 21 August 2004 which killed 22 of her party members. This period also saw the assassination of senior AL figures, notably Ahsanullah Master in 2004 and SAM Kibria in 2005. In the same year, ten truckloads of arms destined for Indian insurgents were seized at the government-owned Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Limited (CUFL) jetty. The consignment, unloaded from a vessel owned by BNP minister S.Q. Chowdhury, a known India-baiter who the Hasina government later hung for his role in the 1971 war crimes, pointed to direct complicity at the highest levels.

Former State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar later admitted that the "ULFA and the embassy of a South Asian country bribed 'higher ups' in the former Khaleda Zia government to ensure safe passage of the consignment."¹² This strongly suggested Pakistan's role in fomenting insurgency in India's Northeast with support from

within the BNP establishment, which posed both internal and external challenges.

Domestically, the BNP also facilitated radicalisation by courting Islamist groups to counter left-wing extremism. The regime relied on Bangla Bhai's *Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh* (JMJB) to suppress the *sarbohara* movement in North Bengal.¹³ Several BNP ministers reportedly maintained close ties with these groups.¹⁴ The country-wide bomb blasts of August 2005 across 63 districts of the total 64 districts in Bangladesh, followed by suicide attacks on the judiciary claimed by *Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB), exposed the depth of militant entrenchment, raising concerns across the border in India. Before this incident, *Harkat-ul Mujaheedin Bangladesh* was involved in the bomb blasts at the US consulate in Kolkata. Yet the BNP-led Islamist coalition denied the existence of extremism, with its partners — Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and Islamic Oikya Jote — blaming India for these attacks across Bangladesh. The Social Welfare Ministry, under JeI General Secretary Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed, facilitated the registration of foreign-funded Islamic NGOs, including the Kuwait-based Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), many of which had already been

banned in Western countries due to extremist links.¹⁵

Eventually, BNP's anti-India stance became a defining feature of its political identity, allowing it to project itself as a Muslim nationalist force defending Bangladesh's sovereignty against alleged Indian "expansionism." This was very much evident from its political slogans, such as "sovereignty at stake" and "Islam in danger", which were routinely deployed to frame the Awami League as a pro-India party. As Begum Khaleda Zia once infamously remarked, "If Awami League comes to power, from Feni onwards, Bangladesh will become part of India."¹⁶ Therefore, not surprisingly, if AL is seen as friendly to India, then BNP has to oppose it and build a political constituency that is anti-India. Such domestic political contestation and a zero-sum approach have led both parties to adopt divergent approaches towards India. As political scientist Rounaq Jahan observed, "A confrontational approach to Indo-Bangladesh relations has long been BNP's principal point of contestation with AL."¹⁷

India and the BNP: Did India Place All Its Eggs in One Basket?

India was also deeply concerned about the BNP's close relationship

with Pakistan and its historically adversarial posture towards New Delhi. This included Dhaka's refusal under BNP rule to permit transit facilities that had existed during the Pakistan period as well as the systematic mobilisation of anti-India sentiment, not so much as a defence of national sovereignty, but as a political instrument to oppose Awami League. This was evident even when AL proposed limited transshipment arrangements in 1999. Some Bangladeshi analysts have argued that India "kept all its eggs in one basket," implying that New Delhi maintained relations only with the AL while ignoring other political forces. Such claims, however, do not withstand scrutiny when examined within the broader historical context of India's engagement with Bangladesh's major political parties after the restoration of democracy.

New Delhi's expectation of building a constructive relationship with BNP following Bangladesh's democratic transition suffered an early setback during Begum Zia's visit to New Delhi in 1993, when the two sides failed to reach an agreement on any substantive issue. On illegal immigration, the only consensus achieved was a procedural understanding that individuals apprehended while crossing the border illegally would be deported

to their country of origin. In contrast, in 1997, India and the AL government agreed to address cross-border insurgency as a shared security concern. That same year, however, Begum Zia publicly stated at a rally in Feni, "They (the northeastern insurgents) are fighting for independence. We also fought for it, so we are always in favour of any independence movement."¹⁸ Such statements only reinforced Indian apprehensions regarding BNP's strategic outlook

During BNP's tenure from 2001 to 2006, India repeatedly sought to engage Dhaka. Brajesh Mishra, Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, visited Dhaka as his Special Envoy on 26-27 October 2001 to convey New Delhi's willingness to work with the new government. However, the gesture was not reciprocated positively.¹⁹ External Affairs Minister Jaswant Sinha visited Dhaka in August 2002 and clarified India's position on BNP, stating, "India does not have a preferred political party in Bangladesh, it only has a preferred country."²⁰ Despite such overtures, the BNP, which had cultivated an anti-India constituency, was unwilling to deepen bilateral ties. When Begum Zia visited India again in 2006, New Delhi reiterated its security concerns and sought her

cooperation to address them while Dhaka focused on trade imbalance and water-sharing issues.

The failure to materialise the proposed Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline, which could have become a game-changer, further illustrated the BNP's unwillingness to accommodate regional connectivity initiatives. The project collapsed after Dhaka refused to allow the trilateral pipeline to pass through its territory. And, despite the security nightmare endured by India during the BNP-led four-party alliance with Islamist parties, New Delhi continued to engage BNP even after Hasina assumed power in 2008. For example, during his 2011 visit to Dhaka, India's Vice-President Hamid Ansari met with BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia in her capacity as the leader of the opposition.

In 2012, New Delhi gave Begum Zia a red-carpet welcome during her visit to India. The Ministry of External Affairs described the visit as "part of our ongoing attempts of engagement with a democratic and multiparty polity in Bangladesh."²¹ Insisting that she came with an "open mind", Begum Zia met the president, the external affairs minister, and the leader of the opposition.²² In her meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, she expressed hope for "a new era" while urging

both sides to move beyond "past wounds" and "past bitterness". She added: "Let's look forward and not look back in the rear view mirror."²³ BNP loyalists interpreted India's gesture as dispelling the perception that New Delhi "favours one political party" in Bangladesh.²⁴ Yet Begum Zia's advice not to look at India through "rear-view mirror" failed to gain traction within BNP as party hardliners feared that such a repositioning would undermine the party's ideological foundations. Writing in *Strategic Analysis*, the BNP chairperson herself acknowledged that fear psychosis in both societies had perpetuated mistrust and argued that a "changed mind-set" was required.²⁵ However, this rhetorical shift was contradicted when she refused to meet Indian President Pranab Mukherjee during his first visit to Dhaka, citing a bandh called by her party coalition partner, Jamaat-e-Islami. However, many in BNP later acknowledged that the refusal to meet the Indian president was a strategic miscalculation.

India continued to engage BNP in the lead-up to the 2014 elections, encouraging, unsuccessfully, its participation in a multiparty contest. The Indian Foreign Secretary's visit to Dhaka and meetings with political parties before the election were portrayed by BNP and its allies as

"Indian interference" in Bangladesh's domestic affairs. Begum Zia refused a one-to-one meeting with the Indian envoy and placed two preconditions for electoral participation, including the restoration of the caretaker government and Sheikh Hasina's resignation, which India declined to mediate between the two political parties.²⁶ The BNP chief criticised India for adopting a hands-off approach while praising the role of Western countries, including the US, Australia, Japan, and the United Nations. Nevertheless, since the 2013 Indian Foreign Secretary Sujata Singh's mission, India has consistently maintained that the elections in Bangladesh are its "internal affair"²⁷ and has refused to take sides. Furthermore, it has stopped urging opposition political parties to participate in the election, even though it continues to insist on free, fair, inclusive and participatory elections.²⁸

Domestically, BNP-affiliated elites continue to view relations with India through the prism of sovereignty and a zero-sum lens. For example, this posture was evident in criticism of transit arrangements between Akhaura and Agartala, with BNP leaders alleging that Bangladesh's independence was being compromised for nominal gains. "It's

an ill-motivated decision to allow India to get land transit facilities from Akhaura to Agartala at a nominal fee. It seems like selling the country's independence at a small price. We think the government has sold its soul to the neighbouring country."²⁹ This transit that was stopped by Pakistan in 1965 was restarted by Hasina, and the BNP criticism is more of political point scoring. Often, the question of "how much Bangladesh benefited" compared to India has typecast the relationship as a zero-sum game.³⁰

Such accusations echo earlier political campaigns, including opposition to Bangladesh's MiG aircraft deal with Russia in 1999, which BNP portrayed as indirectly benefiting India. Begum Zia even called for a hartal against AL to free her "countrymen from the clutches of this government and foil the ruling party's blueprint to make Bangladesh subservient to a neighbouring country."³¹

Despite India's outreach, Begum Zia reverted to overtly anti-India rhetoric as the 2014 elections approached, drawing on Jamaat-e-Islami narratives and comparing Sheikh Hasina to Chief Minister Lhendup Dorjee of Sikkim after its merger with India. In a public meeting, she said, "Do you want to

be a slave? Will you be a lackey? This slavery will not save you. Read the story of Lhendup Dorjee... Your plan to sell the country won't work."³² In 2014, in a meeting with the visiting External Affairs Minister of India, Sushma Swaraj, Begum Zia apprised her of the importance of 'democracy and stability' in Bangladesh for India. In June 2015, when Indian PM Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh, he made it a point to meet Begum Zia even though she was not the leader of the opposition in the Bangladesh Parliament. Yet, on every occasion, as part of political posturing, the BNP leaders never let any opportunity pass to criticise India. For example: reacting to Hasina's 2017 India visit and agreeing 'to foster mutually beneficial and deeper defence cooperation'. Reacting to this, Begum Zia said, "She, rather, has made Bangladesh a part of India's military plan."³³ In October 2017, Begum Zia again met with Sushma Swaraj during her visit to Dhaka and discussed the need for free and fair elections and other internal matters.

The BNP moderated its stance ahead of the 2018 election after facing international censure over violence and arson attacks by its cadre, along with that of its ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, which led to the death of civilians in 2015.³⁴ While it eventually participated in the election, the BNP

sent a senior party delegation to India before the polls to canvass for Indian support in pressuring Sheikh Hasina to make way for a free and fair election under a neutral Caretaker Government. The visiting group claimed to have the blessings of the party Vice-Chairman and Khaleda Zia's son, Tarique Rahman, and assured Indian government representatives that the BNP would not allow Bangladesh's territory to be used against India and would continue to facilitate New Delhi's regional connectivity projects through its territory. While neither Khaleda Zia nor Tarique Rahman gave any statement supporting these assurances, even as the party circulated a position paper,³⁵ New Delhi remained unmoved because of its previous experience with BNP's assurances in 2001, which became the worst security nightmare India had ever suffered.

India's engagement with both major parties increasingly resembled a zero-sum exercise amid polarised domestic politics in Bangladesh. While AL sought to monopolise relations with India, BNP continued to deploy anti-India rhetoric for political mobilisation. As a former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, who wishes to remain anonymous, said, BNP's absence from Parliament further constrained

India's outreach to the opposition, despite several meetings in which bilateral relations were discussed. While explaining India's engagement with political parties in Bangladesh, the diplomat further added, "each High Commissioner decides whom to meet in the opposition and at what level of Party leadership keeping in mind the ruling regimes sensitiveness so that such meetings are not construed negatively. It is the government of the day with which India has to work with."³⁶

Engagements between India and BNP decreased after the 2018 election as Zia's party was frustrated by New Delhi's "inability" to ensure a free and fair election, expecting India to pressure Sheikh Hasina. The party managed to win merely 6 parliamentary seats in the election, which was widely believed to have been rigged. Coinciding with its reduced engagement with India, BNP increased its contacts with Western countries in the run-up to the 2024 elections, believing that this realignment would help deliver its political objectives. While Western countries stressed on free and fair elections, as also emphasised by India, none of these countries insisted on the restoration of a caretaker government – one of the main demands of the BNP. As expected, BNP did not participate in the

election, with Jamaat-e-Islami following suit, even though their electoral alliance had been dissolved.

Interestingly, despite ongoing contact and assurances on security to New Delhi, BNP launched the 'India Out' campaign after the January 2024 elections, mirroring the Maldives example, thereby reinforcing its longstanding anti-India narrative. The BNP Joint General Secretary Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, believed to be Tarique Rahman's close confidante, participated in the 'India Out' campaign when he burnt an Indian shawl even though his party distanced itself from the campaign, terming it as his personal action.³⁷ The BNP narrative that India profited from bilateral relations by 'exploiting' its backing of Sheikh Hasina did not change even after her ouster in August 2024. This was despite New Delhi's simultaneous outreach to both the BNP and the interim administration of Muhammad Yunus. The BNP General Secretary Alamgir later acknowledged that "ice has started to melt," reiterating, "India's main issue was the security problem. We have assured that if we are in the power, we will ensure that this land will not be used by the separatists."³⁸

Paradoxically, these reassurances coincided with BNP-led protests accusing India of interference after

New Delhi raised concerns over violence against minorities, once again reflecting the enduring contradictions in the party's approach towards India. It is also true that India prioritised security over political developments in Bangladesh. As rightly pointed out by Amir Mahmud Khasru Chowdhury, "In the case of Bangladesh, this ecosystem created the narrative that without Ms. Hasina, Bangladesh would go to the fundamentalists. If not for Hasina, the security of India would be in danger. India has to come out of this ecosystem and mind-set."³⁹ It is important to note that both India and BNP have not been able to overcome the trust deficit. Due to domestic politics, BNP cannot abandon its anti-India posture and spawns a nationalism that opposes India, while New Delhi sees BNP's public posture as an indicator of the party's non-seriousness about adopting a forward-looking bilateral relationship with India. With BNP distancing itself from Jamaat, a major hurdle has now been removed which may help pave the way for a rapprochement despite the historically built political rhetoric of the two sides. The early signs of a repair in the relationship are already in sight. Following Begum Zia's death, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Dhaka to attend her funeral and handed over Prime Minister

Modi's condolence letter, in which Modi hoped that Begum Zia's legacy, "continue to serve as a guiding light to ensure a *new beginning* and the enrichment of the deep and historic partnership between India and Bangladesh."⁴⁰

BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami Factor

The BNP's political alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) remained a major point of difference with India. The party has consistently described this arrangement as merely an electoral alliance, despite vocal opposition from several of its senior leaders given JeI's position on Bangladesh's Liberation War and its collaboration with the Pakistan Army during that period. Leaders such as Mannan Bhuiyan and Saifur Rahman in the past, along with some current senior functionaries, argued that maintaining a political alliance with JeI was politically self-defeating.⁴¹ In contrast, sections of the younger leadership, including BNP's Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman, believed that the party stood to gain electorally from access to JeI's vote bank.⁴²

In 2018, BNP and JeI formed Jatiya Oikya Front to jointly contest the election under Kamal Hossain's leadership. The Front used BNP's traditional paddy sheaf as its electoral symbol since Jamaat had

lost its election symbol in 2017 following its deregistration as a political party. By 2021, JeI publicly acknowledged the strain in the relationship, stating, "We are still in an alliance with the BNP but we do not have any political activities with them. We are a bit removed from the activities of the alliance, but we have not decided to break the alliance yet."⁴³ A year later, in August 2022, JeI Ameer Dr Shafiqur Rahman declared that "the alliance has become ineffective." However, ahead of the 2024 election, Jamaat formally announced that it was no longer aligned with BNP, citing the absence of consultations on joint programmes and the fact that both parties had been organising separate political activities. In a tactical response, the BNP welcomed Jamaat's decision.

Many observers interpreted Jamaat's move as being driven by a possible political understanding with AL, particularly as the party was then considering contesting the election. From June 2023 onwards, AL appeared to accommodate JeI, allowing it to hold rallies on "political grounds" after a decade-long hiatus.⁴⁴ Some attribute this permission to US threats to impose visa restrictions on individuals found to be undermining the election.⁴⁵ Also in October 2023, JeI was allowed to

hold a rally despite not having obtained formal police permission.

In December 2022, the BNP dissolved its 20-party alliance and formed a 12-party alliance excluding Jamaat. Yet, in 2023, BNP reached out to JeI to mobilise an anti-government front during its rally on 28 October in Nayapaltan.⁴⁶ This apparent contradiction led many to view the BNP's distancing from JeI as largely tactical, aimed at reassuring external actors, particularly the US and India, rather than signalling a substantive ideological break.

Following the fall of the Hasina government, the rift between BNP and Jamaat has widened further as both parties now seek to recalibrate their strategies and enhance their electoral prospects ahead of the February 2026 general election.

2024 Election and controversy over India's Role

India closely monitored developments in Bangladesh ahead of the 2024 election but largely refrained from making public statements. Yet, AL's statements did not help the matter. For example, Obaidul Quader, a senior member of Hasina's government, stated that "India has behaved like an honest neighbour," arguing that New Delhi stood by the

government at a time when sections of the opposition had allegedly "allied with a few foreign powers to disturb our election process."⁴⁷ He further claimed that India had helped foil a BNP conspiracy to internationalise the issue and draw in Western governments. Such a statement from AL only furthered the narrative on India's role in Bangladesh's election.

A parallel narrative suggested that India influenced Washington and facilitated a Hasina–Biden interaction during the G20 summit in New Delhi, which helped the Awami League. For critics, and understandably so, this reinforced the perception of India's complicity in undermining democracy. Similarly, *Ganatantra Manch* accused India of conspiring to destroy democracy in Bangladesh, citing bilateral agreements that, in their view, helped the Hasina government retain power.⁴⁸ Political scientist Rounaq Jahan observed that "the anti-Indian posture which was one of the foundational positions under Zia" was fundamental and "served as one of the political fault lines which divided the two parties."⁴⁹

Both AL and BNP sought to geopolitically balance major powers with strategic interests in Bangladesh. India discussed the election with the US during the 2+2 dialogue in New

Delhi, where Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra emphasised that the election was an internal matter for Bangladesh. "It is for the people of Bangladesh to decide their future.... We were very clear in sharing our perspective on how we look at our situation in different parts of the world. And that includes Bangladesh with the US side during these discussions."⁵⁰ Notably, China⁵¹ and Russia⁵² openly countered US-imposed visa restrictions, offering vocal support to Hasina even as Beijing pragmatically engaged with all political forces, after her fall.⁵³ However, India's efforts to salvage the situation by reaching out to diverse political groups following Hasina's fall did not gain much traction as New Delhi was seen as biased towards Awami League. Her refuge in India has since become a major focal point in the evolving bilateral relations.

The democratic backsliding in Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina, marked by corruption, repression of media and opposition, and authoritarian governance, contributed significantly to rising anti-India sentiment. This narrative, however, often overlooks the role of Bangladesh's bureaucracy and security establishment which helped Sheikh Hasina engineer elections to preserve the status quo.

India's silence on the flawed elections further reinforced perceptions that New Delhi was complicit in the ruling party's political design – a view widely held in Bangladesh. There was a belief in India that if New Delhi had taken a position contrary to that of Awami League, it could have undermined India's security interests. As a former AL Member of Parliament said, "Since AL perceived India's outreach to BNP in 2001 negatively, Hasina had stacked her Ministries with Pro-China elements when she returned to power after the 2008 election, which resulted in the Sonadia deal."⁵⁴

Taking Stock of Bilateralism: Why AL is perceived as a Preferred Partner in India?

India's relations with Bangladesh, the history of partition and certain unresolved bilateral issues that fuel anti-India sentiments – which are, some of the time, even instigated by vested interests – make New Delhi an easy scapegoat. The post-Hasina political developments, especially cartographic depictions of parts of Northeast India as Bangladeshi territory, allowing Pakistani cargo ships without security checks, and projecting bonhomie with Islamabad, have all been interpreted in New Delhi as deliberate signals aimed at

undermining India's security sensitivities. Moreover, statements by opposition political parties have offered little reassurance, while several Indian-funded projects have been stalled for security concerns.

Interestingly, the Commission set up by the interim regime to investigate into BDR Mutiny again, expectedly blamed India, even though the Bangladesh Army Chief had rejected this theory. Secretary, Jamaat Mian Golam Parwar even went a step further and accused Indian Army of killing Bengali intellectuals on the eve of surrender of the Pakistan Army in December 1971.

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that many in India continue to believe that Awami League is a reliable and preferred partner, particularly on matters of security. Interestingly, this security-centric approach in India's bilateral relations is seen by Bangladeshi scholars as "nothing short of its hegemonic assumption and imposition."⁵⁵ However, India's security perception has moved from the Cold War framework of military security to the non-military realm which explains why India initially invited Bangladesh to Colombo Security Conclave meetings as observer before inducting it as a member in 2024.

AL's relationship with India is rooted in the 1971 Liberation War. The party has consistently argued that a stable and cooperative relationship with India serves Bangladesh's national interests. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rejected the notion of India as an adversary, famously asserting that Bangladesh's ties with India were eternal. India's role during the Liberation War, hosting the government-in-exile, sheltering nearly ten million refugees, providing diplomatic backing, and committing its armed forces, was foundational to the birth of Bangladesh. Yet, following Mujib's assassination in 1975, successive military regimes pursued a policy of distancing from India under the banner of 'sovereignty, independence and nationalism'.

The assassination of Mujibur Rahman and 22 of his family members disrupted the trajectory set by the 25-year Treaty of Peace and Friendship between India and Bangladesh. Ziaur Rahman, the founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), recalibrated Bangladesh's foreign policy away from India by cultivating closer ties with China, Pakistan, the US, and West Asian countries. This ideological shift diluted the founding principle of secularism in Bangladesh's constitution.

By the time AL returned to power after two decades in 1996, forces opposed to the Liberation War had consolidated their influence and fostered a counter-narrative that sought to delegitimise India's role in 1971, thereby substantially damaging the bilateral relationship. AL took steps to resolve the longstanding Farakka issue by signing a 30-year treaty in 1996. The Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) Accord brought peace, enabling the repatriation of Chakma refugees from India. Although the party, during its 1996-2001 rule, was unable to provide transit to India or weaken support for Indian insurgent groups in Bangladesh, decisive action on these two issues could only be taken when Hasina returned to power in 2008.

As promised in the AL manifesto of 2008, the AL government granted transit facilities to India, Nepal, and Bhutan, with Hasina articulating her vision of Dhaka as a regional connectivity hub. Having survived the 21 August 2004 terror attack, Hasina prioritised counterterrorism, besides initiating trials of war criminals of 1971 and restoring secularism after the Supreme Court invalidated the Fifth Amendment Act of 6 April 1979, enacted by Zia ur Rahman. Domestically, following the

Holey Artisan Bakery attack of 1 July 2016, the government intensified its crackdown on the radical networks of the local affiliates of ISIS and Al Qaeda, including Ansarul Islam or Ansarullah Bangla Team. Dhaka's counterterrorism cooperation deepened with New Delhi, particularly after the Burdwan blast exposed cross-border extremist linkages.⁵⁶ Given her position on terrorism, PM Hasina supported India's boycott of the 2016 SAARC summit in Islamabad following the Uri terror attack by Pakistan-based militants which further reinforced strategic convergence.⁵⁷

Recognising that Bangladesh's economic development is intertwined with India's Northeast, Hasina, in 2016, emphasised that "connectivity is productivity" and announced a multimodal transit facility for Indian transporters at a 192 Taka per ton as fee. This, however, was propagated by the *Rashtra Sanskar Andolan* as a compromise on Bangladesh's sovereignty, which accused New Delhi of blocking the "political and democratic development of Bangladesh" by backing the Hasina government. In 2023, Dhaka granted India access to the Chattogram and Mongla ports for transit and transshipment, in addition

to Ashuganj.⁵⁸ An MoU to this effect was agreed in 2015.⁵⁹ Several challenges, however, need to be ironed out for this route to become profitable.⁶⁰ It is worth noting that 99% of the cargo moved by rail is Bangladesh's imports from India. Freight trains via the Haldibari-Chilahati rail route were also restored after 56 years.

Energy cooperation also deepened with joint power projects and trilateral electricity trade involving Nepal. A joint venture Maitree power plant was constructed by India at Rampalin in Bagerhat district, Bangladesh, despite protests from the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power, and Ports. Moreover, while India supplies Bangladesh with 1160 MW of electricity, Dhaka also imports 40 MW from Nepal via the high-voltage Baharampur-Bheramara cross-border power transmission line, built at a cost of \$183.5 million.⁶¹ This energy trade was only possible after India allowed its domestic electricity transmission infrastructure to facilitate cross-border electricity trade. Collectively, these initiatives explain why India has consistently regarded the Awami League as a more dependable partner in advancing security, connectivity, and regional integration.

India-Bangladesh Bilateral Ties: Where is it Moving?

Though Bangladesh's politics cannot be reduced to a simple binary, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, along with their respective electoral allies, broadly represent two opposing perspectives on Bangladesh's relations with India. Convergence on the contours of bilateral relations has been rare. Awami League's 17-year rule and BNP's continued tirade clearly reflect this divergence. A comparison of the agreements that India signed when BNP and AL were in power respectively and the high-level visits exchanged between the two countries during these tenures underscores this stance (see the following Table).

The sharing of waters from 54 common rivers has remained one of the most contentious bilateral issues posing a major challenge. Since independence, the Ganges water sharing question has dominated political discourse, with Bangladesh, as the lower riparian, frequently accusing India of denying it its legitimate "historic" share. The BNP has criticised Awami League for failing to conclude an agreement on Teesta River despite its close ties with India, claiming that "Sheikh Hasina

couldn't even bring a bucket of water from India," and accused her government of making "unilateral move and giving away everything to India than receiving anything."⁶²

The Teesta issue is complicated by India's federal structure. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has repeatedly expressed reservations, arguing that water sharing would adversely affect districts such as Siliguri and Jalpaiguri. Speaking in the West Bengal State Assembly, she said: "They (Bangladeshis) are hurt because we could not share with ... I've no problem... Bangladesh is our friend... no doubt about that ... Jyoti Basu (when he was the CM) had also shared waters from the Farakka barrage with Bangladesh... Teesta is drying up. If we share its water, then people of Silliguri, Jalpaiguri will suffer. The farmers will not be able to carry out agricultural activities... I am saying this because I have seen the situation."⁶³

During Sheikh Hasina's June 2024 visit to India, which was barely two months before her government fell, as the two sides discussed Teesta and Farakka, CM Banerjee, in a public letter, complained to PM Modi that she had not been consulted on the discussions. Nevertheless, while an interim water-sharing arrangement has been agreed on the Kushiara

THE 'INDIA FACTOR' IN BANGLADESH POLITICS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR BILATERAL RELATIONS

**Table: Agreements signed with India during the
Awami League and the BNP periods**

Awami League		BNP	
1972	Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace	1976	Extension of 1973 trade agreement
1974	Tripartite Agreement between India, Bangladesh and Pakistan for Normalisation of relations in the Sub-continent	1977	Agreement on running power for railways
1972, 1973	Trade Agreement	1977	Extension of PIWTT
1972	Supply of Crude oil		
1972	Protocol between India and Bangladesh on Inland Water Trade and Transit	1978	Agreement on Air Service
1972	Agreement on Telecommunication		
1972	Cultural cooperation		
1973	Peaceful use of nuclear energy		
1974	Protocol to the Trade Agreement	1980	New trade agreement
1974	Demarcation of the land boundary between India and Bangladesh and related matters		
		1982, 1983, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001	PIWTTA
		1990	Working agreement for opening of broad gauge rail route for goods traffic (Singhabad-Rohanpur)
1996	Treaty on sharing Ganges water at Farakka		
1997, 1999, 2001	PIWTTA		
1999	Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh for the regulation of motor vehicle passenger traffic between the two countries.	1977	Agreement on sharing of Ganges water at Farakka and on Augmentin its flows
1999	Dhaka-Calcutta bus service	2006	Trade Agreement between India and Bangladesh

THE 'INDIA FACTOR' IN BANGLADESH POLITICS:
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2000	Working agreement on Petrapole-Benapole BG Inter-Change route for movement of goods traffic and resumption of rail communication		
2001	Motor vehicle passenger traffic		
July			
2001	Passenger train service		
2010	Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters		
2010	Agreement on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons		
2010	Agreement on Combating International Terrorism, Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking		
2011	Protocol to the Agreement Concerning the Demarcation of the Land Boundary between India and Bangladesh and Related Matters		
2013	Extradition Treaty		
2013	Revised Travel Arrangement		
2015	Trade Agreement		
2015	Agreement and Protocol for Regulation of Motor Vehicle Passenger Traffic between the Two Countries (Guwahati-Dhaka and Dhaka-Guwahati)		
2015	Agreement and Protocol for the Regulation of Motor Vehicle Passenger Traffic between the Two Countries (Kolkata to Agartala via Dhaka and vice versa)		
2015	Agreement on Coastal Shipping		
2017	Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh on Cooperation in Peaceful uses of Nuclear Energy		

THE 'INDIA FACTOR' IN BANGLADESH POLITICS:
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	Inter-Agency Agreement between Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership (GCNEP), Department of Atomic Energy, Government of India and Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC), Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh on Cooperation regarding Nuclear Power Plant Projects in Bangladesh		
	Agreement between Bangladesh And India for the Regulation of Motor Vehicle Passenger Traffic (Khulna-Kolkata route) and SOP of the Agreement		
	Implementation Agreement and Power Purchase Agreement between Reliance Power and Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources for the first phase (718 MW) of the 3000 MW power project at Meghnaghat		
	Supplementary Agreement between NTPC Vidyut Vyapar Nigam Limited (NVVN) and Bangladesh Power Development Board for supply of additional 60 MW of power from Tripura to Bangladesh		
	Implementation Agreement between Adani Power (Jharkhand) Limited and Bangladesh Power Development Board and Power Purchase Agreement between Adani Power (Jharkhand) Limited and Power Grid Company of Bangladesh Limited for supply of power from 1600 MW Power Plant in Jharkhand		
	Agreement between Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL) and Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) for sale and purchase of Gasoil		
2018	Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (GoB) and the Government of Republic of India (GoI) for extending a Line of Credit of US\$500 Million from GoI to GoB for defence cooperation		

Source: High Commission of India, Dhaka, Bilateral relations. Available at: <https://hcidhaka.gov.in> (accessed on 19 December 2025)

River, seven rivers, including Teesta, Muhuri, Dharla, Khowai, Monu, Dudhkumar, and Gumti, have been identified for prioritised negotiations. Likewise, BNP General Secretary Fakhru Alamgir stated that his party rejects "these agreements as these are against the interests of Bangladesh. I want to say that the BNP was created to protect the sovereignty of the country. BNP will take all measures to protect the country's independence and sovereignty."⁶⁴ Alam further accused Sheikh Hasina of transforming Bangladesh into a geopolitical buffer state of India, and of, in the name of transit, providing New Delhi with a corridor.⁶⁵

China's interest in investing nearly US\$1 billion in the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project has added a geopolitical dimension. Bangladesh is expected to contribute 15 per cent, with the remaining 85 per cent financed through Chinese loans. India has raised security concerns over Chinese involvement and offered to undertake the project itself. While Hasina assured New Delhi that she will "take into cognisance the geopolitical issues", the post-Hasina interim regime has repeatedly demonstrated its inclination to move away from India, with BNP also appearing more inclined to award

the project to China⁶⁶ should it return to power following the next election.

Beyond water, the two countries have prioritised connectivity, particularly inland waterways. Under this, the National Waterways 1 (Ganges) and 2 (Brahmaputra) are now linked to the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol routes⁶⁷ for transporting goods as part of the "Eastern Waterways Grid," offering a cost-effective alternative to road and rail transport. The efforts to restore pre-1965 connectivity have seen three passenger trains, including Maitree, Bandhan, and Mitali Express, resume services, as have five bus routes, thereby strengthening people-to-people ties. It is important to note that Bangladesh has been one of the largest sources of tourists to India in recent years, with many travelling by land routes, underscoring the importance of road and rail connectivity.⁶⁸ As the two countries become regionally integrated, Bangladesh's Look East Policy and India's Act East Policy have begun to converge.

Nevertheless, despite the current downturn in bilateral ties, cooperation continues in limited forms. For instance, on 27 October, Home Minister Amit Shah inaugurated the Passenger Terminal

building and the Maitri Dwar at the Land Port in Petrapole, West Bengal. However, projects such as the 131-km long India–Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline which was to be extended beyond Parbatipur remain suspended. In addition, misinformation has fuelled anti-India sentiment including false claims that the interim government halted Hasina government's gas exports to India. This prompted the Energy Division of Bangladesh to issue a press note stating that the video is "entirely false and deliberately misleading."⁶⁹ Energy cooperation, particularly electricity imports from India, has also come under scrutiny. For instance, narratives of Indian companies, such as Adani's dedicated Godda power plant in Jharkhand, exploiting Dhaka through 'one-sided' agreements to supply electricity at higher rates, at the cost of gross revenue loss for Bangladesh, have been rife.⁷⁰

Following Hasina's ouster, Indian investment has slowed as project engineers and other officials have left Bangladesh due to the deteriorating security situation. Given the growing anti-Indianism, the Indian business community who have invested in Bangladesh have expressed apprehension regarding safety and expansion of their business. As of 2021, 350 Indian companies are registered in

Bangladesh with US\$3.5 billion in FDI.

After the interim regime took over, its Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus stated on 2 September 2024 that Indian projects would be reviewed to determine whether they were beneficial to Bangladesh and served its national interests.⁷¹ However, according to the Foreign Adviser, only one project was cancelled.⁷² The two countries had agreed "to commence goods-train service from Gede-Darshana through Chilahati Haldibari up to Hasimara via Dalgaon railhead (as and when operationalised) at the India-Bhutan border."⁷³

India is keen to establish defence cooperation and has extended a US\$500 million credit line. The two countries hold an annual defence dialogue. Capacity building remains a priority area for India. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief is one area where cooperation can be strengthened, as both countries face a range of non-traditional security challenges.

Border management and security have remained major challenges. The porous border has been a safe haven for smugglers, human traffickers and illegal immigrants.⁷⁴ Often, Bangladesh complains about firing on the border, where Bangladeshi

nationals, mostly engaged in smuggling, are killed. It is important for Bangladesh to ensure that the border fence is not trespassed by petty criminals, some of whom also carry cough syrup Phensedyl and yaba tablets.⁷⁵ Militants and extremists also use the porous border to develop their cross-border networks. The South Bengal border is notorious for fake currency and gold smuggling. Between January and November 2023, BSF apprehended 1,410 Bangladesh nationals, 864 Indian citizens and 61 Rohingyas.⁷⁶

India's decision to push back illegal Bangladeshi migrants living in India has added another dimension to the bilateral tension. The Yunus government has accused India of allowing AL activities within its borders. The presence of Sheikh Hasina, against whom a trial in absentia is being conducted in Bangladesh, is a sore point. The interim regime's decision to allow visa-free travel of Pakistani officials would cast a shadow on the bilateral relations, as Pakistan has used Bangladesh to infiltrate militants into India. Yet, given the historical socio-cultural ties, India would wait for an elected government to assume office before it could steamroll bilateral relations.

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Conclusion

India-Bangladesh relations cannot be understood in isolation from Bangladesh's domestic political landscape and the 'India factor' in it. The persistent divergence between AL and BNP on India reflects deeper ideological differences regarding nationalism, sovereignty, and regional alignment. While the AL has largely framed engagement with New Delhi as essential for India's security, connectivity, and the economic development of the Northeast, the BNP has historically mobilised scepticism toward India as a political resource. This has ensured that bilateral relations remain vulnerable to shifts in domestic power and political rhetoric. Given

the nature of political contest this time, BNP has taken a measured approach to politics so far, while Jel and its alliance partners have tried to use anti-India sentiment as an electoral issue, seeking to benefit from the killing of Islamic Moncho convenor Osman Hadi by linking it to India without evidence. Islamist elements are being mobilised to demonstrate in front of the Indian High Commissioner's building in Dhaka as well as outside the offices of its Assistant High Commissioners in other regions, raising security concerns. Anticipating repetition of such incidents post-election, India has asked family members of its staff serving at the High Commission in Dhaka and its regional offices to return to India. Similarly, the brutal killing of Hindus (one of them was set on fire in one such case) in Bangladesh has been met with demonstrations in front of the Bangladesh High Commission in India. The case of Bangladesh cricketer Mustafizur Rahman being dropped from the Indian Premier League (IPL) has emerged as yet another emotive issue, signalling a decline in bilateral relations. While India has reached out to Tarique Rahman and met with Jel Ameer Shafiqur Rahman, it will wait for an elected government to assume office before engaging constructively.

Moreover, unresolved issues and perceptions of asymmetric benefits, have continued to produce friction and reinforce anti-India narratives. Social media has emerged as a new battlefield for spoilers on both sides, who are busy adding more fuel to the fire in the name of 'nationalism'. Cooperation in areas such as counterterrorism, connectivity, energy exchange, and disaster management underscores the structural interdependence between the two sides. However, Bangladesh's recent political turbulence, the deceleration of Indian investment, and the expanding influence of external actors such as China and Pakistan add complexity to the bilateral dynamic. For the relationship to shift from a zero-sum to a positive-sum framework, both countries will need to establish mechanisms that shield cooperation from domestic political polarisation. New Delhi's challenge lies in reconciling its security priorities with sensitivity to Bangladesh's emerging internal political dynamic and conducting its diplomacy with emphasis on mutual respect, while the challenge for Dhaka is to rein in elements stoking communal fire, address India's concerns, and take its developmental partnership with India forward as a stepping stone for regional stability and economic integration. ■

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