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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India-Bangladesh – Managing the Most Important Neighbour Through Political Turbulence

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"The Hasina government's fall in August 2024 dramatically changed India-Bangladesh relations. What does this episode reveal about the risks of India over-identifying with a single political leader in a neighbouring country?"

WHY IN NEWS

India-Bangladesh bilateral relations remain in a delicate reset phase in early 2026. Muhammad Yunus's interim government has raised issues of minority protection, Teesta water management, and China engagement that test India's neighbourhood diplomacy — as New Delhi navigates the consequences of having closely identified with the Hasina government for 15 years.

BANGLADESH IS NOT OPTIONAL FOR INDIA

The instinct, whenever India-Bangladesh relations deteriorate, is for Indian observers to reach for categories like ingratitude or Chinese manipulation. These framings miss the structural point. Bangladesh is not a peripheral country that India can manage at arm's length. It is, by any measure, India's most geopolitically significant neighbour after Pakistan and China.

Bangladesh borders five Indian states — West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. India's seven northeastern states have approximately 1,600 km of border with Bangladesh. The Siliguri Corridor — the narrow 22-km strip connecting the northeast to mainland India, India's most acute territorial vulnerability — is directly adjacent to Bangladesh. Transit corridors through Bangladesh that allow road and rail connectivity to the northeastern states without going through the Corridor are among India's most important strategic infrastructure achievements of the past decade.

Bangladesh is also India's largest SAARC trading partner, absorbs Indian electricity and petroleum, and shares rivers (Teesta, Ganga, Feni, Kushiya) whose management requires permanent bilateral engagement. The relationship cannot be allowed to deteriorate beyond a certain floor, whatever government is in Dhaka.

THE RISK OF OVER-IDENTIFICATION

The most important lesson of the Hasina episode is one that India keeps re-learning across its neighbourhood: **personalising a bilateral relationship is not the same as deepening it.**

Under Hasina's government (2009–2024), India-Bangladesh relations achieved genuine depth. Transit agreements, the Friendship Pipeline, the Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link, the Maitri Setu, electricity supply arrangements, and the cooperative management of the 2015–2016 terrorism threat from groups like JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh) — these were real, durable improvements in the bilateral architecture.

But India also developed habits that were not sustainable. Intelligence sharing and cooperation were personalised around Hasina's political interests. Bangladesh's security services shared information about Indian insurgent groups in northeast India operating from Bangladeshi territory — a genuine Indian strategic interest — but this cooperation was bundled with support for Hasina's political survival in ways that were difficult to separate. India's Ministry of External Affairs calibrated its public statements about Bangladesh's democratic health carefully, avoiding criticism of Hasina's increasingly authoritarian governance, media crackdowns, and electoral manipulation.

When Hasina fell, this calibration became a liability. The Yunus government and large sections of Bangladeshi civil society and academia perceived India as having backed a repressive regime. Bangladeshi public opinion toward India — long complicated by the history of 1947 partition, the 1971 Liberation War (India's military intervention on behalf of Bangladesh's independence), and river water disputes — turned sharply more negative in the August 2024 period.

India's challenge in 2025–2026 is to rebuild a relationship with an interim government and ultimately an elected government (elections are expected by 2026–2027 under Yunus's commitment) that does not depend on any single political party's preference.

THE HASINA PRESENCE: INDIA'S LEAST-BAD OPTION

Of all the complications in the current bilateral relationship, Hasina's presence in India is the most symbolically charged and the most diplomatically constrained. Bangladesh has filed dozens of criminal cases against Hasina and has called for her extradition. India has no operative extradition treaty with Bangladesh and has not committed to any extradition proceeding.

India's options are constrained on all sides. Handing Hasina over would be:

Legally uncertain: without a treaty, extradition requires specific legislative action; the process would be lengthy and politically charged in both countries

Diplomatically damaging: as signal to current and future leaders across the region that India will hand over an ally the moment they face political reversal — the opposite of the message India wants to send

Personally dangerous: if the cases against Hasina involve show-trials or politically motivated prosecutions, India would be complicit in a potential judicial travesty

Refusing to engage with the issue at all is also costly: it keeps the bilateral relationship in a state of permanent irritant and gives Bangladesh's Islamist opposition parties (like Jamaat-e-Islami) a narrative about India shielding corrupt leaders.

The least-bad position is what India appears to be maintaining: quiet diplomacy, no public commitment on extradition, and gradual rebuilding of bilateral mechanisms that are politically durable because they serve both countries' interests regardless of Hasina's status.

CHINA'S OPPORTUNITY AND INDIA'S RESPONSE

The Yunus government's engagement with China — particularly on the Teesta river management project — has generated concern in New Delhi. But the concern should be proportionate. China has been a significant investor in Bangladesh since at least 2016 (when Bangladesh joined the Belt and Road Initiative). The Karnaphuli Tunnel (first undersea road tunnel in South Asia, Chinese-built), Padma Rail Link (partially Chinese-financed), and multiple industrial zones with Chinese participation predate the Yunus government.

What has changed is the political temperature — a government that was previously somewhat cautious about Chinese infrastructure in politically sensitive areas (particularly near the India-Bangladesh border) is now less cautious. The Teesta project is the most concerning element because it creates Chinese presence in river management directly affecting India's water security and Bangladesh's agricultural north.

India's response should be proportionate rather than panicked. **Infrastructure competition in Bangladesh is a legitimate arena.** India has real comparative advantages: geographic proximity, shared languages and cultural networks, the ability to provide electricity and petroleum connectivity that China cannot, and the institutional memory of 1971 that still carries weight in much of Bangladeshi society. The Adani Godda power supply — despite payment disputes — provides Bangladesh approximately 1,600 MW of electricity that it genuinely needs. India's connectivity investments (Agartala-Akhaura, Maitri Setu, the Friendship Pipeline) are permanent facts of geography that no political government can undo.

What India cannot afford is the lazy assumption that Bangladesh will remain in India's orbit by default. The lesson of the Maldives, Nepal, and now Bangladesh is that proximity does not guarantee alignment.

THE MINORITY QUESTION — INDIA'S MORAL POSITION

India's concerns about attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh are legitimate. They are also politically complex. The Hindus of Bangladesh — approximately 8–9 percent of the population, approximately 13–14 million people — are citizens of a sovereign country. India can and should raise the issue diplomatically. But India's ability to raise minority protection concerns in Bangladesh is constrained by the state of minority communities in India itself.

When Indian officials protest attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi officials (and international observers) note the condition of Muslims and other minorities in India. This does not make the Bangladeshi minorities' situation better; it makes India's diplomatic pressure less effective. The moral authority to demand minority protection is inseparable from the practice of it domestically.

The more durable approach is institutional: India can press Bangladesh to restore the Vested Property Return laws, support Bangladeshi civil society organisations working on minority protection, and link development assistance explicitly to protection metrics — the way the EU links development finance to governance conditionalities. Moral demands without institutional linkage and domestic credibility are rhetorical, not diplomatic.

WHAT A RESILIENT INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONSHIP REQUIRES

Depersonalise and institutionalise. Bilateral mechanisms — the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), the Joint Working Groups on trade, connectivity, and security, the Border Haat network, the power supply arrangements — should be durable regardless of which party governs in Dhaka. Investing in these institutions, not in individual political leaders, is the long-term strategy.

Complete the Teesta treaty. The Teesta water-sharing agreement has been pending since 1983 negotiations began. India should make a serious political effort to resolve West Bengal's objections — either through a modified allocation formula, Central government-state consultation, or a compensatory water management infrastructure investment for West Bengal farmers. Allowing China to fill this vacuum would be a self-inflicted strategic wound.

Expand people-to-people connectivity. Bangladesh is one of India's largest sources of medical tourism — hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis visit Indian hospitals (Chennai, Kolkata, Vellore) annually. Student exchanges, cultural programmes, and digital connectivity (OTT platforms, social media cross-exposure) build familiarity that survives political disruptions. India should expand visa access for Bangladeshi citizens and reduce the friction of the current visa system.

Maintain strategic patience. Bangladesh will likely hold elections in 2026 or 2027. The political landscape is fluid. Awami League, BNP, and Jamaat-e-Islami will compete. India's interest is in a stable, prosperous, and tolerant Bangladesh — not in any particular party's victory. Maintaining this principled neutrality while building institutional relationships is the test of strategic maturity.

FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA
INDIA-BANGLADESH STRATEGIC CONTEXT:

- Bangladesh borders: West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram
- India-Bangladesh border: approximately 4,156 km (2nd longest India land border after Bangladesh)
- Siliguri Corridor: 22–24 km wide; connects NE India to mainland India
- Bangladesh: India's largest SAARC trading partner

CONNECTIVITY ACHIEVEMENTS:

- India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline: Noonmati (Assam) → Parbatipur (Bangladesh); 131.5 km; first cross-border petroleum pipeline in South Asia; March 2023
- Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link: inaugurated October 2023; Tripura rail connectivity to Bangladesh network
- Maitri Setu: bridge over Feni River; Sabroom (Tripura) — Ramgarh (Bangladesh); 2021
- Border Haats: small cross-border markets; currently 4 haats operational

RIVER-SHARING TREATIES:

- Ganga Waters Treaty: signed December 1996; 30-year term; sharing at Farakka Barrage
- Teesta treaty: under negotiation since 1983; blocked in 2011 (West Bengal objection); unsigned as of 2026
- Joint Rivers Commission (JRC): India-Bangladesh body for river management; established 1972

BANGLADESH POLITICAL PARTIES:

- Awami League: Sheikh Hasina's party; socially liberal, secular-leaning
- BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party): Khaleda Zia's party; centre-right
- Jamaat-e-Islami: Islamist party; banned briefly in 2013; restored

CHINA IN BANGLADESH:

- Bangladesh joined BRI: 2016
- Karnaphuli Tunnel (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel): first undersea road tunnel in South Asia; Chinese-built; Chittagong; 2023
- Padma Rail Link: partially Chinese-financed
- China's proposed Teesta project: Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

- 1971 Liberation War: India military intervention; ~93,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered; Bangladesh independence December 16, 1971
- JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh): Islamist militant group; India-Bangladesh cooperation led to crackdown
- Vested Property Act (1965, originally Enemy Property Act): used to dispossess Hindus; partial restoration reforms under Hasina government
- India provides ~1,600 MW to Bangladesh from Adani Godda plant (Jharkhand)

Sources: MEA, Indian Express, PIB

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