



# After the “Golden Era”: Getting Bangladesh-India Ties Back on Track

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** The demise of Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh has led to a deterioration in relations between Dhaka and New Delhi. There have been disputes over the border, tit-for-tat trade restrictions and a rise in inflammatory rhetoric. Bangladesh's forthcoming elections offer an opportunity for a reset.

**Why does it matter?** New Delhi's support for Sheikh Hasina fanned longstanding anti-India feeling in Bangladesh, contributing to her ouster. Poorer relations could spell violence, further destabilisation of the border and hindered economic development. Violent protests surged in Bangladesh in mid-December after the killing of a young activist critical of India, underscoring the risks.

**What should be done?** Bangladeshi political parties should refrain from stoking anti-India sentiment, while New Delhi should avoid further inflaming tensions and undermining potential partners in Bangladesh. After the elections, New Delhi should extend good-will gestures to the new government in Dhaka, which in turn will need to respect Indian security concerns.

## *Executive Summary*

The August 2024 ouster of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was a major setback for India, which had been her staunchest ally during her fifteen-year rule. New Delhi's support had enabled her party, the Awami League, to prevail in three controversial elections. But aligning so closely with an increasingly unpopular ruler amplified anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh and left India poorly positioned when a mass uprising forced Hasina from power. The two countries have since struggled to repair ties, instead swapping rhetorical barbs, imposing trade restrictions and engaging in confrontations along their shared border. New Delhi is unlikely to normalise relations with Dhaka's interim government, but Bangladesh's national elections scheduled for 12 February 2026 offer the chance for a reset. To make the most of the opportunity, New Delhi should prepare to make good-will gestures in the election aftermath and step up engagement with a wide range of political stakeholders, including those it disagrees with; for their part, political parties in Bangladesh should avoid anti-India rhetoric during the campaign.

Though India's support was crucial for securing Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, and the countries share deep historical and cultural ties, bilateral relations have often been strained by border disputes, security threats, perceived Indian hegemony and communal tensions. Sheikh Hasina's victory in the December 2008 elections paved the way for what New Delhi has described as *shonali adhyay*, or a "golden era", in the relationship. The two sides demarcated land and maritime borders and accelerated economic integration, including through reductions in tariffs, transshipment agreements and infrastructure development. Bangladeshis also began visiting India in large numbers for tourism and medical treatment. But there was a widespread sense in Bangladesh that India was getting favourable political, security and business deals in exchange for propping up Hasina's autocratic regime. India's decision to give Hasina refuge after she fled the country in August 2024, despite Bangladesh's insistence she face justice, only added to the ill feeling.

Since Hasina's departure, New Delhi and Dhaka have settled into a pattern of recrimination. Both insist they have reached out to mend ties but have been rebuffed; each has accused the other of provocations; at times, the two have engaged in border standoffs and what appears to be tit-for-tat retaliation on trade. The tension has entrenched negative perceptions without benefiting either side. Still smarting from Hasina's downfall, India is now unlikely to normalise relations with the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus; policymakers are instead waiting for the outcome of the Bangladeshi elections.

With Hasina’s Awami League barred from contesting the polls, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is considered the front runner. Historically, India and the BNP have had a troubled relationship. But in Bangladesh’s much-changed political landscape, the party is likely the best option for safeguarding New Delhi’s interests.

Domestic politics in both countries could undermine efforts to rebuild ties, however. Fanning anti-India sentiment is a common strategy for Bangladeshi political parties. In India, the Hindu nationalism of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), including its muscular foreign policy and focus on illegal immigration, could increase Bangladeshi resentment of New Delhi. Elections in the Indian border states of Assam and West Bengal in March-April 2026 are potential flashpoints, as is the looming expiration of the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty. While most political leaders in both countries appear to recognise that better ties would be beneficial, there is also a risk that they could settle into a pattern of acrimony and distrust. The prospect of state-to-state conflict remains remote, but strained relations could manifest in destabilising ways short of war, including violent protests, communal attacks, border killings and insurgent activity. Underscoring the risks, anti-India violence erupted in Bangladesh in mid-December following the killing of a student leader whose group criticised India and supported the Awami League ban.

For many years, India has viewed constructive relations with Bangladesh as dependent on the Awami League being in power, to the detriment of both Bangladeshi politics and long-term cross-border ties. If the BNP indeed forms the next government, both sides should grasp the opportunity to get relations back on to a stable footing. New Delhi should seek to go further, however, by strengthening ties across the Bangladeshi political spectrum – not only with the post-election administration, but with other parties as well – and further develop people-to-people links and economic connections to help insulate bilateral relations from political shifts. While India will logically put its own economic and security interests first, it should also ensure that its initiatives are mutually beneficial and consider domestic sensitivities in Bangladesh. It should begin planning a charm offensive of good-will gestures and new policies that it could present to the incoming government, starting with the reversal of visa restrictions imposed in August 2024.

Bangladeshi political parties, meanwhile, should resist the temptation to use anti-Indian sentiment to win votes in the forthcoming elections. Such electoral tactics would reinforce the widely held belief in India that the major parties contesting the polls are inimical to its interests, particularly on security – a view informed by historical precedent. The incoming government should instead reciprocate New Delhi’s overtures, adopt a balanced foreign policy, keep a lid on insurgency

and extremism, and do more to curb cross-border smuggling and illegal migration. Assuaging Indian security concerns will be paramount for putting the relationship on the right track, and making it a source of stability, in the years ahead.

**Dhaka/Brussels, 23 December 2025**

# After the “Golden Era”: Getting Bangladesh-India Ties Back on Track

## I. Introduction

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Modern-day India and Bangladesh have a long shared history.<sup>1</sup> The region of Bengal, which is now split between Bangladesh and India’s state of West Bengal, has been bound together for millennia by trade and culture, both under homegrown rulers and as part of larger empires, including the Delhi Sultanate, Mughal Empire and British Empire. During the 20th century, Bengal’s political borders were redrawn several times. The 1947 partition of British India, which created the Indian Union along with a bifurcated Pakistan comprising western and eastern wings more than 1,600km apart, divided Bengal largely along communal lines. Muslims dominated East Bengal, which later became East Pakistan, while Hindus formed the majority in Indian-controlled areas. Partition exacerbated this religious divide by triggering the mass movement of millions of Hindus from the two wings of Pakistan into India, with millions of Muslims heading in the opposite direction.

Though many political leaders in Muslim-majority parts of Bengal had campaigned to join Pakistan, the relationship with the government began to sour almost immediately after independence, as politicians from the western wing dominated the newly independent Pakistan state apparatus. The imposition of Urdu as the national language, the centralisation of power in the hands of a non-Bengali civil-military

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<sup>1</sup> For Crisis Group’s recent work on Bangladesh, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°336, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh’s Political Deadlock*, 4 January 2024, and N°344, *A New Era in Bangladesh? The First Hundred Days of Reform*, 14 November 2024; Pierre Prakash, “Bangladesh on Edge after Crushing Student Protests”, Crisis Group Commentary, 25 July 2024, and Crisis Group Commentary, “Bangladesh: The Dilemmas of a Democratic Transition”, 30 January 2025; and Crisis Group Statement, “Bangladesh: The Long Road Ahead”, 7 August 2024. On India, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°334, *Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute*, 14 November 2023, and N°346, *Finding a Way Out of Festering Conflict in India’s Manipur*, 14 February 2025; Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°182, *A Rebel Border: India’s Evolving Ties with Myanmar after the Coup*, 11 April 2025; Praveen Donthi, “India’s Modi Stays in Power, but Weakened”, Crisis Group Commentary, 13 June 2024, Praveen Donthi, “Flare-Ups and Frustration as Kashmir Waits for a Vote”, Crisis Group Commentary, 8 March 2024, and Praveen Donthi, “India Rekindles Its China Ties as Trump’s Tariffs Bite”, Crisis Group Commentary, 5 September 2025; and Crisis Group Statement, “Pulling India and Pakistan Back from the Brink”, 8 May 2025.

elite, and the perceived unequal distribution of resources between East and West Pakistan sparked resentment in the former.<sup>2</sup> Military rule in Pakistan through the 1960s only exacerbated Bengali frustrations, and in 1966 the East Pakistan Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, issued a Six-Point Demand for greater autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

The Bhola cyclone in November 1970 – one of the worst natural disasters in the region’s recorded history – was a pivotal moment in West and East Pakistani relations, deepening the political rifts that had emerged since independence. Up to half a million Bengalis are estimated to have died but the central government’s relief efforts largely neglected East Pakistan. In national elections the following month, the All-Pakistan Awami League won a majority of seats nationally, surprising the country’s military rulers. Authorities in West Pakistan responded by blocking the party from forming a government. In March 1971, the Pakistani army launched a brutal campaign in East Pakistan aimed at curbing Bengali nationalism. Known as Operation Searchlight, it led to mass atrocities against civilians and provided the final spark for Bangladesh’s war of independence.<sup>4</sup>

India covertly supported the liberation movement, training and arming pro-independence guerrillas in its border areas to fight Pakistan. Recognising the irreconcilable differences between Pakistan’s two branches and the growing humanitarian fallout – as many as ten million civilians sought refuge in India during the war – Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian army to prepare for invasion.<sup>5</sup> Indian troops entered East Pakistan in December 1971.<sup>6</sup> The intervention was decisive, with Pakistan’s Eastern Command forced to sign an instrument of surrender within weeks and around 90,000 of the Pakistani forces in Bangladesh taken prisoner.

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<sup>2</sup> Pakistan’s imposition of Urdu as the sole state language was perceived by many in East Bengal as reinforcing the political and economic dominance of the western wing while denigrating Bengali culture and identity. It culminated in the 1952 Language Movement, in which five students were killed while demonstrating for the right to speak their mother tongue, after which Bengali was also recognised as a state language.

<sup>3</sup> Bengalis made up just a fraction of the Pakistani army, despite being the country’s largest population group – a legacy of colonial rule, during which groups the British deemed “martial races”, such as the Punjabis and Sikhs, filled most positions in the army. Much of the Six-Point Demand focused on economic issues; under the proposal, East Pakistan would have had powers of taxation, its own currency and a separate account for foreign exchange earnings; the centre would have handled only defence and foreign affairs.

<sup>4</sup> Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, *Transformation: Emergence of Bangladesh and Evolution of India-Bangladesh Ties* (New Delhi, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Chandrashekhar Dasgupta, *India and the Bangladesh Liberation War* (New Delhi, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



Most in Bangladesh greeted independence from Pakistan with joy, but the war left at least hundreds of thousands of civilians dead and much of the country’s infrastructure in ruins.<sup>7</sup> It also created deep political and social divisions that reverberate to this day. Some in Bangladesh remained loyal to Pakistan and were accused of complicity in atrocities against civilians, including a systematic campaign of rape.<sup>8</sup> The Bangladesh Awami League, many of whose members had been guerrillas fighting the Pakistani army, emerged as the party of liberation, first under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and later his daughter, Sheikh Hasina.

Despite India’s support for Bangladeshi independence, bilateral relations have often been strained, if not outright hostile, since then. Both sides nurture narratives that downplay the other’s role in Bangladesh’s emergence as an independent country. In India, a common view is that Bangladesh has been insufficiently grateful for New Delhi’s contribution to the independence struggle; in Bangladesh, there is a widespread perception that India intervened only for its own strategic reasons, and has often treated independent Bangladesh condescendingly, almost as a satellite state.<sup>9</sup> The chief determinant of the state of bilateral relations has been whether the Awami League is in power in Dhaka, as India has long associated the party with protection of its interests in Bangladesh. At other times, New Delhi and Dhaka have struggled to keep the relationship on an even keel, falling recurrently into mutual suspicion, provocation and irritation.<sup>10</sup> The current moment is part of this long-term pattern.

This report examines the history of the countries’ bilateral relations, the extent and nature of the current tensions between Dhaka and New Delhi, and the need for a reset following political changes in Bangladesh. It explores how, after the upheavals of the past year, the Bangladeshi elections scheduled for 12 February 2026 present an opportunity to restore ties and move away from the tensions of the past. The report is based on field research in Bangladesh in March 2025 and interviews with Indian experts conducted in mid-2025, as well as interviews conducted remotely over a period of more than six months. Interviewees included current and former diplomatic and security officials, diplomats from other countries, analysts, researchers and journalists. Around two thirds of the interviewees were men, reflecting their disproportionate role in state institutions in both India and Bangladesh.

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<sup>7</sup> Estimates of the number of casualties range from 300,000 to three million. Bangladeshis commonly refer to the 1971 war of independence as the “liberation war”.

<sup>8</sup> Thaslima Begum, “‘We lay like corpses. Then the raping began’: 52 years on, Bangladesh’s rape camp survivors speak out”, *The Guardian*, 3 April 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> Smruti S. Pattanaik, “India-Bangladesh Relations: Enduring Challenges”, *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2020).

## II. Sheikh Hasina and New Delhi

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Relations between India and Bangladesh have endured numerous ups and downs. For decades after Bangladesh’s independence, mutual suspicion – if not outright hostility – was the predominant dynamic, contributing to an increasingly securitised border and limiting economic integration. The Awami League’s return to power in 2009, with Sheikh Hasina commanding a huge parliamentary majority and more authority vis-à-vis the military, marked a turning point in the relationship, bringing Dhaka and New Delhi closer than at any time since the early 1970s. But this closeness gradually became a political liability for Hasina. Alongside concerns about growing authoritarianism and economic mismanagement, the perception among many Bangladeshis that she had become too dependent on New Delhi eroded her domestic legitimacy and contributed to her eventual downfall.

### A. *Bilateral Relations from 1971-2009*

Despite its support for Bangladesh’s liberation movement, India struggled to build strong ties with its neighbour in the post-independence period. A prominent Indian analyst said the fracturing of Pakistan amounted to a “pyrrhic victory” for New Delhi.<sup>11</sup> The warm welcome Indian troops received following their decisive intervention against Pakistan in December 1971 soon turned to frustration and anger as reports of looting emerged. The newly formed Bangladeshi army had its own grievances: the exclusion of its commander from the surrender ceremony was regarded as a slight; troops were further angered when Indian soldiers took stocks of arms and ammunition left behind by the Pakistani army.<sup>12</sup>

Tensions between the two nations – which share a 4,096km border – persisted after India withdrew the last of its forces in March 1972. That month, government officials in India and Bangladesh inked a bilateral treaty styled on the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, to which some in Dhaka took exception, alleging that the pact would make Bangladesh too dependent on India and might draw the country into an Indo-Soviet bloc.<sup>13</sup> Other issues hampered relations as well. Sharing of transboundary river waters and borders emerged as points of dispute, exemplified by India’s failure to ratify a 1974 demarcation agreement. Bangladesh increasingly sought to

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<sup>11</sup> Avinash Paliwal, *India’s Near East: A New History* (London, 2024), p. 187.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. See also Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, “Bangladesh and Its Neighbours”, in Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh* (New York, 2020), pp. 378-388.

<sup>13</sup> These claims are highly contested in both Bangladesh and India. See, for example, Smruti S. Pattanaik, “Internal Political Dynamics and Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy Towards India”, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2005).

balance its foreign relations, gaining recognition by Pakistan in 1974 and by China the following year.

The August 1975 assassination by disgruntled army officers of independence leader and inaugural Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with most of his family, was a pivotal moment for both countries. In Bangladesh, the killings ushered in a succession of military governments, notably those led by Ziaur Rahman from 1976 until 1981 – when he, too, was killed by members of the army – and then Hussain Muhammed Ershad, from 1982 to 1990. These administrations moved the country closer to Pakistan, other majority-Muslim countries, China and the United States as part of a counterbalancing policy toward India. Both Ziaur Rahman and Ershad established political parties – the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jatiya Party, respectively – to legitimise their regimes and counter the Awami League. They also rolled back the secular policies of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s government, including by allowing the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami to return to politics, and stoked anti-India sentiment for political gain.<sup>14</sup>

The military regimes killed or imprisoned many Awami League leaders after 1975, shunting the party to the political margins. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s daughter, Sheikh Hasina – who had survived the August 1975 massacre of her family because she was out of the country at the time – led the party from self-exile in India until her return in 1981. New Delhi’s support cemented the close relationship between the Awami League and the Indian government. That relationship was grounded in personal ties between Hasina and politicians from the Indian National Congress, which dominated politics in post-independence India.<sup>15</sup>

During this fifteen-year period of military rule in Dhaka, India and Bangladesh came to view each other largely through a security lens.<sup>16</sup> Both countries provided covert support to insurgents in the other’s territory. New Delhi backed the Shanti Bahini in Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts. Dhaka, meanwhile, facilitated arms shipments to insurgents in India’s north east and allowed them to set up camps on Bangladeshi soil.<sup>17</sup> As illegal immigration from Bangladesh increasingly became a

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<sup>14</sup> In 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s government had banned Jamaat-e-Islami and other religion-based parties over their support for Pakistan in the Liberation War. For more, see van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, op. cit., pp. 219–224.

<sup>15</sup> Bhumitra Chakma, “Bangladesh-India Relations: Sheikh Hasina’s India-positive Policy Approach”, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Singapore, 12 November 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Rahman, “Bangladesh and Its Neighbours”, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> The largest recipient of support from Bangladeshi security agencies was the separatist United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), a group seeking the independence of the Indian state of Assam, which was established in 1979.

political issue in India in the 1980s, New Delhi responded by starting work on a border fence and beefing up security along the frontier. From that point on, the killing of Bangladeshi civilians at the hands of India’s Border Security Force (BSF) became a regular occurrence.<sup>18</sup>

The 1990-1991 transition back to democracy in Bangladesh generated initial optimism in New Delhi that relations could improve. But the new government that came to power in Dhaka was led by the BNP, which New Delhi had always distrusted.<sup>19</sup> Despite early positive signs, including the visit of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to India in 1992 and a new trade deal between the two countries, hopes of friendlier relations were soon dashed.<sup>20</sup> New Delhi’s lingering suspicion of the BNP government, which was backed by Jamaat-e-Islami, morphed into hostility. Indian officials accused Dhaka of continuing to provide support to insurgents, and little progress was made on key bilateral issues such as water sharing and border demarcation.

Political dynamics in India – particularly the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a mosque demolished by a mob in December 1992 – also inflamed anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup> The BJP’s ideology draws on “Hindutva”, which places Hindu culture at the centre of Indian identity; other religious groups, particularly Muslims, often perceive it as discriminatory. Soon after the Babri Masjid was destroyed, Hindu communities in Bangladesh came under attack, while Hindu-Muslim communal violence also flared in India.

In June 1996, Sheikh Hasina led the Awami League back into office after 21 years. The tone of relations with India changed immediately. In December of that year, the two countries signed a 30-year water sharing agreement for the Ganges. Indian officials were also instrumental in brokering the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord between Hasina’s government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti, the political wing of the Shanti Bahini insurgent group. The Indian government then facilitated the return to Bangladesh of Chakma refugees, who had fled the Chittagong Hill Tract region years earlier.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ali Riaz, “Making Walls, Fencing Borders and Living on the Margin: Understanding the India-Bangladesh Border”, *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>19</sup> As the BNP had not won an absolute majority in parliament, it governed with the support of Jamaat-e-Islami, adding to the mistrust.

<sup>20</sup> Pattanaik, “India-Bangladesh Relations: Enduring Challenges”, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> This 16th-century mosque was in the Indian town of Ayodhya. Its destruction by right-wing Hindu activists was a seminal moment in the rise of the BJP, which claimed the mosque had been built on top of a temple marking the birthplace of Ram, a major Hindu god, and led a multi-year campaign demanding a temple be constructed on the site. “How the Babri mosque destruction shaped India”, BBC, 6 December 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Chakravarty, *Transformation*, op. cit.

Hasina did not, however, have a free hand to drive Bangladesh-India relations forward. Lacking an outright parliamentary majority, she governed with the support of Ershad’s Jatiya Party and relied on Jamaat-e-Islami support to get into office; she was also wary of getting sideways with the Bangladesh army, which retained significant political influence and remained suspicious of India.<sup>23</sup> Such political considerations likely kept her from, for example, taking strong action against Indian insurgent groups operating from Bangladesh or preventing deadly border skirmishes from erupting in April 2001.<sup>24</sup>

The continued rise of the BJP – which in 1998 took the reins in New Delhi, leading a coalition government – also exacerbated anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh, constraining her policy options.<sup>25</sup> BJP leaders demonised Bangladeshis in India, claiming that illegal immigrants were a “vote bank” for their political rivals, especially in north-eastern states such as Assam, which borders Bangladesh and has a long history of nativist politics.

The BNP’s return to power in Dhaka in October 2001 saw ties hit new lows. India again accused the party, which ruled in coalition with Jamaat-e-Islami, of supporting Indian insurgent groups and orchestrating post-election attacks on the country’s Hindu minority.<sup>26</sup> In April 2004, the Bangladeshi police and coast guard seized a large haul of weapons in Chittagong, apparently destined for rebels in India, confirming Indian fears.<sup>27</sup>

Ahead of the January 2007 elections, Bangladesh became embroiled in a political crisis. The increasingly unpopular BNP had amended the constitution in an attempt to manipulate the country’s election-time caretaker government process, which had since 1990 ensured reasonably credible elections and transfers of power. As Awami League-led protests gripped the country, the Bangladesh military stepped in, installing a caretaker government that ruled for two years.<sup>28</sup> Unlike previous military regimes, this technocratic administration sought to improve relations with India, particularly on economic cooperation. But it was Sheikh Hasina’s landslide election win in December 2008 that set the stage for a new chapter in Bangladesh-India ties.

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<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Indian security official, July 2025.

<sup>24</sup> J.N. Dixit, *India’s Foreign Policy and Its Neighbours* (New Delhi, 2001), pp. 212–217.

<sup>25</sup> Chakma, “Bangladesh-India Relations”, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Paliwal, *India’s Near East*, op. cit., p. 289.

<sup>27</sup> “Complicity of State Actors in Chittagong Arms Haul Case Revealed”, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 9 March 2009.

<sup>28</sup> For further background, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°264, *Mapping Bangladesh’s Political Crisis*, 9 February 2015.

## B. A “Golden Era”?

Assuming power with a large majority, Hasina was freed from many of the political fetters that had previously held her back. She began transforming relations with New Delhi from the outset of her term in office, adopting what analysts have described as an “India-positive policy”.<sup>29</sup> She set about tackling several longstanding irritants in the relationship, launching a crackdown on Indian insurgent groups operating from Bangladesh and handing over members to Indian authorities.<sup>30</sup> Hasina also took an aggressive approach to domestic Islamist and extremist groups, another perennial concern for India. Her handling of the 2009 Bangladesh Rifles mutiny just months after taking office not only won her support from New Delhi but also strengthened her control of Bangladesh’s army.<sup>31</sup>

During Hasina’s January 2010 visit to New Delhi, she and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh pledged in a joint communiqué to anchor bilateral relations in security and economic cooperation and inked three key security agreements. Talks on border demarcation resumed: during Singh’s 2011 visit to Dhaka, he and Hasina signed a protocol supplementing the 1974 border accord that addressed longstanding points of contention, paving the way for India to ratify the agreement in 2015. The India-Bangladesh maritime boundary was made final through a tribunal ruling around this time as well.

Hasina and Singh also made progress on economic cooperation and connectivity. New Delhi provided Dhaka with lines of credit totalling \$8 billion and grants worth hundreds of millions for infrastructure improvements that boosted bilateral trade.<sup>32</sup> The two neighbours also signed multiple agreements on energy trading. By 2023, Bangladesh was importing around 2,300 megawatts of electricity from India; the neighbours also invested in joint power production. Transit deals that previous governments in Bangladesh had resisted helped commerce flow, particularly to India’s landlocked north-eastern states.<sup>33</sup>

The strength of the relationship was such that when the BJP returned to power in New Delhi in mid-2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s leadership after a decade-long hiatus, there was little percep-

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<sup>29</sup> Chakma, “Bangladesh-India Relations”, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Sumir Karmakar, “ULFA leaders say crackdown in Bangladesh forced them to join peace talks with govt”, *Deccan Herald*, 1 January 2024.

<sup>31</sup> In February 2009, members of the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles revolted against their army commanders in Dhaka, killing at least 73 people, mainly officers. The Indian perspective on the mutiny is detailed in Paliwal, *India’s Near East*, op. cit., pp. 287-292.

<sup>32</sup> “Brief on India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations”, India Ministry of External Affairs, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> For further discussion of the transit agreements, see Crisis Group Briefing, *A Rebel Border: India’s Evolving Ties with Myanmar after the Coup*, op. cit.

tible change – notwithstanding the widely held view that good relations depended on the Awami League and Congress Party both being in power.<sup>34</sup> What shifted under the BJP government was the centralisation of Indian policy vis-à-vis Bangladesh in the executive branch, with the Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Home Affairs (particularly on immigration and border security) and National Security Council becoming increasingly dominant and the Ministry of External Affairs playing a reduced role.<sup>35</sup> The result was a security-focused Bangladesh policy, with Indian domestic political considerations also given more weight.

Inconsistencies in Indian policymaking nevertheless remained, reflecting institutional fragmentation and centre-state rivalries, as well as differences of opinion between the BJP political leadership and the more cautious bureaucracy. Despite these tensions, among Indian policymakers the view hardened that Hasina needed to stay in power to protect Indian interests. “We have no option but the Awami League!”, an Indian diplomat told Crisis Group emphatically in June 2024, just days before protests erupted and eventually toppled the Hasina government.<sup>36</sup>

This unidirectional approach meant that India became aligned with an increasingly authoritarian regime that was using brutal violence and rigging votes to hold onto power. Hasina pushed through constitutional amendments in 2011 that axed the election-time caretaker government, a mechanism that had helped deliver fairly credible elections – and transitions of power – through the 1990s and 2000s. She formed tribunals that critics say targeted political rivals – several of whom were sentenced to death for war crimes committed at the time of the independence struggle – and presided over thousands of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.<sup>37</sup> Indian diplomatic support was important for getting her through three deeply flawed elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024.<sup>38</sup> Many in Bangladesh argue that without India’s backing, Hasina would not have been able to crush her political opponents – making New Delhi an enabler of her abuses.<sup>39</sup>

New Delhi did make attempts to engage the opposition – particularly the BNP – and encourage the Awami League to allow its political

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<sup>34</sup> Md. Abul Kashem and Md. Shariful Islam, “Narendra Modi’s Bangladesh Policy and India–Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Possible Policy Responses”, *India Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, former senior Indian diplomat, July 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, Indian diplomat, June 2024.

<sup>37</sup> For further discussion, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°277, *Political Conflict, Extremism and Criminal Justice in Bangladesh*, 11 April 2016.

<sup>38</sup> For background on the Hasina government’s increasing authoritarianism, see Crisis Group Report, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh’s Political Deadlock*, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, various contacts in Bangladesh, March–August 2025.

opponents a greater presence in parliament. These efforts contributed to the BNP, which had boycotted the 2014 elections, deciding to contest the 2018 polls. But when Hasina was widely perceived to have rigged the vote and India endorsed the results, opposition forces lost faith in New Delhi.<sup>40</sup> “India completely failed in the 2018 election. ... The BNP was frustrated with India, and India was frustrated with the Awami League. I don’t think Hasina was listening to us”, said an analyst close to Indian policymakers.<sup>41</sup>

BNP officials and many analysts dismiss suggestions that India seriously pushed for a more inclusive political environment, insisting that New Delhi’s aim in engaging the opposition was to diminish the prospects of it toppling the government through street movements, thus keeping Hasina in power.<sup>42</sup> Ahead of the 2024 elections, the BNP instead looked to Washington for support in pressing Hasina to hold a credible vote; months out from the poll, India appeared to convince the U.S. to back off.<sup>43</sup>

In private, Indian policymakers recognised that Hasina’s growing unpopularity was hurting India’s image in Bangladesh. But given the dividends she had delivered, particularly on security, there was little willingness to publicly distance New Delhi from her administration or even to apply real pressure behind the scenes.<sup>44</sup> “Hasina was a horror and the people of Bangladesh deserve much better ... but it’s not easy to tell a leader to step down, particularly one as haughty as Hasina”, said a retired Indian security official.<sup>45</sup>

There was also little progress on several key issues that have perennially fuelled anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh. Civilian deaths at the hands of Indian forces along the shared border – often labelled one of the world’s deadliest frontiers – continued unabated, despite India regularly pledging to work to reduce the number. Odhikar, a human rights group, reported that at least 1,185 Bangladeshis were killed by India’s BSF between 2000 and 2019.<sup>46</sup> In 2011, a BSF member shot

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<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Beyond the Election: Overcoming Bangladesh’s Political Deadlock*, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, analyst close to Indian policymakers, July 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior BNP official, August 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Gerry Shih, Ellen Nakashima and John Hudson, “India lobbied U.S. to go easy on Bangladesh’s Hasina before ouster, officials say”, *Washington Post*, 15 August 2024; “No role for deep state, leave it to PM Modi’: Trump on Bangladesh crisis”, *NDTV World*, 14 February 2025. The BNP boycotted the 2024 elections after most of its senior members were jailed in advance of the vote.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former Indian officials and analysts close to the Indian government, July 2025.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Indian former security official, July 2025.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, “India’s great wall – the world’s deadliest frontier”, Channel 4 News, 23 July 2009. For a more recent overview, see Saqlain Rizve, “The deadly border between Bangladesh and India”, *The Diplomat*, 23 February 2024.



and killed a fifteen-year-old girl, Felani Khatun, as she attempted to cross the border. A photograph of her body hanging on the border fence caused outrage. While BSF courts tried the officer on two separate occasions (there was a retrial following public outcry about the first proceedings), he was acquitted both times. It was part of a pattern: border guards have rarely, if ever, been held accountable for the violence, with Indian officials publicly shifting blame for the incidents to the victims.<sup>47</sup>

There is a widely held perception in Bangladesh that Sheikh Hasina facilitated expansion of the border fence and downplayed BSF violence to appease India.<sup>48</sup> Dhaka’s limp response to the killing of a Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) member by the BSF in January 2024 was seen as emblematic of its subservience to New Delhi on the issue.<sup>49</sup>

Economic cooperation with India also became a growing source of tension within Bangladesh. In 2011, the regional government in the Indian state of West Bengal blocked a long-proposed water sharing deal for the Teesta River, undermining efforts to address water shortages in parts of Bangladesh during the dry season. More generally, many Bangladeshis felt their country was getting a raw deal on economic cooperation, pointing to the large trade deficit with India and low transit rates for Indian goods. Expensive power supply deals with Indian firms, particularly a 2016 agreement with Adani Power, became a lightning rod for criticism of Hasina’s regime (see Section III.E below).

While perceptions that India was taking advantage of Hasina’s dependence – combined with India’s increasingly nationalistic and pro-Hindu domestic politics – were not the cause of her downfall, they further undermined her political standing in Bangladesh and helped create the conditions for her eventual removal.<sup>50</sup> BJP leaders’ comments about Bangladeshi immigrants – one referred to them as “termites” who should be “thrown into the Bay of Bengal” – fuelled public anger, as did the Indian government’s treatment of Muslims.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Asked about the killings in 2021, India’s foreign minister responded: “No crime, no death on the border.” See Md. Kamruzzaman, “India’s ‘no crime, no killing’ policy across the border irks Bangladeshis”, Anadolu Agency, 9 March 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Rizve, “The deadly border between Bangladesh and India”, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> The BSF said the BGB officer had been accompanying smugglers over the border and fired at BSF members who attempted to stop them; the BGB said he had gotten lost in thick fog. “Death in firing: BSF returns BGB man’s body after two days”, *The Daily Star*, 25 January 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Indian and Bangladeshi analysts had warned the countries’ relations would suffer. See, for example, Chakma, “Bangladesh-India Relations”, op. cit., and Kamal Ahmed, “Bangladesh is vexed by and wary of Modi’s unstinting support to Sheikh Hasina”, *Himal Southasian*, 15 May 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Devjyot Ghoshal, “Amit Shah vows to throw illegal immigrants into Bay of Bengal”, Reuters, 13 April 2019.

Some of the political leaders in Indian states bordering Bangladesh also adopted vociferously anti-immigration policies. Such measures were particularly harsh in Assam, where officials updated a National Register of Citizens between 2017 and 2019, leading to almost two million people not being recognised as Indian citizens.<sup>52</sup> Assam is the only state to have implemented the Register, but at times the BJP government has proposed expanding it nationwide to identify “infiltrators” – a term widely understood as a reference to Bangladeshis. In 2019, the BJP passed the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, which fast-tracks Indian citizenship for religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, while excluding Muslims.<sup>53</sup>

Hasina’s alignment with New Delhi meant that anti-India and anti-Hasina sentiment came to be closely associated in Bangladesh public opinion. Many saw her as having failed to respond to Indian provocations, fuelling the perception she was in thrall to New Delhi. “The way Indian politicians talk [of Bangladeshis], it’s very humiliating”, noted a Bangladeshi analyst. “When you hit someone’s dignity, that’s dangerous”.<sup>54</sup> Indian foreign policy experts agree that the BJP government’s actions have created anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh. “India has been losing the plot on Bangladesh for a decade. Domestic politics has been infecting our relationships with all our neighbours. August 2024 was just the climax of that problem”, observed a prominent journalist, referring to the student uprising that toppled the Hasina government.<sup>55</sup> “The orientation of the party in power in India is a factor”, agreed a former high-ranking national security official, hinting at the BJP’s Hindu nationalist agenda.<sup>56</sup>

Against this backdrop, Hasina’s iron-fisted approach to holding onto power following a deterioration in Bangladesh’s economic conditions proved lethal for her government. Although she made it through the controversial January 2024 elections, her administration struggled to build momentum after the vote, instead becoming mired in corruption scandals that further eroded public support. In July 2024, student activists staged demonstrations against the reinstatement of quotas for government jobs that were seen as favouring Awami League supporters. When Hasina responded by insulting the protesters and sending out her party’s thugs, the protests escalated. She doubled

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<sup>52</sup> Those excluded from the Register are not automatically stateless; they are entitled to appeal in specially formed tribunals, as well as in the courts. “Assam NRC: What next for 1.9 million ‘stateless’ Indians?”, BBC, 31 August 2019.

<sup>53</sup> The Citizenship Amendment Act is widely perceived as indirectly targeting Muslims in India. Sheikh Saalia, “India’s new citizenship law excludes Muslims. Here’s what to know”, Associated Press, 16 March 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi analyst, August 2025.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, prominent Indian journalist, July 2025.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, Indian former high-ranking national security official, July 2025.

down, shutting down the internet, arresting the movement’s leaders and ordering the police and security forces to shoot on sight.<sup>57</sup> A UN fact-finding team later put the number of protest-related deaths at up to 1,400, the vast majority of which appeared to have been caused by firearms typically used by state forces.<sup>58</sup>

Rather than crushing the student-led protests, the crackdown transformed them into a mass movement. When, on 5 August, millions of people began marching toward Hasina’s residence in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi army refused to follow orders to shoot them. Hasina was left with little choice but to flee the country, taking a Bangladeshi air force plane to India.<sup>59</sup> Her chaotic departure caught most of her party and government by surprise, although many regime officials are thought to have eventually also made it to India as well – mainly to Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal. On 8 August, following negotiations among protest leaders, major political parties and the army, Bangladesh swore in an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus.

For the preceding three days, Bangladesh had no functioning government. Many members of the police force – which was heavily implicated in the violence against protesters – fled their posts, fearing retaliation. More or less unrestrained, rioters launched a wave of retributive attacks on police officers and Awami League supporters.<sup>60</sup> A small proportion of those targeted were members of Bangladesh’s Hindu community (around 8 per cent of the population), whom other Bangladeshis widely perceive as part of the Awami League’s support base, and members of other minority groups.<sup>61</sup> Within weeks, the interim government was able to restore order, with many police returning to their posts and the army providing additional security. The situation has remained largely under control, though ensuring law and order has continued to pose a challenge for the interim government.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Prakash, “Bangladesh on Edge after Crushing Student Protests”, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> “Fact-Finding Report: Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh”, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 12 February 2025.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group Statement, “Bangladesh: The Long Road Ahead”, op. cit. Media reports said she intended to continue to the United Kingdom, where her sister lives, but she was refused entry, leaving her with little choice but to stay in India. “Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina lands in India, meets Ajit Doval, taken to safe house; set to go to UK”, *The Indian Express*, 6 August 2024.

<sup>60</sup> “Vandalism, Attacks Follow Bangladesh Prime Minister’s Exit”, Human Rights Watch, 8 August 2024.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., and “Fact-Finding Report: Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh”, op. cit.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group Report, *A New Era in Bangladesh? The First Hundred Days of Reform*, op. cit.

### III. The Post-Hasina Shock

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Sheikh Hasina’s loss of power and departure was a shock to New Delhi and created a rupture in bilateral relations that has yet to heal. India’s initial unwillingness to engage with the interim government, its provision of refuge to Hasina and the negative coverage of events in Bangladesh in the Indian media raised hackles across the border. Both sides have since taken steps that, fuelled in part by domestic politics, have further escalated tensions. The low point came in December 2024, when far-right Hindu groups attacked the Bangladeshi assistant high commission in Agartala, capital of the north-eastern Indian state of Tripura, which borders Bangladesh. While ties have stabilised to some degree in recent months, New Delhi has not normalised relations with the interim government and is unlikely to do so before the national elections scheduled for February 2026.

#### A. *Political Shifts in Bangladesh and an Erosion of Good-will*

The toppling of Sheikh Hasina has dramatically reshaped the political landscape in Bangladesh, much to India’s consternation. The Awami League’s leadership is underground or overseas, rendering the party largely dysfunctional. Sheikh Hasina has refused to give up control of the party from her new base in India, preventing Awami League officials who were less implicated in the 2024 violence and past human rights abuses and corruption scandals from taking the party forward. Shortly after assuming power, the interim government reconstituted the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) – which Hasina had earlier convened to try those accused of international crimes during the independence war – to prosecute those responsible for violence under the former regime, including Hasina herself. In November, the ICT convicted her in absentia of crimes against humanity and imposed the death penalty.<sup>63</sup> Many senior members of her government and the Awami League have been arrested and are facing charges either at the ICT or in regular courts.<sup>64</sup>

Though Yunus initially said he did not plan to ban the Awami League, the interim government in May prohibited the party from carrying out political activities until the ICT completes its proceedings.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sheikh Hasina convened the ICT shortly after her election win in 2008 to try individuals accused of war crimes dating to the 1971 liberation war, mainly from Jamaat-e-Islami. While the trials – which resulted in several executions – were popular in Bangladesh, they were criticised by human rights groups for lacking fairness and transparency, as well as for targeting political opponents. On the verdict, see “Sheikh Hasina sentenced to death over student protests”, BBC, 17 November 2025.

<sup>64</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Redwan Ahmed, “She should answer for what she did’: trial of ex-Bangladeshi leader Sheikh Hasina begins”, *The Guardian*, 3 August 2025.

<sup>65</sup> “Yunus: Govt has no plans to ban Awami League”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 20 March 2025.

The election commission also suspended the party’s registration.<sup>66</sup> The decision was taken under public pressure, after former president Abdul Hamid, seen as complicit in Hasina’s repression, quietly left the country, sparking several days of protests by those who thought he should have been tried. The party is now barred from contesting the elections scheduled for February 2026.

With the Awami League sidelined, political parties more hostile to India have come to the fore. The country’s largest Islamist force, Jamaat-e-Islami, which Hasina had pushed to the margins during her rule, is once again one of the country’s key political players.<sup>67</sup> Students involved in the 2024 uprising, many of whom remain upset at India for supporting Hasina’s fifteen-year rule, have also formed their own political vehicle, the National Citizen Party (NCP).<sup>68</sup>

The more open political environment (for all but the Awami League) has also created space for more radical forces such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist group banned in Bangladesh since 2009 that advocates a global caliphate, including in India.<sup>69</sup> Taking advantage of weak governance and security, the group has campaigned to be legalised, held protests and recruited new members; it has also been active online, mostly without consequences despite the ban.<sup>70</sup> While Hizb ut-Tahrir generally does not employ violence to achieve its goals, counter-terrorism experts describe it as a “conveyor organisation”, because it can be a stepping stone for members to join more violent outfits.<sup>71</sup>

The political ground has shifted in other ways, too. Over time, the events of 1971 – which shaped much of Bangladeshi political discourse in later decades – have become less relevant to younger generations. The Awami League’s politicisation of the liberation struggle, and then its dramatic fall from power, are largely responsible. Student protesters’ ironic adoption of the pejorative term *razakars* to describe themselves – after Sheikh Hasina used it (it refers to those who sided with Pakistan in 1971) to try discrediting them – speaks to the generational divide.<sup>72</sup> Some now describe the 2024 uprising as a “second liberation” – a term Yunus himself has used that rhetorically puts it on par with

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<sup>66</sup> “Ousted Bangladesh PM Hasina’s party barred from election as party registration suspended”, Reuters, 14 May 2025.

<sup>67</sup> Mubashar Hasan, “Resurgence of Jamaat-e-Islami shifts Bangladesh politics to the right”, *The Diplomat*, 19 August 2025.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, student leaders, September and November 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Iftekhharul Bashar, “Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh: A Growing Threat and the Need for Action”, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 25 March 2025; and “Government declares Hizb-ut-Tahrir a terrorist organisation”, *The Hindu*, 11 October 2024.

<sup>70</sup> Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan, “Hizb ut-Tahrir on the Rise in Bangladesh”, Jamestown Foundation, 20 September 2025.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi security expert, March 2025.

<sup>72</sup> Prakash, “Bangladesh on Edge after Crushing Quota Protests”, op. cit.

the war of independence.<sup>73</sup> The NCP and Jamaat-e-Islami have pushed this narrative, the latter attempting to use its participation in the 2024 protests to wash off the stain of its opposition to independence in 1971.<sup>74</sup> In the Awami League’s absence, the BNP has moved to assume the mantle of Bangladesh’s secular, liberal party. It is increasingly at odds with its one-time ally Jamaat – now its major electoral rival.<sup>75</sup>

These shifting narratives on the liberation struggle have implications for India. While its role in 1971 remains a significant source of goodwill among Bangladeshis, many – particularly younger people – now perceive it as having been on the wrong side in 2024.

India’s public response to these developments has been restrained. While avoiding expressions of overt support for the Awami League, the Ministry of External Affairs has repeatedly called for “inclusive and participatory elections”, hinting at its desire to see the party join the polls.<sup>76</sup> It has also expressed concern about the lack of “due process” in banning the Awami League’s political activities and what it describes as the “curtailment of democratic freedoms and shrinking political space”.<sup>77</sup> Indian analysts and foreign policy insiders say the worry is primarily that leaving the party out will disenfranchise a large section of the electorate, thereby causing instability. “Without the Awami League, it’s democracy in name only”, argued a former high commissioner to Dhaka.<sup>78</sup> Most, however, agree that Sheikh Hasina’s political career is finished and that her refusal to give up control of the party is depriving it of a chance to return to the political field.<sup>79</sup>

Though Bangladeshis often express similar concerns, to many of them the Indian position comes across as hypocritical and politicised. When the Awami League held power, New Delhi rarely spoke about democracy or political inclusion in Bangladesh, and it had few apparent qualms about turning a blind eye to the government’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies. The same Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson who expressed concern about banning the Awami League declined in

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<sup>73</sup> “Bangladesh has achieved its second liberation, says Muhammad Yunus”, *The Economist*, 6 August 2024.

<sup>74</sup> Jamaat-e-Islami opposed independence from Pakistan and some of its members fought in pro-Pakistan militias that were accused of atrocities. See, for example, “True independence not achieved in ’71, ‘second liberation’ came in ’24: Jamaat’s Parwar”, *The Business Standard*, 26 March 2025.

<sup>75</sup> Faisal Mahmud, “Analysis: Bangladesh’s BNP seeks Hasina’s liberal mantle before elections”, *Al Jazeera*, 9 December 2025.

<sup>76</sup> “Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 7 March 2025.

<sup>77</sup> “Ousted Bangladesh PM Hasina’s party barred from election as party registration suspended”, *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh, July 2025.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former senior Indian diplomat and former high-ranking Indian diplomat close to the current Indian government, July 2025.

2024 to comment on that year’s elections – in which the party and its allies won 96 per cent of seats after the BNP boycotted due to the arrest of its leaders – describing those polls as a “domestic affair”.<sup>80</sup>

For its part, the interim government in Dhaka insists the Awami League ban is necessary for “national security”. It has urged “all to respect the sovereign will of our people in matters relating to elections”.<sup>81</sup>

### B. *Misinformation, Violence and a Low Point in Relations*

Indian media coverage of Bangladesh has been a major source of tension between the two governments. Numerous outlets have pushed bogus conspiracy theories that the U.S., China or Pakistan were behind Hasina’s ouster, while commentators have claimed that radical Islamists led the protest movement and that a “culture of Taliban-style moral policing is rapidly taking root” under Yunus.<sup>82</sup> These commentators typically exaggerate the violence of the student-led movement, gloss over Hasina’s brutal response and cast Bangladesh under the interim government in a negative light.<sup>83</sup> Indian media has also given an uncritical platform to Awami League politicians in exile, including Hasina.<sup>84</sup>

While Indian media coverage of Bangladesh is not state-controlled, it is shaped by the views of government officials, ruling-party leaders, and the foreign policy and security establishment. Speaking to Crisis Group, insiders tended to be highly critical of the interim government and to take a pessimistic view of developments within Bangladesh; some drew comparisons to what they saw as Hasina’s achievements.<sup>85</sup> A former high-ranking diplomat close to the BNP government, echoing a conspiracy theory circulating in the Indian media, questioned whether the U.S. had installed Yunus in the role.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> “Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 4 January 2024.

<sup>81</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, “Ban on Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League a ‘concerning development’: India”, *The Hindu*, 13 May 2025.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Brahma Chellaney, “Bangladesh is a South Asian time bomb”, *Project Syndicate*, 14 August 2025.

<sup>83</sup> Mahfuz Anam, “The Indian media and Bangladesh-India relations”, *The Daily Star*, 22 November 2024.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Sushim Mukul, “Bangladesh chaos funded by Clintons, Soros, backed by Biden: Ex-minister’s big revelation”, *India Today*, 10 November 2025.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, New Delhi, July 2025.

<sup>86</sup> The official said: “Yunus is an artificial creation. He doesn’t represent anyone except the United States – he belongs to them. Who made him president? It wasn’t the students”. Crisis Group interview, former high-ranking Indian diplomat close to the current Indian government, July 2025. See also Abhinandan Mishra, “Documents show U.S. set in motion plan to oust Hasina”, *Sunday Guardian*, 15 September 2024; and C. Raja Mohan, “Bangladesh and the ‘foreign hand’ bogey”, *Indian Express*, 14 August 2024.

A particular source of tension has been the Indian media’s coverage of attacks on Hindus and other minorities in the aftermath of Hasina’s downfall. This reporting tended to inflate the scale of the violence and oversimplify the causes by framing it as communal – seemingly, in some cases, to fit domestic political narratives in India.<sup>87</sup> While attacks on Hindus did occur, subsequent investigations found that the real number was much lower than reported and that most incidents were politically or economically motivated, in part due to the historical association between the Hindu community and the Awami League (see below).<sup>88</sup> Indian media also largely ignored interventions by political and religious leaders – including from the interim government, the BNP and Jamaat – aimed at calming the situation and restoring order, as well as community-led efforts to protect members of minority groups, particularly Hindus.

This reporting was met with dismay in Bangladesh, where it was perceived as an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the protest movement and the new administration.<sup>89</sup> The interim government, media outlets and fact-checking organisations responded by debunking many of the claims, but this wave of misinformation and disinformation still shaped how events in Bangladesh were perceived around the world, due in part to algorithmic bias that reflects the power dynamics between the two countries.<sup>90</sup> Parts of the Indian diaspora, along with a number of expatriate Bangladeshis (mostly associated with the Awami League), pushed these narratives with politicians in the U.S., the United Kingdom and Australia, among other places.<sup>91</sup> In the week before the November 2024 U.S. presidential election, then-candidate Donald Trump tweeted about “barbaric attacks” on minorities in Bangladesh.<sup>92</sup>

A number of high-profile incidents fuelled the narrative. In November 2024, Bangladeshi authorities arrested a local Hindu religious leader, Chinmoy Krishna Das, on a sedition charge, sparking violence on both sides of the border. Das was alleged to have placed a Hindu flag above

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<sup>87</sup> Faisal Mahmud and Saqib Sarker, “‘Islamophobic, alarmist’: How some India outlets covered Bangladesh crisis”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 August 2025; and Krutika Pathi, Al Emrun Garjon and Shonal Ganguly, “The violence in Bangladesh after Hasina’s ouster stirs fear within the country’s Hindu minority”, *AP*, 14 August 2025.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, “Fact-Finding Report: Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh”, *op. cit.*

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Bangladeshi officials and analysts, September 2024.

<sup>90</sup> On misinformation, see “Spread of Fake News About Bangladesh in Indian Media Outlets”, *Rumour Scanner Bangladesh*, 6 December 2024. On algorithmic bias, see “Unrest in Bangladesh is revealing the bias at the heart of Google’s search engine”, *The Conversation*, 17 February 2025.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interviews, August–October 2024.

<sup>92</sup> Tweet by Donald Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, 4:03am, 1 November 2024.



the national flag at a rally.<sup>93</sup> Clashes between Das’s supporters and police outside a Chittagong court resulted in the death of a Muslim lawyer, while Hindu nationalist groups launched weeks of protests in India. After a violent demonstration outside the Bangladeshi deputy high commission in Kolkata on 28 November, protesters on 2 December breached the assistant high commission in the north-eastern city of Agartala, vandalising the building and desecrating the Bangladeshi flag.<sup>94</sup> Around the same time, a leader from the influential Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the ideological parent organisation of India’s ruling BJP – claimed that Hindus in Bangladesh were suffering “genocide”.<sup>95</sup>

These incidents pushed bilateral relations to a low point. Both sides have since taken remedial steps, but resentment lingers. Yunus has said the negative media coverage was fuelling public anger toward India and undermining efforts to build better ties. He remarked in June that Bangladesh wants “the best relationship ... [but] somehow things go wrong every time because of all the fake news ... and many people say it has connections with policymakers at the top”.<sup>96</sup>

Stories about alleged communal violence are a particular source of ire. “We are really pissed off”, an analyst close to Bangladesh’s security agencies said. “Nobody is saying that everything is perfect. ... But just repeating that ‘Bangladeshis are killing Hindus’ is very unfair”.<sup>97</sup> Regarding this point, credible Bangladeshi human rights groups report that the number of incidents targeting minorities in 2024 was at a level similar to that in 2021, under Hasina, and has declined sharply in 2025, though disturbing incidents continue to be reported.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, Hindu leaders and community members in Bangladesh told Crisis Group that they felt the post-Hasina attacks were mainly

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<sup>93</sup> Das was arrested following a complaint from a BNP official, who was subsequently expelled from the party over the incident.

<sup>94</sup> Bangladesh’s foreign ministry runs a system of embassies, consulates-general and consulates in non-Commonwealth countries, such as the U.S., and high commissions, deputy high commissions and assistant high commissions in Commonwealth countries, such as India. Saqlain Rizve, “Agartala attack strains India-Bangladesh ties”, *Lowy Interpreter*, 6 December 2024.

<sup>95</sup> “Bangladesh interim govt. blind to genocide against Hindus”, *The Hindu*, 4 December 2024.

<sup>96</sup> “Bangladesh wanted good ties with India, but ‘something always went wrong’: Yunus”, *The Hindu*, 12 June 2025.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2025.

<sup>98</sup> These include the destruction of Hindu homes in Rangpur in July and the lynching of a Hindu man in December, the latter amid a wave of anti-India violence. See “Attack over FB post: Hindu families living in fear in Rangpur’s Gangachara”, *The Daily Star*, 29 July 2025, and “Bangladesh: Seven arrested for allegedly lynching Hindu man accused of blasphemy”, *Scroll*, 20 December 2025.

politically or economically motivated, rather than communal – ie, ethnic or religious – in nature.<sup>99</sup>

Pushing back against the notion that religious minorities were always safer under the Awami League, the leader of one Hindu organisation said the community is vulnerable regardless of who is in power. All political parties have “used Hindus ... for political benefit”, he argued, adding: “The Awami League built a narrative it was protecting minorities, but in many cases its members were behind the violence” directed at minorities that occurred during Hasina’s time in power.<sup>100</sup> Hindus whom Crisis Group interviewed in Rajshahi, a locality near the Indian border where several Hindu villages were attacked in August 2024, echoed these sentiments. “Whoever is in power, the violence keeps happening”, said a local leader, pointing to communal violence that occurred under previous governments, including the Awami League.

This leader also said the 2024 attack on his village had been economically rather than communally motivated, adding that others of its Muslim neighbours had helped prevent the violence from escalating further.<sup>101</sup> A local human rights researcher explained that attackers were often seeking to displace Hindus in order to take over their land, rather than targeting them on religious grounds. While drawing motivational distinctions may be cold comfort to victims of these crimes and their supporters, the researcher noted that “in August 2024, most of the attacks were foiled through community cooperation. ... This is the real story”.<sup>102</sup>

Some Bangladeshi Hindus feel that the Indian media’s exaggeration or misreporting of violence against them is counterproductive, as it increases anti-India sentiment and strengthens the perception that all Bangladeshi Hindus support the Awami League, leaving them more vulnerable to communal attacks. “What India’s doing, it doesn’t help us at all”, lamented the leader of a Hindu organisation.<sup>103</sup>

### C. *Bilateral and Regional Diplomacy*

Much of New Delhi’s anger is directed at Yunus personally. Many in official circles already viewed him with suspicion because of his longstanding links to the West and perceived hostility to India.<sup>104</sup> Accordingly, New Delhi initially rebuffed repeated requests from

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<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hindu organisation leader, September 2024; Hindu community members, March 2025.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hindu organisation leader, Dhaka, September 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hindu community leader, Rajshahi, March 2025.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights researcher, Rajshahi, March 2025.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hindu organisation leader, Dhaka, September 2024.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interview, former high-ranking diplomat close to the Indian government, July 2025.

Dhaka for a meeting between Yunus and Modi, including on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, insisting on meeting at the foreign ministers’ level. Though Modi and Yunus spoke together on the sidelines of an international summit in Bangkok in April 2025, high-level engagement has remained limited.<sup>105</sup>

Citing security reasons, the Indian government took several policy steps immediately following Hasina’s ouster that engendered significant resentment in Bangladesh. For example, it massively scaled back the issuance of visas to Bangladeshis, affecting hundreds of thousands of people.<sup>106</sup> Patients – including some who were undergoing chemotherapy – were suddenly unable to get planned treatment, while thousands of students were unable to reach New Delhi to obtain visas to third countries.<sup>107</sup> New Delhi also suspended cross-border train connections and stepped up security along the border, causing disruption to other transport services, hindering trade and people-to-people ties.

Behind the scenes, however, there have been divisions in Indian policy circles over how to respond to the end of the Hasina era. Many in the policy establishment would have preferred to normalise ties and engage more closely with the interim government. A former senior Indian diplomat observed that there has been a “big debate internally” as to whether India has taken the right approach, particularly in reducing the number of visas.<sup>108</sup> But some close to the government defend its response, arguing that New Delhi needed to show strength when it believed its interests were under threat: “We are not like bulls in a china shop”, said another former high-ranking diplomat. “We are being sophisticated, calibrated. We don’t want to hurt the people of Bangladesh but it’s a balancing act. We want to send the right signals and occasionally remind them that we can be tough”.<sup>109</sup>

From their perspective, Bangladeshi officials feel their overtures to New Delhi have not only been ignored (as with their efforts to secure a meeting between Modi and Yunus), but that Indian officials have actively tried to undermine the interim government’s legitimacy. They view negative media coverage of Bangladesh as part of a state-

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<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Bangladeshi diplomat, October 2025.

<sup>106</sup> One report, citing Indian diplomatic sources, said the number of visas being issued had fallen from 8,000 per day to just 1,000. Kallol Bhattacharjee, “Lack of Indian visas hurting India-Bangladesh people-to-people ties: Diplomatic sources”, *The Hindu*, 7 March 2025.

<sup>107</sup> Countries that do not have consular services in Dhaka often handle visa processing for Bangladeshis at their embassies in New Delhi. Bangladeshi students who have been accepted into universities in those countries must travel to India to apply for a visa. See Adrita Zaima Islam, “The Indian visa debacle and the many dreams thwarted”, *The Daily Star*, 12 October 2024.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview, former senior Indian diplomat, July 2025.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, former high-ranking diplomat close to the current Indian government, July 2025.

directed campaign and claim that New Delhi has sought to undermine the Yunus administration's relations with other countries, including the U.S., by pushing harmful narratives.<sup>110</sup> A Western diplomat confirmed that since August 2024, Indian officials have routinely used high-level meetings to raise concerns about the safety of minorities and Islamist extremism in Bangladesh. “Previously, Bangladesh was never even on the agenda [in talks with India]”, the diplomat noted.<sup>111</sup>

Sheikh Hasina's presence in India has been a major factor in the simmering tensions. Almost immediately after taking office, the interim government began pushing for her extradition under a 2013 treaty. Indian officials were never likely to agree to send her back; they staunchly support Hasina, and extraditing her would make New Delhi look like an unreliable ally to other governments in the region.<sup>112</sup> Yunus also personally urged Modi to prevent the disgraced prime minister from making political statements while in India, warning that her interventions in Bangladeshi politics from afar were an “unfriendly gesture”.<sup>113</sup> His remarks were not well received in India, where they were described as “megaphone diplomacy”.<sup>114</sup> Bangladesh is further aggrieved at India for allowing thousands of Awami League activists to undertake political activities from Kolkata and New Delhi, including by some reports running a semi-official office.<sup>115</sup>

India has also been concerned by the interim government's foreign policy. A rebalancing of Bangladesh's foreign relations was always likely, given how heavily Hasina's regime had relied on Indian support, but perceived hostility from India has pushed Dhaka to step up its engagement with New Delhi's rivals.<sup>116</sup> Pakistan, which was largely frozen out for fifteen years under Hasina, has been the major beneficiary. Yunus has met twice with his Pakistani counterpart, Shehbaz Sharif. In April, Pakistan's foreign secretary, Amna Baloch,

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<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Bangladeshi official, March 2025. As an example, the official pointed to U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's comments during a visit to India, in which she linked Bangladesh to attempts to establish an “Islamic caliphate”. Abhishek Chakraborty, “US intelligence chief's ‘Islamic caliphate’ remark on crisis in Bangladesh”, NDTV World, 17 March 2025.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat based in India, July 2025.

<sup>112</sup> New Delhi appears not to have formally responded to Dhaka's request but, if pressed, it could refuse extradition under the treaty by citing a clause on politically motivated charges.

<sup>113</sup> “She has to keep quiet till ...”: Bangladesh's Muhammad Yunus sets conditions for Sheikh Hasina's interim stay in India”, *Times of India*, 5 September 2024.

<sup>114</sup> “Bangladesh leader's ‘megaphone diplomacy’ irks India”, BBC, 13 September 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Deep Halder, “What top Awami League leaders are doing in Kolkata – Pilates, hair transplant, online meetings”, *The Print*, 19 August 2025; and Snehamoy Chakraborty, “Bangladesh interim govt accuses India of sheltering Awami League, Delhi denies charge”, *The Telegraph*, 21 August 2025.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas Kean, “After Hasina, Bangladesh needs a foreign policy reset”, *Nikkei Asia*, 12 August 2024.

went to Dhaka – the first high-level bilateral visit in fifteen years. In July and August, three Pakistani ministers – including Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar – then travelled to Bangladesh. The two sides have increased bilateral trade, restarted military cooperation and relaxed visa rules. They plan to resume direct flights soon.<sup>117</sup> Given India’s fraught relations with Pakistan – which barely seven months ago flared into open hostilities – this rapprochement has not gone down well in New Delhi.<sup>118</sup>

Dhaka has also sought to deepen relations with Beijing over the past year. While China was an important economic partner for Hasina, the relationship was constrained by her reliance on New Delhi, whose relations with Beijing have nosedived in recent years.<sup>119</sup> While Bangladeshi leaders traditionally make their first state visit to India, Yunus instead travelled to China – seemingly in response to Modi’s refusal to meet during the first few months of his administration.<sup>120</sup> During the trip, which he took in March, he infuriated New Delhi by describing Bangladesh as the “only guardian of the ocean” for India’s landlocked north-eastern states and inviting Chinese investment – a remark that could only rankle given Indian sensitivities about both the strategic vulnerability of its north east and Chinese activity near its immediate borders.<sup>121</sup>

Yunus also invited Chinese companies to participate in a Teesta River management project and brought China into the Mongla port project (see Section III.E), both of which are close to the Indian border.<sup>122</sup> In June, Bangladesh attended a trilateral meeting with China and Pakistan in Kunming. While Dhaka’s foreign ministry was quick to rule out the creation of a bloc or alliance, the gathering frustrated Indian officials.<sup>123</sup>

In recent months, New Delhi and Dhaka have managed to stabilise the relationship somewhat. India took an important step by sending foreign secretary Vikram Misri to Dhaka at the height of tensions over

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<sup>117</sup> Saqlain Rizve, “The revival of Bangladesh-Pakistan ties”, Lowy Interpreter, 3 February 2025; and Md. Himel Rahman, “Re-engagement, not alignment: The Pakistani foreign minister’s visit to Bangladesh”, *The Diplomat*, 26 August 2025.

<sup>118</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *India-Pakistan: Avoiding a War in Waiting*, op. cit.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute*, op. cit.

<sup>120</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, “Yunus wanted to visit India before China, but did not receive positive response: Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam”, *The Hindu*, 25 March 2025.

<sup>121</sup> Debduutta Chakraborty, “India’s northeast ‘landlocked’, Bangladesh the ‘only guardian’ of ocean in region – Yunus in China”, *The Print*, 1 April 2025.

<sup>122</sup> “Yunus invites China to take part in river conservation project close to India’s Chicken’s Neck corridor”, *Deccan Herald*, 29 March 2025.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh, July 2025. See also Abu Jakir, “Contrary to India’s fears, Bangladesh is not joining a China-Pakistan axis”, *Al Jazeera*, 17 July 2025.

the above-referenced arrest of local Hindu leader Chinmoy Krishna Das, while Modi and Yunus finally met in Bangkok in April on the sidelines of a regional summit. Bangladesh has restored its top diplomats in Kolkata and Agartala, and the new high commissioner to New Delhi has embarked on a charm offensive, hosting a delayed Independence Day celebration and giving interviews to Indian media.<sup>124</sup> In July, in what was seen as a welcome personal gesture, Yunus also dispatched a tonne of mangoes to Modi and other Indian political leaders, while India was among the first foreign countries to respond later in the month when an air force plane crashed into a school in Dhaka, sending a medical team to help treat the injured.<sup>125</sup>

That said, tensions have continued to erupt over border management and economic issues, and they may remain high for at least the next several months. With the Bangladeshi national elections scheduled for February 2026, it is very unlikely that India will normalise relations with the interim government; its focus will instead be on establishing stronger ties with the next administration. A parliamentary hearing in June signalled a desire to find a new direction. “There’s a recognition that we can’t go on the same as we did before”, said one participant.<sup>126</sup> “We will engage with whoever wins the election”, added another. “But we need to think seriously about what to do and how to move forward.”<sup>127</sup>

#### D. *Border Confrontations*

Tensions have also increased along the shared border since August 2024. India began fencing the frontier in the 1980s, in response to concerns about illegal immigration and smuggling; about 80 per cent of the border is now fenced. A 1975 agreement prohibiting the building of defence structures within 150 yards of either side of the border, often referred to as the “zero line”, means that most of the remaining sections cannot be fenced due to existing settlements or topography – unless, of course, the two neighbours agree on exceptions.

Shortly after taking office, the interim government signalled it would take a more assertive approach to managing the frontier than its predecessor. An official claimed that, under Hasina, border force members were told “to turn their backs” to the regular excesses

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<sup>124</sup> Debductta Chakraborty, “Bangladesh’s soil will never be used against India, says Dhaka’s new envoy in Delhi”, *The Print*, 5 August 2025.

<sup>125</sup> Debductta Chakraborty, “By reviving Hasina-era mango diplomacy with India, Yunus govt signals ‘business as usual’”, *The Print*, 15 July 2025; and “Foreign adviser: Dhaka always wanted a good working relationship with Delhi”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 24 July 2025.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interview, former senior Indian diplomat, July 2025.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interview, former high-ranking Indian diplomat close to the current Indian government, July 2025.

of their Indian counterparts, insisting that would “not happen anymore”.<sup>128</sup> Shortly after Yunus came into office, BGB members prevented India’s BSF from erecting a new section of fence along the border, allegedly within 150 yards of the zero line. Bangladesh said this section of the fence was being built without its consent, while BSF officials said it was agreed to in 2012.<sup>129</sup>

Tensions escalated further in December 2024 and the following January, when the BSF attempted to fence several other sections, prompting a standoff with the BGB and Bangladeshi locals.<sup>130</sup> Each country called in the other’s high commissioner; India insisted that the fences were not “defence structures” and that it was observing all agreements, but it eventually agreed to stop the fencing. In what seemed to be a reference to unpublicised deals struck under Hasina’s administration, India’s high commissioner to Bangladesh later said there was “an understanding regarding fencing” that New Delhi expects “will be implemented”.<sup>131</sup> Dhaka countered that these were “unequal agreements” and threatened to scrap them.<sup>132</sup>

Later in January, thousands of Indian and Bangladeshi civilians confronted one another along a stretch of the border separating India’s West Bengal from Bangladesh’s Rajshahi Division that the BSF had attempted to fence the previous month. The Indians accused the Bangladeshis of cutting wheat in their fields. In retaliation, they entered Bangladeshi territory to chop down mango orchards. During the ensuing standoff, Bangladeshis accused the BSF of firing sound grenades into Bangladesh. When Crisis Group visited the area in March, Bangladeshi locals insisted that they did not cut the wheat, alleging the incident was concocted as a pretext for a conflict.<sup>133</sup> Direct discussions between the border agencies – both flag meetings

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<sup>128</sup> “BGB won’t turn its back on border anymore: Sakhawat”, *The Business Standard*, 13 August 2024.

<sup>129</sup> “BGB halts BSF’s construction of barbed-wire fence at Haripara border”, *The Daily Star*, 22 August 2024.

<sup>130</sup> Dhaka accused the BSF of building the fences within 50 yards of the zero line, in violation of the 1975 agreement; the BSF then stopped BGB from building a bunker within 150 yards of the border. See “India ceases border fencing amid strong resistance from BGB, residents: Home adviser”, *The Daily Star*, 12 January 2025; and Prawesh Lama, “BSF stops ‘illegal’ bunker construction at Bangladesh border”, *Hindustan Times*, 3 February 2025.

<sup>131</sup> “Pranay Verma discusses border security, cooperation amid fencing tensions”, *The Daily Star*, 12 January 2025; and Jayanath Jacob, “MEA summons Bangladesh’s envoy day after Dhaka calls in India’s diplomat over border tussle”, *New Indian Express*, 14 January 2025.

<sup>132</sup> “Will seek to scrap ‘uneven agreements’ with India: Bangladesh home adviser”, Press Trust of India, 29 January 2025.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chapainawabganj District residents, March 2025.

at the ground level and higher-level talks – have since helped cool tempers in the area.<sup>134</sup>

While there have been fewer confrontations regarding fencing over the past six months, the killing of Bangladeshi civilians living near the border or attempting to cross it has continued at a similar pace to that in previous years, according to human rights groups.<sup>135</sup> A month after the interim government took office, a thirteen-year-old girl was killed, reviving memories of the 2011 killing of Felani Khatun (see Section II.B above).<sup>136</sup>

The BSF and Indian government have insisted that they follow a “non-lethal” strategy in managing the border, firing only “as a last resort”.<sup>137</sup> In 2019, the two governments put out a joint statement promising cooperation to bring border killings “down to zero”, but in practice there has been little discernible change. A farmer from Chapainawabganj district who was shot in the back in January while visiting his wheat fields in the no man’s land told Crisis Group that the BSF had become “more aggressive” since Hasina’s departure. “They used to patrol along their fence, but now they come into the no man’s land. The harassment has increased. ... We can be shot at any time”, he said.<sup>138</sup>

Beyond the number of killed and injured, there is a perception among many Bangladeshis – and particularly in border communities – that the BSF operates with impunity. “People here are really upset at the BSF, because they treat them so violently and rudely”, a human rights researcher in Rajshahi told Crisis Group.<sup>139</sup> Against this backdrop, residents said they welcomed the interim government’s pushback against New Delhi. “Under Hasina, the BSF did whatever they wanted, and we just had to put up with it. At least now we have a government that is trying to stand up for us”, one said.<sup>140</sup>

More recently, the Indian government and the BSF have angered Dhaka by expelling thousands of people to Bangladesh as part of a drive to curb illegal immigration. These “push-ins”, as they are called in Dhaka, began in early May on the instructions of the Ministry of

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<sup>134</sup> Vijaita Singh, “Infiltration has ‘gone down substantially’ after change of Bangladesh regime, says BSF chief”, *The Hindu*, 21 February 2025; and “BGB-BSF DG-LEVEL CONFERENCE: Dhaka for joint inspection for any construction in 150 yards of border”, *New Age*, 22 February 2025.

<sup>135</sup> Tanzil Rahaman, “Killing of Bangladesh nationals on border by India’s BSF on rise”, *New Age*, 4 May 2024.

<sup>136</sup> Jannatul Naym Pieal, “After a teenage girl is killed on the Bangladesh-India border, a war of narratives emerges”, *The Diplomat*, 7 September 2024.

<sup>137</sup> See, for example, Neeta Sharma, “‘Common heritage’: India, Bangladesh discuss reducing border killings”, NDTV, 14 June 2023.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group interview, farmer from Chapainawabganj district, March 2025.

<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights researcher, Rajshahi, March 2025.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident of Chapainawabganj district, March 2025.



Home Affairs.<sup>141</sup> Police are rounding up people across the country and handing them over to the BSF, which then forces them across the border, ignoring due process.<sup>142</sup> To date, more than 2,000 have been “pushed in”; most are Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh or India, but others are Muslim Rohingya.<sup>143</sup>

While the policy has caused dismay in Bangladesh, it appears to be popular with much of the Indian electorate, attracting little criticism from the opposition. The crackdown has been taken up with particular enthusiasm in Assam, where the BJP government – which is seeking re-election in March-April 2026 – demolished about 3,400 Bengali Muslim homes in July alone.<sup>144</sup> The state’s chief minister has claimed that “Hindus are now on the verge of becoming a minority in their own land” due to “unchecked Muslim infiltration from across the border”.<sup>145</sup> Prime Minister Modi made similar remarks during a September 2025 visit to Assam, describing “infiltrators” as a “grave threat to national security”.<sup>146</sup>

#### E. *Economic Tit-for-Tat*

Many Bangladeshis who nurtured economic grievances against the Awami League due to perceived corruption and mismanagement extended them to India, which they saw as gaining unfair advantage through its close relationship with Hasina. After taking office, the interim government vowed to review the deals its predecessor had made with Indian companies, including power purchase agreements that were widely viewed as overly generous – or, in the words of one analyst, “an absolute gouge” – and a burden to Bangladeshi taxpayers.<sup>147</sup>

Shortly after Hasina’s ouster, the Adani Group – one of India’s largest conglomerates, known to have close links to the Modi government – added fuel to the fire when it demanded that the interim government

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<sup>141</sup> These expulsions are sometimes described as being part of Operation Sindoor, India’s military response to the terror attack in Kashmir in April, which has led to a crackdown on those accused of being “infiltrators”. Nandini Singh, “Operation Sindoor: Over 2,000 illegal Bangladeshis sent back by India”, *The Business Standard*, 2 June 2025. For background on Operation Sindoor, see Crisis Group Briefing, *India-Pakistan: Avoiding a War in Waiting*, op. cit.

<sup>142</sup> “India: Hundreds of Muslims Unlawfully Expelled to Bangladesh”, Human Rights Watch, 23 July 2025.

<sup>143</sup> “Number of people pushed into Bangladesh by India tops 2,000”, *New Age*, 31 July 2025.

<sup>144</sup> “Evictions and expulsions of Muslims to Bangladesh precede Indian state polls”, Reuters, 28 July 2025.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> “PM Modi alleges plot to change mix of border population”, *The Hindu*, 14 September 2025.

<sup>147</sup> Gerry Shih, Niha Masih and Anant Gupta, “How political will often favors a coal billionaire and his dirty fossil fuel”, *Washington Post*, 9 December 2022.

pay an \$800 million debt for purchases of electricity mostly accrued under her rule. When the Yunus government failed to pay in full, Adani cut production by half, exacerbating power shortages in Bangladesh.<sup>148</sup> The interim government subsequently accused Adani of breaching the agreement by not passing on tax benefits that the company received from New Delhi. It threatened to take the case to arbitration in Singapore. In November, Adani announced that the two sides had agreed to international arbitration.<sup>149</sup> In another escalation of economic tensions, in December 2024, Bangladesh’s communications regulator cancelled a project that would have allowed India to transit fibre-optic cables through Bangladesh to its north-eastern states, in partnership with local companies that had been close to Hasina’s regime.<sup>150</sup>

The economic tensions have ratcheted up since then. Against a backdrop of worsening ties and hostility on both sides, the trigger appears to have been Yunus’s remarks about inviting Chinese companies to India’s doorstep during his visit to Beijing.<sup>151</sup> Around the same time Bangladesh also moved to bring China into sensitive infrastructure projects – namely the Teesta River management project and Mongla port – that Hasina had indicated she would award to Indian contractors due to what her foreign ministry had described as “geopolitical considerations”.<sup>152</sup>

In early April, India withdrew a bilateral transshipment arrangement agreed to in 2020 that had enabled Bangladeshi garment exporters to circumvent Bangladesh’s infrastructure bottlenecks by sending their products to India by road, from where they could be sent by air freight to buyers worldwide.<sup>153</sup> In response to India’s move, Bangladesh restricted imports of Indian yarn and other products. Then, in May, India imposed restrictions on several types of goods coming from Bangladesh by road, affecting close to half of all overland imports, and expanded the list in June to include jute products – another key

<sup>148</sup> “Adani writes to Yunus-led Bangladesh government to pay \$800 million unpaid power dues”, *Times of India*, 10 September 2024; Krishna N. Das, “Exclusive: Bangladesh halves power buying from India’s Adani amid payment dispute”, Reuters, 2 December 2024.

<sup>149</sup> Das, “Exclusive: Adani, under bribery scrutiny, pressed by Bangladesh to reopen power deal”, op. cit.; and Sethuraman N.R. and Ruma Paul, “India’s Adani Power opts for arbitration to settle payment dispute with Bangladesh”, Reuters, 4 November 2025.

<sup>150</sup> Mahmudul Hasan, “BTRC recalls bandwidth transit bid to India”, *The Daily Star*, 7 December 2024.

<sup>151</sup> Chakraborty, “India’s northeast ‘landlocked’, Bangladesh the ‘only guardian’ of ocean in region – Yunus in China”, op. cit.

<sup>152</sup> Smruti Pattanaik, “Hasina’s India visit strengthens ties”, *The Kathmandu Post*, 4 July 2024; and “China seeking to nudge out India from Bangladesh’s port projects”, *Economic Times*, 30 June 2025.

<sup>153</sup> The ready-made garment sector contributes around 80 per cent of Bangladesh’s commodity exports and employs an estimated 3-4 million people.

Bangladeshi export. Meanwhile, Bangladesh has reportedly started levying a transit fee on goods sent through the country to India's north east, which businesses say makes the routes prohibitively expensive.<sup>154</sup> Both countries have claimed they made these decisions to protect local producers and manufacturers, but there is little doubt that they are at least partly politically driven.<sup>155</sup>

These measures have hurt Bangladesh more than India, given the latter's much larger economy. For India, the impact has mostly been limited to logistics businesses in West Bengal and retailers that relied on Bangladeshi-made garments.<sup>156</sup> “Yes, we've been hurt too, but India is big enough to weather it”, said an Indian policymaker.<sup>157</sup> That said, even in Bangladesh, the signalling has been more significant than the actual impact. The trade restrictions “caused headaches rather than significant issues”, as a Dhaka-based foreign economist put it.<sup>158</sup> Garment exports to India have, in particular, remained strong, as manufacturers rerouted their shipments through Chattogram port in order to export by sea rather than overland.<sup>159</sup> Bangladesh has nevertheless approached India for trade talks, but it has reportedly received no response.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Dev Kachari, “India limits 42% of imports from Bangladesh, targeting \$770 million in goods: GTRI”, *Economic Times*, 18 May 2025.

<sup>155</sup> “Businesses count costs as India and Bangladesh impose trade restrictions”, BBC, 2 May 2025.

<sup>156</sup> “Port curbs on imports from Bangladesh to have impact in Bengal, but national interest supreme: Officials”, *The Hindu*, 19 May 2025; Sagar Malviya and Sutanuka Ghosal, “From Zudio to Lifestyle, fashion retailers struggle with inventory crunch post import ban from Bangladesh”, *Economic Times*, 2 September 2025.

<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group interview, former high-ranking Indian diplomat, July 2025.

<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interview, foreign economist based in Dhaka, August 2025.

<sup>159</sup> Masud Milad, “Exports to India rise despite restrictions”, *Prothom Alo*, 16 August 2025.

<sup>160</sup> “Delhi ignores Dhaka's request for trade talks, businesses pay”, *Financial Express*, 26 July 2025.

## IV. Turning the Page

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Bangladesh’s forthcoming national elections, scheduled for February 2026, offers policymakers and politicians in both countries the opportunity to end the cycle of recrimination and retaliation of the past year and make a fresh start. Neither side will be working from a blank slate, given the history between the two countries. But both can and should take steps to build on recent good-will gestures.

### A. *Averting a Downward Spiral in the Run-up to the Election*

Political dynamics in Bangladesh are becoming increasingly complex as parties seek to position themselves in the run-up to the February 2026 elections. The interim government and political parties have been negotiating since early 2025 over a suite of reforms broadly aimed at preventing another autocrat from emerging, dubbed the July Charter. While most parties have signed the document, there are disagreements over implementation and plans for a referendum.<sup>161</sup>

Security conditions are also parlous, with the army still out on the streets to support the country’s largely ineffective police force. Mob and political violence is on the rise: there have been clashes between supporters of the NCP and the Awami League – with the latter also allegedly mounting crude bombings and other attacks across the country.<sup>162</sup>

The 12 December shooting of a prominent member of the July 2024 protest movement has further heightened tensions, particularly toward India and the Awami League.<sup>163</sup> Sharif Osman Hadi led an activist group that was sharply critical of India and had been demanding a ban on the Awami League.<sup>164</sup> Media reports have linked his alleged attacker to the party’s youth wing, while Bangladeshi police say they believe the suspects fled to India.<sup>165</sup> Bangladesh and India

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<sup>161</sup> Mohiuddin Alamgir, “July charter implementation: What notes of dissent could mean”, *The Daily Star*, 21 August 2025.

<sup>162</sup> “Violence erupts at Bangladesh youth rally, media report four killed”, Reuters, 17 July 2025; and Miftahul Jannat, “Bangladesh’s new epidemic: Mob violence in the age of misinformation”, *The Daily Star*, 1 September 2025.

<sup>163</sup> The activist, who was registered as an independent candidate for the election, had reported receiving death threats from foreign telephone numbers prior to the shooting. Bangladesh subsequently called in India’s high commissioner to express concern about possible Awami League involvement. “Bangladesh summons India envoy over election concerns after attempt to assassinate political activist”, Anadolu Agency, 14 December 2025.

<sup>164</sup> “Osman Hadi in the spotlight throughout the year”, *Prothom Alo*, 13 December 2025.

<sup>165</sup> “Who is Faisal Karim Masud? The name behind Bangladesh’s latest political crisis”, *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2025; “2 remanded after arrest for allegedly aiding Faisal in fleeing across border”, *Prothom Alo*, 19 December 2025.

summoned each other’s high commissioners; India insisted it has “never allowed its territory to be used for activities inimical to the interests of the friendly people of Bangladesh”.<sup>166</sup> Hadi’s death on 18 December while undergoing treatment in Singapore sparked a wave of protests and violence across the country.<sup>167</sup> Institutions perceived as close to New Delhi – including Indian diplomatic posts and Awami League offices, but also media outlets and cultural organisations – were targeted.<sup>168</sup> In Mymensingh, a mob lynched and burned a Bangladeshi Hindu accused of blasphemy.<sup>169</sup>

Experience suggests that violence tends to increase during highly competitive elections, as the February 2026 vote will be.<sup>170</sup> The prosecution of Awami League leaders and security officials could also create instability. While the interim government is responsible for setting Bangladesh’s political direction ahead of the elections, Dhaka’s capacity to limit prosecutions, maintain security and control street mobilisation is constrained by weak institutions, fragmented authority and public pressure for accountability.

Conscious of these risks, there are certain measures that Dhaka and New Delhi can take to help contain the risk of violence and avoid further setbacks to bilateral relations.

#### 1. Managing security

Given the risk of unrest, strengthening security ahead of the polls will be vital. While the Yunus administration avoided the worst-case scenarios in terms of retributive violence after Hasina’s fall, it has struggled to restore trust in the police force, contributing to an increase in mob justice.<sup>171</sup> As the political temperature rises, so, too, will the risk of unrest. While police reform is vital, it will be a long-term project; for now, the interim government should temporarily deploy more army personnel to beef up the police, particularly in the period before and after polling day. It will be especially important to

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<sup>166</sup> “India’s rejection of assertions made by the interim government of Bangladesh”, press release, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 14 December 2025.

<sup>167</sup> “Bangladesh government urges calm in wake of youth leader’s killing, as election looms”, Reuters, 20 December 2025.

<sup>168</sup> Masum Billah, “Bangladesh-India ties worsen after killing of student leader”, *Nikkei Asia*, 19 December 2025.

<sup>169</sup> “Bangladesh: Seven arrested for allegedly lynching Hindu man accused of blasphemy”, op. cit.

<sup>170</sup> Shola Lawal, “Bans and boycotts: The troubled history of Bangladesh’s elections”, Al Jazeera, 5 January 2024, and Syeda Salina Aziz and Farhana Razzaque, “Role of Electoral Competition in Explaining Political Violence in Bangladesh”, *South Asian Survey*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>171</sup> One rights group, Ain o Salish Kendra, reported 165 deaths due to mob violence in the first ten months of 2025, almost four times as many cases as during the same period in 2023 under Hasina. For full statistics, see the Ain o Salish Kendra website.

prevent further violence against Awami League supporters or minorities, who are most vulnerable at times of political transition or instability. Bangladesh should also guard against any further violence aimed at Indian interests in Bangladesh.

India can help steer dynamics in a positive direction. Indian officials and politicians should, in particular, express support for a free and fair electoral process. They should avoid provocative rhetoric that could cause further instability in Bangladesh or embolden Awami League supporters to carry out attacks. The Indian government should also use its influence with exiled Awami League leaders to limit their interventions in Bangladeshi politics, including inflammatory online statements, and encourage them to instruct their members to abstain from violence during the election cycle.

## 2. Striking the right balance on the Awami League ban

New Delhi should avoid wading further into the debate over the restrictions on the Awami League, even though India’s concerns have some merit. The temporary ban has disenfranchised millions of people who still support the party and may have pushed its more committed activists toward violence, in addition to setting a troubling precedent for political freedoms. But Dhaka’s position is also understandable. There is still considerable anger among the public and political parties over the abuses committed by Hasina’s regime and, in particular, the Awami League leadership’s apparent lack of remorse. Lifting the ban at this juncture may therefore invite an unhelpful spike in tensions just before the elections. The Awami League leadership abroad has also to some extent backed the interim government into a corner through its regular verbal attacks. When it comes to the Awami League’s status in this election, New Delhi should give Dhaka space to strike a balance that will serve domestic stability.

## 3. Reining in prosecutions

Large-scale prosecutions of Awami League supporters are also a potential source of cross-border friction that will need to be managed. Bangladesh’s interim government has amended the law underpinning the ICT to address some of the criticisms levelled at the tribunal when it was convened under Hasina. But the former prime minister’s trial, which ended with a conviction and death sentence in November, still had significant shortcomings, not least that it was conducted in absentia.<sup>172</sup> At the same time, too many mid-tier Awami League officials and public figures considered supporters of the former regime – including journalists and celebrities – have been detained and

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<sup>172</sup> See, for example, David Bergman, “The Sheikh Hasina trial: ‘Justice’ and a fair judicial process”, *Prothom Alo*, 1 December 2025.

remanded on flimsy charges; regardless of how their cases proceed, the process is already a punishment.<sup>173</sup>

The wave of prosecutions is attributable in part to longstanding social norms and flaws in the criminal justice system, but it also reflects a failure of political leadership from the interim government, which should have pushed back more strongly against the processing of spurious cases.<sup>174</sup> The arrests have continued in recent months, with hundreds of Awami League supporters detained for staging protests since the party’s ban.<sup>175</sup> To the eyes of Indian policymakers, it looks as though Yunus and his supporters are out for revenge. “I’m not defending what the Awami League did last year, but this has become a farce”, said one former security official. “They are arresting everyone from the party on ridiculous charges”.<sup>176</sup> For reasons of fairness and prudence – as well as bilateral relations – Dhaka should stop taking actions that reinforce this impression, most obviously mass arrests and other measures that smack of a crackdown on dissent.

Police have already taken steps to limit the scope of criminal complaints, but they need to do more.<sup>177</sup> They should conduct thorough investigations before making arrests, and public prosecutors should also in general support bail applications while cases are being heard; they should review cases that are already before the courts and drop those that are without merit. Not only would these measures make the legal process fairer, they would also to some extent assuage Indian concerns that the law is being weaponised against the Awami League, while undercutting allegations that the interim government and its allies are more interested in retribution than justice.

#### 4. Avoiding provocations

With the elections drawing nearer, Bangladeshi political parties should avoid the temptation to inflame anti-Indian sentiment for electoral gain. While the current public mood makes such tactics a way to mobilise support and undermine rivals, engaging in India bashing

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<sup>173</sup> “Bangladesh: Year since Hasina Fled, Rights Challenges Abound”, Human Rights Watch, 30 July 2025.

<sup>174</sup> Under colonial-era laws, any person can file a complaint with police regarding the commission of a cognisable offence and police are legally obligated to record it. While police have discretion whether to investigate the complaint and whether to take action, in practice their response often depends on social and political pressures; complaints can be either shelved or investigations fast-tracked, depending on the circumstances. Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi legal expert, September 2024.

<sup>175</sup> “Bangladesh: New Crackdown Under Anti-Terrorism Law”, Human Rights Watch, 8 October 2025.

<sup>176</sup> Crisis Group interview, Indian former senior security official, July 2025.

<sup>177</sup> “Don’t arrest govt employees without proper evidence in mass uprising-related cases: Police HQ to OCs”, *The Business Standard*, 13 September 2024.

or violence against those perceived as having links to India will have repercussions for how New Delhi perceives these political actors. Bangladesh’s geographical realities mean that any political entity with serious political aspirations needs to be able to work with New Delhi.

Similarly, Indian political leaders should tamp down their rhetoric about developments across the border. Their present approach might be playing well domestically, particularly in the run-up to regional elections in the border states of Assam and West Bengal. It will, however, increase anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh and make relations with New Delhi an even more salient issue in a potentially combustible Bangladeshi election campaign.

Despite the stabilisation of the past few months, India’s anti-immigration rhetoric and actions are continuing to anger Bangladeshis, hurting prospects for better ties. While New Delhi may have legitimate concerns about illegal immigration emanating from Bangladesh, it should seek to address them through bilateral talks. Dhaka should participate constructively.

#### *B. Moving Forward after the Vote*

The election of a new government in Bangladesh that will be run by forces other than the Awami League is an opportunity to break the historical pattern in which the state of bilateral relations has depended largely on who is in power in Dhaka. The goal should be to build a relationship that can weather political changes and reduce sources of friction, such as violence against minority communities, border killings, resource sharing, informal migration, insurgency and religious extremism. This project will take effort from both countries over years, but there are also opportunities to make progress in the nearer term. Given the cultural, economic and geographic realities that make India an inescapable partner, the stakes are higher for Bangladesh. But a stable if not warm relationship would have economic and security benefits for India as well, especially given Bangladesh’s proven capacity to work with other regional partners.

Political changes in Bangladesh since August 2024 underscore the necessity of a change in approach from New Delhi. Policymakers should not expect a return to the status quo ante, under either Sheikh Hasina or another leader. While perceived in India as the high-water mark, both the style and the substance of the relationship between Hasina and New Delhi would be a liability for any political leader who tried to replicate it.<sup>178</sup> Though people-to-people ties between the countries remain reasonably strong, the Indian state needs to address perceptions that it took advantage of Bangladesh during Hasina’s

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<sup>178</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bangladeshi analyst, July 2025.



tenure. Fundamentally, Bangladeshis want India to treat them with respect and feel that, for too long, it has not done so. “India needs to adjust to the new reality”, asserted a senior Bangladeshi official. “We need reciprocity and respect – we shouldn’t be dictated to”.<sup>179</sup>

As for who New Delhi’s new partner in Dhaka will be, the BNP – India’s long-time *bête noire* – appears most likely among the major parties to be the one at the helm of the next government. It also seems to be the most amenable among Bangladesh’s political forces to respecting Indian interests and concerns. While often perceived as anti-Indian in the past, the party has taken steps to moderate its position, distancing itself from Jamaat-e-Islami and moving to occupy some of the “secular” political ground previously held by the Awami League.<sup>180</sup>

That said, as it resets bilateral ties, India should look to engage all political actors in Bangladesh, including Jamaat-e-Islami and the student-led NCP. While it may seem counter-intuitive for the Hindu nationalist BJP to reach out to an Islamist party, both sides would have a lot to gain in at least building a level of understanding of each other’s perspectives and interests, which are often more nuanced than either side perceives. Such dialogue will no doubt be challenging, especially given the assertiveness and ideological underpinnings of both Islamist parties in Bangladesh and the current Indian government. But engagement does not have to equate to endorsement, and India has recently shown flexibility in how – and more importantly who – it engages with in both Afghanistan and Myanmar.<sup>181</sup> It should endeavour to replicate this approach in Bangladesh.

Regardless of who is in power, New Delhi should seek to work with and, where possible, strengthen and support its neighbour’s government to avert a more destabilising trajectory. India’s interests are best served by a capable, stable government in Dhaka; a weak administration will create opportunities for those seeking to hurt India’s interests. Antagonising Dhaka further is also likely to push it toward China and even Pakistan. As a BNP leader told Crisis Group:

Traditionally there were some people in Bangladesh who were anti-Indian, but it wasn’t a large number. Now the whole population is against them. ... If they want to really improve the relationship with Bangladesh, there will have to be a total reset. We need three

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<sup>179</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Bangladeshi official, March 2025.

<sup>180</sup> For an Indian perspective on the BNP, see Anand Kumar, “Domestic Politics of Bangladesh and India-Bangladesh Relations”, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 38, no. 5 (2014). On the BNP’s repositioning, see Mahmud, “Analysis: Bangladesh’s BNP seeks Hasina’s liberal mantle before elections”, op. cit.

<sup>181</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *A Rebel Border: India’s Evolving Ties with Myanmar after the Coup*, op. cit., and Chietigi Bajpae, “India is seeking to reset relations with the Taliban. But can this rapprochement last?”, Chatham House, 16 October 2025.

things: mutual respect, mutual benefit and non-interference. They need to get these right – if not, the relationship won’t go anywhere.<sup>182</sup>

India can take several immediate steps to boost ties after the elections, if not earlier. Once the new government is in office, it should resume issuing visas in significant numbers. It should also restore transport links and remove trade restrictions (or, in the case of transshipment rights, restore access). On this last point, Bangladesh should reciprocate by lifting its own restrictions.

More broadly, both sides need to develop a new approach to economic cooperation. As country with the larger and more diversified economy, India will always have leverage; Bangladesh is likely to continue running a significant trade deficit for the foreseeable future, for example. But India should use this leverage with caution given the perception in Bangladesh that Indian firms were securing advantageous business deals in exchange for New Delhi’s political support for the Awami League, particularly in recent years. While the reality was more complicated, some deals did appear to be more favourable to New Delhi and to run counter to Bangladeshi interests. Renegotiating the terms of some of the more controversial contracts signed under Hasina would help shift public opinion about Indian companies – and by extension, the Indian state. The easing of more non-trade barriers – such as standards, licences and phytosanitary requirements – to help address Bangladesh’s persistent trade deficit would also go a long way toward improving India’s image among Bangladeshis.

New Delhi and Dhaka should also engage on more complex issues that fuel resentment on both sides of the border. Chief among these are immigration and border security. India’s BSF has a long record of violence against Bangladeshi civilians and, despite pledges over the years to work with the BGB to reduce border killings, has shown little sign of adjusting its behaviour. Fatalities along the border should be properly and jointly investigated, while a formal process to review infrastructure development within 150 yards could stop disputes from escalating between the two countries’ border guards. Bangladesh could also do more to address Indian concerns about immigration, including by monitoring illegal crossings more closely and engaging more seriously in the repatriation of Bangladeshis verified as illegal immigrants.

Water sharing is another key transboundary issue, one that will become more potent with the expiry of the Ganges treaty in December 2026. India’s domestic politics – specifically, the rivalry between the BJP-controlled centre and West Bengal’s regional government under the Trinamool Congress – will make it difficult for New Delhi to

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<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior BNP official, August 2025.

hammer out water sharing deals on the Ganges or Teesta Rivers, as they will likely be blocked by Kolkata. Failure to reach a new agreement on the Ganges, however, could compromise food security and livelihoods in downstream areas and signal an unwillingness to cooperate for mutual benefit.

For its part, to gain New Delhi’s trust the next government in Dhaka will need to respect India’s security concerns, particularly regarding insurgent and extremist groups. These are entirely understandable, particularly given the history of Bangladesh – and, even earlier, East Pakistan – having engaged in activities aimed at undermining its neighbour. To begin with, Dhaka should stay clear of offering support to Indian insurgent groups using Bangladesh as a rear base – a clear red line for India. Dhaka should also prevent radical Islamist forces from taking root again, ensuring that counter-terrorism forces have the mandate and resources to look out for violent extremist organisations and respond as necessary.

Dhaka also needs to carefully consider how closely it decides to engage with Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, China. Bangladesh should, of course, be free to determine its foreign policy, and outreach to other international partners is to some extent a hedging strategy given the power asymmetries with India. But if it is going to be pragmatic, it should also realise that a close relationship with Islamabad in particular – more than with Beijing – will likely come with costs vis-à-vis New Delhi, given the reality of India-Pakistan relations. If India presents itself as a more appealing partner than it has since Hasina’s downfall, it can reduce the incentives for Dhaka to seek leverage through other partners.

The future of the Awami League is another cause for concern in New Delhi. While Indian policymakers say they believe Sheikh Hasina is “finished” and recognise it would be better for the party if she relinquished control, they believe that the Awami League still has support in Bangladesh and that its return to politics is important for the country’s long-term stability.<sup>183</sup> Bangladesh would do well to consider these concerns. Signals that it would allow the Awami League back into the political arena if certain conditions are met – such as removing Hasina and her family from the leadership, as well as apologising for human rights violations under her government – would be well received in New Delhi. Ultimately, Bangladesh’s internal political dynamics will determine the fate of the Awami League. Additionally, demands for accountability enjoy broad public support in Bangladesh and cannot be overridden by foreign policy considerations. What will be crucial for the next Bangladeshi government is

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<sup>183</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former senior Indian diplomat and former high-ranking official close to the current Indian government, July 2025.

pursuing justice in a way that is independent and impartial and avoids using – or being seen as using – legal processes for retribution or political gain.

Communal relations in Bangladesh are likely to remain a challenge in the bilateral relationship. The country’s Hindu minority has often been the target of violence, and the challenges in maintaining law and order, as well as the perceived growing influence of radical or extremist Islamist groups since Hasina’s toppling, have left many members of this community feeling insecure. The interim government has worked to ensure security for vulnerable communities, but the risk of further violence is ever present.

The Indian government’s ideology is such that it will feel compelled to speak up for Hindus overseas it perceives as being vulnerable or under attack. But while it is legitimate for it to express concerns in some specific cases, it should avoid exaggerating the problem or echoing disinformation about the fate of Bangladesh’s Hindu minority, things that will inflame tensions and dent its credibility; indeed, as noted, some Bangladeshi Hindus say India’s stance has been counter-productive for them. Given perceptions in Bangladesh that Muslims in India are often the target of communal violence and discrimination, India’s exhortations to protect Bangladesh’s Hindus tend to come across as politically motivated (including for some Hindus), particularly given New Delhi’s relative silence about the same type of communal violence during Hasina’s term. In general, India’s concerns about minority rights in Bangladesh would best be conveyed through diplomatic channels, rather than public statements. For its part, Bangladesh should reassure India, through rhetoric and action, that it takes these concerns seriously.

Finally, both countries need to broaden their relations. While official contacts at the central level and people-to-people contacts in business, culture and tourism have generally been strong, engagement between political elites – politicians, journalists, academics, analysts and so on – has been more limited. The result is a lack of nuance in understanding the behaviour and motivations of the other side’s political actors, leading to misinterpretations of intentions and objectives. Both governments should encourage more interaction between think-tanks and academic institutes, encourage journalists to visit and report, and boost ties between political parties. Both New Delhi and Dhaka could show greater appreciation for how the other country’s domestic politics shape the bilateral relationship, often to its detriment. Bangladesh, a unitary state, should also invest more in building ties with institutions and individuals in neighbouring states, given India’s federal structure.

## **V. Conclusion**

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The ouster of Sheikh Hasina marked a major shift in Bangladesh-India relations. Bilateral ties have stabilised in recent months but have yet to normalise. Both New Delhi and the administration that takes power in Dhaka in early 2026 have a strong interest in stepping up engagement, ending the tit-for-tat retaliation and rolling back trade barriers. To get things off on the right foot as the Bangladeshi elections draw near, India should avoid provocative statements that would be seen in Bangladesh as meddling in its polls, and Bangladeshi parties should avoid taking rhetorical shots at New Delhi in order to score nationalist points with voters.

But the real work will begin after the elections, and it will require changes in approach from both sides. Along with reversing its visa and trade restrictions when the new government takes office, India should significantly expand its engagement across Bangladesh's political spectrum and boost people-to-people ties. For Dhaka, respecting India's longstanding security concerns will be paramount, while also pursuing a balanced foreign policy to avoid signalling hostility to New Delhi. In practice, it will need to ensure that support does not reach Indian insurgent groups and that radical Islamist groups are not given free rein in Bangladesh. It will also need to manage its relationship with Islamabad carefully.

Domestic political dynamics in both countries pose a major threat to progress. The Hindu nationalist orientation of India's central government and strong anti-immigrant sentiment in some of the Indian states bordering Bangladesh undermine efforts to strengthen relations with Dhaka, while there is a risk in Bangladesh of political parties stoking anti-Indian sentiment for domestic gain. The presence of Hasina and other Awami League leaders in India will present a challenge.

How Dhaka and New Delhi manage the coming years will have consequences beyond bilateral ties. Failure to build a working relationship could manifest in border violence, irregular migration, communal tensions and economic restrictions, whereas a strong, mutually beneficial partnership would enhance security, trade and regional stability. Commitment and statecraft on both sides will be critical if these two neighbours are to navigate the inevitable coming tensions in a way that fortifies, rather than frays, the bonds between them.

**Dhaka/Brussels, 23 December 2025**

## Appendix A: Map of Bangladesh



## **Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group**

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**December 2025**

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