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Balancing the threat: Bangladesh's pivot to the Sino-Pakistani axis and the crisis of Indian regional security



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and the crisis of Indian regional security**

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ABSTRACT

The collapse of Sheikh Hasina’s regime in Bangladesh and the subsequent collapse of Indo-Bangladeshi relations represents the most significant transformation of the security framework of South Asia since the 1971 division. This paper examines the geopolitical shift of Bangladesh under the interim government of Muhammad Yunus, arguing how the current engagement in a Sino-Pakistani axis is a structural recalibration and not just a temporary fluctuation. In that sense, it will analyse how domestic emancipatory values and historical anti-Indian sentiments have been an incentive for the strategic diversification. Moreover, the paper will detail the different movements that are institutionalising the realignment through defence cooperation and investment in security projects. It was identified that while Dhaka seeks to balance perceived Indian hegemony, it is risking the generation of new and deeper dependencies under Chinese influence. Furthermore, there is an evaluation of broader regional implications and the scenario for multilateral frameworks.

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1. Introduction

The geopolitical panorama of South Asia is facing the most profound fracture since the division of Pakistan in 1971. For half a century, the region remained within the orbit of Indian hegemonic power; however, this long-standing alignment has now shattered. After a violent ousting of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 and the emergence of an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh has been strategically shifting towards a new Sino-Pakistani axis. Dhaka's approach and developments with Islamabad might have deeper motivations: domestic dissatisfaction with India's policies throughout time, growing historical grievances, and intertwined strategic objectives which were exacerbated by their asylum to Hasina.

For understanding the relevance of the current shift in the alignment of Bangladesh, it is important to revisit the foundations of the relationships with India. While Bangladesh's emergence and stabilisation as an independent state was possible with the Indian military support, the interventionism and involvement of India in Bangladesh have been historically marked as hegemonic. The current recalibration suggests that any historical gratitude or debt is being superseded by a new security dilemma. It is not only a new political mandate that looks forward to dismantling the pro-India's legacy and policies from the previous government, but also a strategic shift to balance a threat presented by New Delhi's influence in the country by joining a new sphere of influence under China and Pakistan. This realignment dismantles Indian hegemony, posing new threats that require adaptive strategies from each side. Dhaka restored maritime trade with Karachi last year and participated in discussions for defence procurement with China. Moreover, it signalled a no-return point with India, in November 2025, by sentencing in absentia Sheikh Hasina to death because of the deaths in protests that led to the downfall of her government, while India still grants her protection and asylum.

It is clear that Dhaka's political forces are moving forward towards a strategic diversification. The emergence of the Sino-Pakistani-Bangladesh axis is strengthening through enhanced military and defence cooperation, such as the reports of a \$2.2 billion deal for 20 Chinese J-10CE fighter jets. Moreover, the strained talks for water deals and treaties have led Dhaka to a unilateral approach for water security measures, including Chinese cooperation in Teesta River projects. All these moves are signalling the dismantling of New Delhi's once uncontested hegemony, leading to a security dilemma in which Bangladesh distances itself from India and courts Beijing and Islamabad. From a broader perspective, the pivot reflects a quest for power equilibrium in the international system. Yet, the hedging towards China will unlikely be a better landscape of balance and cooperation than the one previously sustained with India.

As time passes, what was a diplomatic cooling is now showing a tendency of it being a structural realignment. Such a realignment challenges the narrative of the Modi

government, which contends that its ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy has prioritised and strengthened India’s role in the region.¹ Nevertheless, Bangladesh’s growing rapprochement with other regional actors is not just a bilateral shift but one that poses serious strategic challenges to India’s regional security and influence.² The geopolitical landscape of South Asia and the Bay of Bengal used to be deeply intertwined with New Delhi-Dhaka relations. Consequently, the evolving dynamic not only challenges the established regional balance of power, but it also brings growing concerns towards the way regional cooperation and stability may be affected. If Bangladesh keeps pursuing closer ties with China and Pakistan, it will be fundamental for India to define how they will overcome a shifting landscape and rising security and strategic concerns.

2. Historical background and context

The geopolitical background of the independence

The secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 was not an isolated regional conflict but another scenario of Cold War geopolitics. Washington, Beijing, and Moscow were all involved in the diplomatic and political aspects leading to the war, and the subsequent resolution of it. For China, the interest in the conflict did not emerge from the question of self-determination of Bangladesh or the preservation of a status quo within a nation, it was fear of Soviet hegemony in the region. According to Mahanty,³ China preferred a US imperialism than a soviet-socialist imperialism in the region that could threaten its military security in contiguous zones. This allowed for the new approach of Nixon to take place and normalise Sino-American relations.

In fact, it was Pakistan who functioned as a promoter of the dialogue between Washington and Beijing.⁴ This also had countereffects in United States foreign affairs, as Washington had to limit any comments towards the brutal tactics of Pakistani military because Islamabad was its only channel with China.⁵ The Soviets initially tried to support a political solution under the international law principles to sustain integrity of Pakistan, yet the closeness of Islamabad and Beijing drifted them to support India. Thus, the US limitations signalled a clear stance for New Delhi, while Islamabad was also

¹ Md Abul Kashem and Md Shariful Islam, “Narendra Modi’s Bangladesh Policy and India-Bangladesh Relations: Challenges and Possible Policy Responses,” *India Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928416655409>.

² Murali Krishnan. “How Bangladesh-Pakistan Reconciliation Impacts India,” *Deutsche Welle* (New Delhi), December 31, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-bangladesh-pakistan-reconciliation-impacts-india/a-71189995>.

³ Mahanty, J N. “China and the Emergence of Bangladesh: Role of Great Power Global Perceptions.” *India Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1983): 137–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492848303900202>.

⁴ Henry, Kissinger. *White House Years* (Simon & Schuster trade paperbacks, 2011).

⁵ *Ibidem*

demonstrating a preference for China subsequently leading to New Delhi and Moscow to lean in support of each other. The independence of Bangladesh was, in fact, a turmoil for international relations.

For China, the gains were considerable by aligning with Pakistan. Beijing not only gained a position of geopolitical advantage, but it was also allowed to deter India. For Pakistan, holding China as an ally was strategic to stabilise East Pakistan and dissuade any action from India. Yet, it is important to notice that this cooperation and alliance is not based upon the ideological ties, but rather in the mutual interest: India. Moreover, the support of China has mostly been the same with its allies, limited to diplomatic and political means. Bangladesh independence was not the exception as Beijing did not get militarily involved when India entered the conflict in East Pakistan.⁶ Rather, it used its first veto in the United Nations Security Council to avoid the entrance of Dhaka into the UN as a full member.⁷ It was not until 1975, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was ousted in Bangladesh, that the new military government sought Chinese support against India. Now, 50 years after establishing diplomatic ties with Dhaka, the realignment in a Sino-Pakistani axis could be denoted as the reactivation of a direct opposition towards the influence of India.

Bangladesh's post-independence trajectory

The outcome of independence brought a wide range of challenges for Bangladesh in the mentioned international context; it had to deal with an already deficient economy and with states wary to recognise the secession (Middle East countries supporting Pakistan took longer to recognise Dhaka).⁸ Summoned to this, war had brought more devastation and destruction of the substandard and underdeveloped infrastructure of the country.⁹ India was strongly supporting the revitalisation and stabilisation of Dhaka, forging a strong partnership which was seen with reserve not only by external actors,¹⁰ but within Bangladesh as some leaders considered an unequal relationship might succumb their country to clientelist policies from India.¹¹

⁶ Singh, Ajit Amar. "The Cost of Forgotten History: Bangladesh's Dangerous Alignment with Pakistan and China." *Icrr.in*. ICRR - Institute for Conflict Research & Resolution, December 12, 2025. <https://www.icrr.in/Encyc/2025/12/12/bangladesh-pakistan-china-strategic-alignment.html>.

⁷ Time. "United Nations: China's First Veto." *TIME*. TIME, September 4, 1972. <https://time.com/archive/6844248/united-nations-chinas-first-veto/>.

⁸ Chowdhury, Shamsheer M. "Bangladesh-India Relations." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 15, no. 3 (2020): 191–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/48630179>.

⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

¹¹ Pattanaik, Smruti S. "India - Bangladesh Relations." *Foreign Affairs Journal* 15, no. 3 (n.d.): 211–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/48630181>.

Soon after the war ended, Indira Gandhi visited Dhaka in a symbolic gesture that also signified the retirement of military troops back to India.¹² Cooperation in between both states started upon different fronts by the ‘Treaty of Cooperation, Friendship, and Peace,’¹³ which was criticised for a disbalance under the provisions of some articles;¹⁴ some critics went as far as to argue a threat towards autonomy. Nevertheless, both countries had unresolved land issues from colonial legacy. Unresolved frontiers and some enclaves led to a complex situation in between the borders of both countries. They signed the ‘Land Boundary Agreement’ (LBA) in 1974.¹⁵ Bangladesh effectively started the implementation of it in the corresponding time, but India was slow and inefficient on the application of the agreement, arguing on legal and political issues.

Bangladesh looked forward towards political efforts that ensured it autonomy beyond the Indo-Soviet sphere it was trapped in. It took strategic decisions for its normalisation in the international arena, specifically, the urge of recognition and relationship with its former state Pakistan. The Organisation for Islamic Cooperation summit in Lahore in 1974 was a momentum for Bangladesh—initially not invited to the summit—as it was finally recognised by Muslim countries and Pakistan itself as an independent sovereign nation.¹⁶ Yet, the relations between both countries have been volatile or mostly limited because of historical grievances and changing governments.¹⁷

The domestic politics in Bangladesh have consistently exposed the tension and leverage towards the view of India as an unequal player and the stance towards Islamabad. During the 80s and beginning of the 90s, the relationship with Pakistan matured and considerably increased as General Ershad governed Bangladesh and subtly pushed for the Islamisation of the country—while protecting Indian sensibility and cultural appeasing—that allowed for closer ties with Islamic states and Islamabad.¹⁸ Later in 2002, a state visit from Pakistan to Bangladesh took place under the government of Khaleda Zia from the

¹² Majumdar, Anindya Jyoti. “Making Sense of India–Bangladesh Relations.” *India Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928414545919>.

¹³ Ibidem

¹⁴ Chowdhury, Shamsheer M. op. cit.

¹⁵ Das, Pushpita. “India–Bangladesh Border Management: A Review of Government’s Response.” *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 3 (2008). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160802063228>.

¹⁶ Khan, Naimat. “Veteran Journalists Recall 1974 OIC Lahore Summit Where Pakistan Finally Recognized Bangladesh.” *Arab News*, March 21, 2022. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2047026/pakistan>.

¹⁷ Mannan, Md Abdul. “Islam’s Role in Bangladesh–Pakistan Alignment against India under the BNP’s Rule.” *India Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928418766685>.

¹⁸ Hakim, Muhammad A. “The Use of Islam as a Political Legitimization Tool: The Bangladesh Experience, 1972–1990.” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 2 (1998). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185379808434127>.

Bangladesh National Party (BNP).¹⁹ The visit was marked by different newspapers and correspondents as mostly successful.²⁰ Relations between Islamabad and Dhaka have been more stable during the government of BNP, while Awami League Party (AL) governments have pushed for strengthening ties with India. It is important to recall that the AL was the direct actor and leader of the movement against Pakistan.²¹

The third main field of cooperation among both is regarding water sharing and transboundary rivers. India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers,²² but have a water agreement for a critical one that is the Ganges River. This issue has been a straining point for the relation between both countries, but in 1996 with the arrival of Sheikh Hasina to office, the treaty was signed for a period of 30 years.²³ As climate change exacerbates existing challenges for Bangladesh, tensions over water allocation resurface. Prior to her ousting, Hasina had advocated for the renewal negotiations to encompass additional rivers—such as the Teesta²⁴—to ensure a more stable and equitable distribution of water resources. The Teesta River holds significance to both parties, for instance, any changes on the water flow might ripple food security as agricultural production might be jeopardised by lack of water.²⁵

3. The emerging axis

The relationship between Bangladesh and India had demonstrated to be mostly effective and functional for the interest of both throughout the years,²⁶ yet the feeling of disparity or being manipulated by India has always been a topic of internal debate in Dhaka;²⁷

¹⁹ BBC News South Asia. "Musharraf Wraps up Bangladesh Visit." *BBC News World Edition* 2002, July 31, 2002. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2163374.stm.

²⁰ Ibidem

²¹ Choudhury, G. W. "Bangladesh: Why It Happened." *International Affairs* 48, no. 2 (1972). <https://doi.org/10.2307/2613440>.

²² Brichieri-Colombi, Stephen, and Robert W. Bradnock. "Geopolitics, Water and Development in South Asia: Cooperative Development in the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta." *Geographical Journal* 169, no. 1 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4959.t01-1-00002>.

²³ Pandey, Punam. "Revisiting the Politics of the Ganga Water Dispute between India and Bangladesh." *India Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928412454605>.

²⁴ Baruah, Sanjib. "Bangladesh and India: Breaking the Impasse on the Teesta Water-Sharing Talks." *The Indian Express*, September 15, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/bangladesh-and-india-breaking-the-impasse-on-the-teesta-water-sharing-talks-8151638/>.

²⁵ Rosegrant, Mark. "Food Security Depends on Water Security and We Need to Act Now." IFPRI Blog: Issue Post - Director General's Office (DGO), June 12, 2019. <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/food-security-depends-water-security-and-we-need-act-now/>.

²⁶ Chaudhury, Anasua Basu Ray. "Re-Connecting Neighbours: India-Bangladesh Relations." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 15, no. 3 (2020): 219–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/48630182>.

²⁷ Bhardwaj, Sanjay. "Bangladesh Foreign Policy Vis-a-vis India." *Strategic Analysis* 27, no. 2 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160308450087>.

evidenced when former Prime Minister Hasina (AL), despite her close alliance with New Delhi, chose not to renew the Friendship Treaty upon its expiry in the 90s.²⁸ On the other hand, although former leaders in Dhaka have already held diplomatic approaches to Islamabad, Prime Minister Yunus has advanced this inclination by a deeper approach enhanced by the interests of China, thereby upending decades low level of relations.²⁹ Yet, his trading relation represents a profound departure from traditional ties.³⁰ Not only diplomatic channels have been created on the military front,³¹ but the overall relationship is beginning to explore new dimensions.

Since the August 2024 ousting of the Hasina administration, the ‘Golden Era’ of cooperation with Narendra Modi has effectively collapsed. Consequently, the space left by the exile of Awami League has not resulted in a non-alignment by Bangladesh, but rather it has rapidly shifted to a strategic axis from Islamabad to Beijing. This new alliance has not limit itself to diplomatic channels and exchanges but has opened the path for a coordination of security and military ties that would allow Bangladesh to balance itself and its autonomy towards New Delhi’s former hegemony.

The deposition of Sheikh Hasina as prime minister marked a pivotal point for the political landscape of Bangladesh. After fifteen years in power, her tenure ended after two months of intense uprising that led to death of hundreds of protestors.³² The student-led organisation and movement was driven upon demands for reforms to laws that have largely remained unmodified since the foundation of the country;³³ it could be argued that this was just a tipping point and not a root cause of the turbulent days as Hasina’s government had agreed upon modifications to this law. Instead, widespread allegations of repression, low democratic values preserved, and a lack of accountability from the

²⁸ Chowdhury, Mahfuzul H. “Asymmetry in Indo-Bangladesh Relations.” *Asian Affairs(UK)* 40, no. 2 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2013.788414>.

²⁹ Sumon, Shehab. “Cautious Optimism in Bangladesh as Post-Hasina Relations with Pakistan Grow Previous.” *Arab News* (Dhaka), February 2, 2025. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2588849/world>.

³⁰ Ehtirajan, Anbarasan. “India Watches Warily as Bangladesh-Pakistan Ties Thaw.” *BBC News*, March 17, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cge1gxxn07qo>.

³¹ Krishnan, Murali. “How Bangladesh-Pakistan Reconciliation Impacts India.” *Deutsche Welle* (New Delhi), December 31, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-bangladesh-pakistan-reconciliation-impacts-india/a-71189995>.

³² Hasnat, Saif, and Andres Martínez. “What We Know About the Ouster of Bangladesh’s Leader.” *The New York Times* (Dhaka, Bangladesh), August 5, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/bangladesh-student-protests.html>.

³³ Sujan, Moudud Ahmmed. “Bangladesh Students Who Deposed PM Hasina Form Party to Fight Elections.” *Al Jazeera Media Network* (Dhaka, Bangladesh), February 28, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/28/bangladesh-students-who-deposed-pm-hasina-form-party-to-fight-elections>.

government further fuelled the public unrest,³⁴ finally forcing Hasina to exile to India where she currently remains under asylum.³⁵ An interim government was established, with Muhammad Yunus assuming the role of prime minister. Although he is not formally affiliated with none of the two main political parties, his policy orientation might seem more inclined towards the BNP approach to foreign affairs.³⁶ The foreign policy priorities from Yunus are alarmingly strengthening towards Pakistan. It is critical that his approach does not oversimplifies the role of India.

The protests that led to government change may be studied under two lenses. First, by observing the broader context of the socioeconomical transformation that Bangladesh was going through. Different scholars such as Geddes (2009)³⁷ have pointed out that economic development tends to foster access to education, information, and the growth of diverse perspectives. There have been studies that demonstrate that there is a correlation between education-primary years especially-and middle-class income growth with the surge of democracy; when having the required skills and belief on democracy, it may be achieved.³⁸ Thus, as the country developed, as argued by Inglehart and Welzel's Evolutionary Modernization Theory, youth look forward to emancipatory values with a strong change to the system, this reflects the evolving dynamic. Nevertheless, these aspects could fall underestimated when analysing the changing dynamics of Bangladesh. This period of growth and change might be reflected at the international level as they also look forward to emancipating the country from unequal treatment or a system they see outdated; it could explain the growing anti-India sentiment that covered the aftermath of the popular uprising against Sheikh Mujibur in 1975, and against Sheikh Hasina in 2024. Secondly, this is part of a regional Zeitgeist following general awakening towards authoritarian, repressive, and allegedly corrupt government structures. The 'Gen-Z Protests' have led to a massive wave of protests erupting around South, East and

³⁴ BBC News. "La estrepitosa caída de Sheikh Hasina, la mujer más poderosa de Bangladesh, que fue derrocada por un movimiento estudiantil." *BBC News Mundo*, August 5, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/ckg11ng76d2o>.

³⁵ Hussain, Abid. "Pakistan Pulls Closer to Post-Hasina Bangladesh amid Shared India Concerns." *Al Jazeera Media Network* (Islamabad, Pakistan), January 17, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/17/pakistan-pulls-closer-to-post-hasina-bangladesh-amid-shared-india-concerns>.

³⁶ Mostofa, Shafi Md. "Geopolitics and Revolution: The Superpower Nexus Behind Hasina's Rule and the Future of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, October 24, 2024. <https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/geopolitics-and-revolution-the-superpower-nexus-behind-hasinas-rule-and-the-future-of-bangladeshs-foreign-policy/>.

³⁷ Geddes, Barbara. "What Causes Democratization?" In *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0014>.

³⁸ Geddes, "What Causes Democratization?"

Southeast Asia primarily.³⁹ These movements have been capable of forcing regime changes in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Mongolia, and the downturn of government policies in Indonesia. The most important aspect regarding these movements is their supposedly “decentralised and leaderless movements” which are non-aligned to defy government censorship and rally against economic disparities and lack of opportunities for youth.

After the latest uprising, anti-India sentiment has escalated⁴⁰ and affected the already strained bilateral relation with different false accusations like that India released water from the dams and caused the flooding of the end of August in Bangladesh; claim that have been proven to be false and misleading.⁴¹ The persecution against Hindu minorities in Bangladesh has increased following the fleeing of Hasina to India,⁴² leading to the need of increasing security around Hindu worship temples and sites inside Bangladesh.⁴³ At the same time, an apparent reconciliation with Pakistan is solidifying in different areas, getting to argue that their new alliances should be protected from any external influence,⁴⁴ pointing to India indirectly. This cooperation has allowed for a resumption of trade, marked by rice imports from Pakistan,⁴⁵ and simplified visa procedures. Furthermore, it has fostered new military ties including trainings and technology-India alleged that

³⁹ López Martín, Ignacio. “The Awakening of the Gen Z across Asia: Common Patterns and Possible Implications. Global Affairs. University of Navarra - Global Affairs and Strategic Studies.” *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies - Universidad de Navarra*, December 4, 2025. <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/the-awakening-of-the-gen-z-across-asia-common-patterns-and-possible-implications>.

⁴⁰ Rana, Aayushi. “From Allies to Adversaries: The Anti-India Wave in Bangladesh.” DFRAC: Digital Forensics, Research and Analytics Center, January 31, 2025. https://dfrac.org/en/2025/01/31/from-allies-to-adversaries-the-anti-india-wave-in-bangladesh/#google_vignette.

⁴¹ Ashraf, Anwar, Arafatul Islam, and Wesley Rahn. “Fact Check: India Did Not Cause ‘Artificial’ Flooding.” *Deutsche Welle*, August 27, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-no-india-did-not-cause-artificial-flooding-in-bangladesh/a-70059159>.

⁴² Devnath, Arun. “Bangladesh Targets Hasina with New Probe, India Extradition Plea.” *Bloomberg*, December 27, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-27/bangladesh-targets-hasina-with-new-probe-india-extradition-plea>.

⁴³ Shankar, Priyanka. “Bangladesh Mission in India Attacked: Why Are Ties in Freefall?” *Al Jazeera Media Network*, December 5, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/5/bangladesh-mission-in-india-attacked-why-are-ties-in-freefall>.

⁴⁴ Hussain, Abid. “Pakistan Pulls Closer to Post-Hasina Bangladesh amid Shared India Concerns.” *Al Jazeera Media Network* (Islamabad, Pakistan), January 17, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/17/pakistan-pulls-closer-to-post-hasina-bangladesh-amid-shared-india-concerns>.

⁴⁵ Ehtirajan, Anbarasan. “India Watches Warily as Bangladesh-Pakistan Ties Thaw.” *BBC News*, March 17, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cge1gxxn07qo>.

security and intelligence cooperation has deepened,⁴⁶ while there has been an increasing closeness between Islam parties from Dhaka and Islamabad.

India is indirectly positioning itself while giving asylum for Sheikh Hasina. According to government bodies of Bangladesh and other international organizations such as the United Nations Human Rights Office, there is evidence that could incriminate the former government and ruling officials as expressed in the following:

“...OHCHR finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the former Government and its security and intelligence apparatus, together with violent elements associated with the Awami League, systematically engaged in serious human rights violations, including hundreds of extrajudicial killings, other use of force violations involving serious injuries to thousands of protesters, extensive arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture and other forms of ill-treatment. [...] reasonable grounds to believe that these violations were carried out with the knowledge, coordination and direction of the political leadership and senior security sector officials, [...] a strategy to suppress the protests and related expressions of dissent...”⁴⁷

By doing this, India is inherently straining any relation with the current government of Yunus. Moreover, it is of due relevance that the latter was an alleged victim of judicial investigations with political motivations funded in Hasina’s comments against the microcredit model of Yunus.⁴⁸ Now is Muhammad Yunus and the student movement who ask for Hasina to be returned to Bangladesh for her to face her fate under the judicial investigations because of the protests repression and added claims of corruption during her time of tenure.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ It could be brought into discussion the possibility that the reconnection with Pakistan might be then just strategic for pushing India to reconsider or negotiate the status of Hasina in return of defrosting relations between both countries and avoid a deeper approach with Pakistan. Yet, India should not overestimate that possibility,

⁴⁶ Naji, Cyrus. “A Fraught New Frontier in Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations.” *Himal Southasian*, January 14, 2025. <https://www.himalmag.com/politics/sheikh-hasina-diplomacy-india-pakistan-bangladesh>.

⁴⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). *Human Rights Violations and Abuses Related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh*. Geneva, Switzerland, 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/bangladesh/ohchr-fftb-hr-violations-bd.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Lawson, Alastair. “How Grameen Founder Muhammad Yunus Fell from Grace.” *BBC News*, April 5, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12734472>.

⁴⁹ Devnath, “Bangladesh Targets Hasina with New Probe, India Extradition Plea.”

⁵⁰ Fraser, Simon. “Crackdown on Bangladesh Protesters May Be Crime against Humanity, UN Says.” *BBC News Website*, February 12, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cnvqle40183o>.

and instead it should delve into the implications this crescent relation brings for the nation and the regions—subsequently define a strategic approach in favour of its own security.

4. Strategic implications and concerns

Delving into how the evolving foreign policy of Bangladesh is changing circumstances for India's regional stability may be analysed from two key dimensions: security and economy. The dawn of rapprochement with Pakistan may be interpreted through the lens of different schools of thought. In the case of classical realism, Morgenthau (1985)⁵¹ and Waltz (1979)⁵² would argue that as states are operating in the anarchical international system, they will look for national security and a balance of power that is fundamental. Following this presumption, the shift from Dhaka may be driven in the search of countering the long-time perceived imbalances brought by the Indian sphere of influence in the region.

Geopolitical and security concerns

The conception of Indian security in South Asia has been based upon the robust ties of the last 15 years with Bangladesh, years in which military cooperation exercise and intelligence sharing was strengthened to counterbalance not only the constant threat of Pakistan, but the increasing influence of China in the region. During the past years, India is believed to effectively beholden Bangladesh from allowing Chinese plans of constructing a port directly under their sphere of influence and in a location that was alarming for because of proximity to key naval bases of India.⁵³ The Matarbari port is a clear demonstration of how India is protecting its interests in their 'neighbourhood first,' as well as in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific it promotes with Japan;⁵⁴ Japan was the biggest investor in the construction of this deep seaport.⁵⁵

Regarding the military and defence affairs, there have been recent developments from Bangladeshi institutions that are raising alerts for India. Recently, Bangladesh and Pakistani senior military officials from both former nations met and discussed diverse

⁵¹ Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th ed. Knopf, 1985.

⁵² Waltz, Kenneth Neal. *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw Hill, 1979.

⁵³ Thankachan, Shahana. "Matarbari: A Deep-Sea Port at the Heart of a Deep-Seated Regional and Global Rivalry." *China-India Brief*, no. 224 (May 2023). <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag/publications/center-publications/publication-article/detail/matarbari-a-deep-sea-port-at-the-heart-of-a-deep-seated-regional-and-global-rivalry>.

⁵⁴ Horimoto, Takenori. "Relations between Japan and India in the Indo-Pacific Age - Transcending the Quad Framework." *Japan Review* 3, no. 2 (2019).

⁵⁵ TBS Report. "Japan to Disburse \$1.27b for Matarbari Port, Other Projects." *The Business Standard*, March 29, 2023. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-japan-sign-agreement-3-dev-projects-607610>.

ways they could build ties and cooperation on security matters. Different fronts were opened as they considered the possibility of having joint military trainings, as well as arms trade. The latter would align with defence objectives from Dhaka of modernising their military for 2030,⁵⁶ thus there was a high interest in acquiring JF-17 Thunder Jets from Pakistan and China manufacture. Getting China involved under these ties would signify a three-way threat for Indian national security,⁵⁷ especially when India had heavily cooperated with Bangladesh on security efforts. For example, India and Bangladesh used to have an annual common military exercise ‘Sampriti’,⁵⁸ focused on a counter-terrorism strategy and the development of interoperability of their armed forces; the eleventh and last edition took place in 2023.

There is an inherent contradiction in Dhaka seeking a balance of power by pivoting towards Beijing. While they criticise that India has been a hegemonic player, China often represents an even more asymmetrical and possibly hegemonic alternative. As argued by Morgenthau (1985),⁵⁹ the actions of a state shall be centred on obtaining power, yet, the actions of Bangladesh leave unclear which power would they obtain from Beijing. Recent reports that are still unconfirmed by Yunus, signal the deal of \$2.2 billion for Dhaka to buy 20 Chinese J-10CE fighter jets. Also, for the first time in more than a decade, Bangladesh was part of the AMAN Joint Exercises organised by Islamabad held in Karachi.⁶⁰ There are also ongoing discussions for military training of fighter pilots and technical staff. With these exercises and cooperation links established, Bangladesh is clearly replacing the training and assistance they had with India the years before.

One of the most complex issues for Bangladesh and India, has been the rivers and water disputes. Environmental security has entered discussions worldwide as it is closely intertwined with national security interests. Homer-Dixon (2010)⁶¹ argued that the environment scarcity that has been strained by changing climate conditions will likely convert into a catalyser for the uprising of clashes and conflicts at different societal levels; diminishing natural resources would compound into a conflict among neighbours like

⁵⁶ Mahboob, Iqram Hossain. *Forces Goal 2030: Geopolitical Significance for Bangladesh and the Region*. 2023. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/bangladesh-navy-receives-final-two-chinese->

⁵⁷ Ethirajan, Anbarasan. “Bangladesh Wooed by China as Ties with India Fray.” *BBC World Service, South Asia* (London), February 25, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9q47qleey8o>.

⁵⁸ Singh, Bikash. “Eleventh Edition of SAMPRITI-XI Bilateral Military Exercise Takes Place between India & Bangladesh.” *The Economic Times*, October 17, 2023.

⁵⁹ Morgenthau, Hans J. op. cit.

⁶⁰ Gupta, Saurabh. “Bangladesh and Pak Move to Revive Military Ties with High-Level Visits.” NDTV, November 25, 2025. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/bangladesh-and-pakistan-move-to-revive-military-ties-with-high-level-visits-9697491>.

⁶¹ Homer-Dixon, Thomas F. *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*. In *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*. 2010. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20049302>.

Bangladesh and India.⁶² For this, they have established in previous years a wide range of mechanisms and discussions, having the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty as the most important reference.

Nevertheless, this agreement is due to expire in December 2026. The impact, if the treaty is not renewed, is bigger for Bangladesh than it is for India. This could lead to adverse conditions of a reduced water flow through the river that would increase environmental degradation across the zones close to the river basin. Bangladesh is one of the countries that has suffered the most from changing environmental conditions,⁶³ so it would be counterproductive to oversimplify or underestimate the need of water sharing agreements with India. Moreover, China is funding the Teesta Master project of Bangladesh,⁶⁴ allegedly aimed at solving flooding, erosion, and irrigation problems. Nevertheless, India has tried to offer funding and support for the project to counter Chinese involvement, especially because of the location of the project being close to Siliguri Corridor, representing a security threat for them. Yet, Yunus has welcomed the Sino investment and involvement for the modernisation efforts inside the country, additionally, it allows Bangladesh to continue with their diversification efforts.⁶⁵

For these two states, the topic has already been complex and is part of their bilateral agenda, both see transboundary resources-like water sharing-as a paramount issue.⁶⁶ This has led to important achievements after negotiations that paved the way for cooperating on the issue of River basins-for flooding or drought-improving the regional stability. Sheikh Hasina had as a priority the renegotiation of the Ganges treaty and the inclusion of other vital rivers on it, like Teesta as she argued with evidence that climate change and time had changed the circumstances and needs from both sides.⁶⁷ With the government of Yunus, high level meetings with India have not been a constant like it is now with

⁶² Alam, Sarfaraz. "Environmentally Induced Migration from Bangladesh to India." *Strategic Analysis* 27, no. 3 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160308450098>.

⁶³ Ali, Anwar. "Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation Assessment in Bangladesh." *Climate Research* 12, nos. 2-3 SPEC. ISS. 6 (1999). <https://doi.org/10.3354/cr012109>.

⁶⁴ Kallol Bhattacharjee. "Bangladesh Welcomes China to Participate in Teesta Project." *The Hindu*, March 28, 2025. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bangladesh-welcomes-china-to-participate-in-teesta-project-taiwan-inalienable-part-of-china-yunus-gives-firm-commitment/article69385201.ece>.

⁶⁵ Kamal Uddin Mazumder, "Teesta River Project Pushes Bangladesh into China-India Cold War," *The Diplomat.com* (The Diplomat, May 22, 2024), <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/teesta-river-project-pushes-bangladesh-into-china-india-cold-war>

⁶⁶ Arfanuzzaman, Md. "Upstream Downstream Divergence and Hydro-Socioeconomic Distress in South Asia." *World Food Policy* 7, no. 1 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1002/wfp2.12022>.

⁶⁷ Baruah, Sanjib. "Bangladesh and India: Breaking the Impasse on the Teesta Water-Sharing Talks." *The Indian Express*, September 15, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/bangladesh-and-india-breaking-the-impasse-on-the-teesta-water-sharing-talks-8151638/>.

Pakistan, so the issue has limited to technical teams from both sides meeting.⁶⁸ The time is short for the magnitude of what is being negotiated; thus, it is important to stress the need of leaving aside any ideological presumption from Bangladesh that might hinder the renewal of the Ganges Treaty.

Economic concerns

Turning towards the second dimension, economically, India and Bangladesh have had a functional engagement in trading and commercial relations. This relation has allowed for a strategic partnership in terms of cooperation for development of infrastructure and key areas. Nevertheless, the new decision of Bangladesh to resume trade with Pakistan in levels not seen since they were a single nation⁶⁹ could be a risky hedging towards their stability and change patterns of economy in the region. The new government is not conscious of how India was a key negotiator for avoiding sanctions from United States and Europe towards products from Bangladesh⁷⁰. This would be a strategic front in the international arena that Pakistan could not cover up for India's role, nor China would as they would benefit from sanctions towards Bangladesh exports.

From an international Political Economy perspective, Robert Gilpin (1987)⁷¹ argues that global economic transactions are correlated with the distribution of power, yet when Bangladesh entered trading relations with Pakistan, it did not enter as equal partner, thus succumbing once again to a negative disparity.⁷² Although it is too early to call on the long-term effects-especially with uncertainty of the durability of this shift-of the new economic ties, Gilpin's theory would imply that a change on the economic system of the region might indicate a change in the regional influence or strategy, possibly, it would undermine the intended Indian economic hegemony throughout the region as well as their main interests. On the other hand, this shift could also entail a dynamism of emancipation from developing countries towards a hedging strategy that does not limits the autonomy of their economic ties that benefit their national interests, breaking with argued neocolonial structures; once again, the question remains on whether China represents a

⁶⁸ Ranjan, Amit. *Talks on India-Bangladesh Water Sharing*. 2025. <http://southasiandiaspora.org>.

⁶⁹ Krishnan, Murali. "How Bangladesh-Pakistan Reconciliation Impacts India." *Deutsche Welle* (New Delhi), December 31, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-bangladesh-pakistan-reconciliation-impacts-india/a-71189995>.

⁷⁰ Mostofa, Shafi Md. "Geopolitics and Revolution: The Superpower Nexus Behind Hasina's Rule and the Future of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, October 24, 2024.

⁷¹ Gilpin, Robert. *The Political Economy of International Relations*. In *The Political Economy of International Relations*. 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40202522>.

⁷² Mufti, Ali, and Imran Ali. "Commentary on Pakistan Bangladesh Trade Relations." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3951743>.

better and more equal relationship than India did, or if they would rather sacrifice more autonomy in response to a heightened anti-India sentiment.

5. Broader regional and multilateral implications

As evidenced throughout the strategic implications for India of this realignment, they translate into implications at a regional level. One of the complexities or issues surrounding South Asia, is the low effectiveness of the regional institutional building.⁷³ Keohane and Nye⁷⁴ support the idea of regional institutions as vital for fostering economic interdependence, and subsequently, reducing the possibilities of conflict between the parties. When the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was envisioned, they looked forward to a format that would diminish the existing regional tensions-Pakistan v. India power dynamics-by opening a forum of political and economic cooperation. Nevertheless, the organisation was doomed to fail as the ongoing disputes and constant mistrust in between the parties hampered the ability of the organisation to function.⁷⁵ The new ties of Bangladesh could worsen an already declining institutional work.

As the SAARC failed, and Modi looked forward to the East-exemplified on his renamed 'Now Act East' policy,⁷⁶ the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) emerged as a closer approach and more functional framework.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that it was not envisioned completely as an alternative to the SAARC, as that might have turned some States against participation on this new institution.⁷⁸ BIMSTEC had key advantages for India in the sense that it connected with Southeast Asian states and included a maritime perspective. The institution also worked as a countering measure to the growing influence of India on countries of the region; Modi visited the Maldives and Sri Lanka, which are two states with heavy investment and Chinese influence.⁷⁹ The institution fell short as it is underfinanced and underproductive, but if India looks forward to maintaining access to the Southeast Asian States even without Bangladesh, it should keep promoting itself as a good benefactor, invest more in the region, and take more leadership that could flourish

⁷³ Datta, Sreeradha. "South Asian Regionalism: The Limits of Cooperation." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 60, no. 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2021.2018965>.

⁷⁴ Keohane, Robert, and Joseph Nye. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. 3rd ed. Longman, 1977.

⁷⁵ Das, "Assessing India's Shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC."

⁷⁶ Keohane, Robert, and Joseph Nye. op. cit.

⁷⁷ Das, "Assessing India's Shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC."

⁷⁸ Ibidem

⁷⁹ Mohan, Geeta. "Prime Minister Modi's First Foreign Visit: A Two-Nation Tour to Maldives, Sri Lanka." *India Today* (New Delhi), May 31, 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-first-foreign-visit-maldives-sri-lanka-1539324-2019-05-31>.

under the organisation. At the end, it could evolve into a hedging strategy that would allow to balance the emerging power dynamics of the region.

6. Conclusion

Following the exile of Awami League and Hasina's government, the realignment of Yunus' interim government represented a pivotal moment for the geopolitical structure of South Asia. Throughout the analysis, it has been possible to demonstrate that Dhaka's emerging ties with a Sino-Pakistani axis is not only the collateral or reactionary effect from the uprising, but a structural transformation under the context of a security dilemma and anti-Indian resentment that was underestimated. In general terms, the new leadership of Bangladesh has considered the previous relation with India as an asymmetric structure, yet, pragmatically speaking, India cannot be overlooked or left aside completely. Despite the current shift, Bangladesh cannot permanently dismiss its neighbour; systemic pressure-both economic and environmental-will inevitably force to a return to negotiating tables where India will still maintain a significant leverage.

There is a wide range of implications for India's regional security rising from the shift that will require adaptation and recalibration for both sides. The erosion of the sustained influence of New Delhi in defence and military affairs in Dhaka is undermining the 'Neighbourhood First Policy,' complicating the management of the Siliguri Corridor for India as well. The suspension of traditional security cooperation and joint exercises such as 'Sampriti,' added to the potential acquisition of Chinese fighters by Bangladesh, are just a demonstration of the shift. Moreover, the weaponisation of history within Bangladeshi politics, fuelled with the rise of Anti-Indian sentiment, demonstrate what Chowdhury argued about how the lack of sociocultural links and civil groups involvement within the cooperation among States could lead to weakening ties,⁸⁰ now fractured. Furthermore, the continued asylum of Hasina serves as the symbolic bottleneck that hinders any possibility of a pragmatic relation between Modi and Yunus, giving the later a justification and cause to push forward ties with Beijing and Islamabad.

Nonetheless, even if the situation is temporary and Sheikh Hasina were to return to power, India shall examine the way it has approached its relationship with Bangladesh and push forward for a more balanced and nuanced one that would reduce the anti-Indian sentiment. As India has characterised for a pragmatic international relationship, it should allow for accountability to take place in Bangladesh, even if their closest ally Hasina ends condemned; this will be deterministic for the future of Indo-Bangladeshi relations and regional security. In the worst-case scenario of keeping low relations, India shall strengthen its multilateral platforms by deepening its economic partnerships and invest in a diplomatic strategy that will allow to respond to the challenges of a Sino-Pakistani-

⁸⁰ Chowdhury, Shamsher M. "Bangladesh-India Relations." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 15, no. 3 (2020): 191–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/48630179>.

Bangladeshi alliance.⁸¹ With a flexible and open approach that looks forward to sustaining cooperation and balance of power, India could effectively manage shifting dynamics over the region. India should recalibrate itself from a hegemonic player into a position that guarantees parity to other States while maintaining an institutional leadership that is undeniable.

Moreover, the wide challenges surrounding the water sharing agreements are of vital relevance to India and Bangladesh, as well as for the regional overall stability. The contested management of transboundary water resources shall be maintained through diplomatic and technical channels that allow for agreements like that of Ganges to prevail and symbolise the strength of cooperation capacities. Economic interdependence and progress from this region are tied to the scarcity of resources and the due diligence of those available, as they become scarce, should maintain open channels to mutually support and not fall on selfish national interests that may lead to conflict or public unrest. Regarding the sociocultural dimension, it is important for both States to maintain respect and civility among minorities from the other living in their territory. As Land Boundary Agreements are not fully executed, they should ensure that landlocked communities and ethnic groups can live peacefully and enhance civil integration that would foster future national relations.

It remains too early to predict a long-term effect of Bangladesh's evolving foreign policy, but part of it will lighten up once elections take place and a new government is formally in place. The future lays in the hands of the Bangladeshi people, shall they hold accountability for the actions of the past, and continue their path to be a new 'Asian tiger.' They have a wide range of internal challenges that need to be resolved before they can fully engage on regional power dynamics. Regardless of which party governs from Dhaka in the post-Hasina era, they should not overlook at the importance of keeping ties with India. While it is undeniable that disparities in the bilateral relationship have existed, India has been a cornerstone for the stability and progress of Bangladesh; by supporting its independence aspirations, cooperating on mutual interest matters, aiding for development of infrastructure, and even during COVID-19 outbreak they manoeuvred to help Bangladesh obtaining vaccines.

However, Bangladesh shall be wary of the inherent risks from their hedging strategy. The investments and support from China regarding the Teesta River and military capabilities might offer short-term solutions to economic, environmental, and military necessities, but there is a fine line between gaining autonomy back from India or changing dependency from New Delhi to Beijing. Moreover, it is yet to be evaluated if the new commercial alternative posed by Pakistan is a viable alternative with further development, or if the

⁸¹ Ethirajan, Anbarasan. "Bangladesh Wooed by China as Ties with India Fray." *BBC World Service, South Asia* (London), February 25, 2025.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9q47qleey8o>.

cooperation of China might eventually demand a sacrifice or loss of sovereignty and autonomy over natural resources or key assets. Lastly, the incoming expiration of the Ganges Treaty remains as a critical test of pragmatic diplomacy v. ideology. Both countries should consider the environmental security issues that no external actor could cover up for one side or the other. Other is the case with Pakistan. Caution must prevail when considering Islamabad as a viable alternative for addressing Bangladesh's needs.

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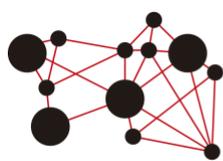
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