

## FUTURE OF INDIA-BANGLADESH IN THE POST-HASINA ERA

By  
**Muhammad Ahmad Khan**  
Research Associate  
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by  
**Dr Khurram Abbas**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### Introduction

Bangladesh has seen a government change after protests against Sheikh Hasina's 15-year-long rule. The student-led protests in July 2024 resulted in Hasina's resignation and her fleeing to India on August 5. Reportedly, the violent clashes between students and police resulted in around 400 deaths. Hasina's stay in India is widely criticized by officials and social circles in Dhaka. It is significant to analyze, how India and Bangladesh will look towards each other in the post-Hasina phase? Dr. Muhammad Yunus-led Interim government in Bangladesh has revoked the diplomatic passport of Sheikh Hasina. There is a possibility that Dhaka can ask Delhi to extradite Hasina. This extradition can majorly contribute to deepening discontent between the two countries. In response to Hasina's statement regarding the protestors, Dr. Yunus said, "We have said quite firmly that she should keep quiet. This is an unfriendly gesture towards us; she has been given shelter there and she is campaigning from there. It is not that she has gone there on a normal course. She has fled following a people's uprising and public anger."

India enjoyed the status of a privileged neighbour as its economic, defence, and diplomatic cooperation was boosted during Hasina's tenure. However, the student-led government change in Bangladesh has put a sharp spotlight on major loopholes in India's policy outlook towards Dhaka.

Leadership in Bangladesh is also aiming to renegotiate the agreements signed with India and those that were under consideration. Amidst speculation about Bangladesh restarting talks with India on the Teesta River, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, advisor to the interim government in Bangladesh, said: "I have discussed the issue of Teesta water sharing with all relevant stakeholders (in Bangladesh). We have discussed that we need to restart the process and dialogue regarding the Teesta treaty. We also have to work on the Ganges treaty, which is coming to an end in two years." She also hinted at engaging the international community and legal documents if the two countries fail to reach an agreement.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sheikh Hasina Factor**

The most prominent point of concern between Dhaka and Delhi is Sheikh Hasina's stay in India. When the student-led protests started, Indian Minister for External Affairs, Dr. S. Jaishankar called it an 'internal matter' of Bangladesh. India was hopeful, that Hasina's government would deal with these protests anyhow. This hands-off policy of India in times of crisis was criticized by the top leadership of Bangladesh. Muhammad Yunus, the present head of the Interim Government in Dhaka, was disheartened by Jaishankar's remarks. He said, "If there is a fire in the brother's house, how can I say it is an internal affair." Contrary to this neutral approach, when Sheikh Hasina fled to India, she was received by Ajit Doval, India's National Security Advisor. It has been over a month since Hasina landed in India.

Legally, if a Bangladeshi citizen has a diplomatic or official passport, he or she can stay in India for 45 days without a visa. But, as the interim government has revoked Sheikh Hasina's diplomatic passport, it will create challenges for New Delhi. For now, only the Opposition party, BNP has asked India to extradite Hasina and this has also been hinted at by Bangladesh's de-facto Foreign Minister, Mohammad Touhid Hossain.<sup>2</sup> He said that if the Home and Law Ministries approve, then Dhaka would formally ask India to extradite Hasina, further pushing Delhi into a troubling dilemma. Refusing to extradite Hasina will further sour bilateral relations. According to the extradition treaty signed between the two countries in 2013 and renewed in 2016, the extradition can only be refused

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1 "Bangladesh's Interim Government keen to Restart Talks on Teesta Water Treaty with India," The Indian Express, September 2, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/bangladesh-teesta-water-treaty-india-talks-sheikh-hasina-modi-9545804/>.

2 "Bangladesh Mulls Sheikh Hasina's Extradition, India Faces Dilemma," Firstpost, August 28, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/vantage/live-bangladesh-mulls-sheikh-hasinas-extradition-india-faces-dilemma-vd470706/>.

if the charges against the accused are political in nature.<sup>3</sup> However, as of now, there are 51 cases against Hasina, including 42 murder charges.

### **Water Crisis**

Water issues between India and Bangladesh are historically driven by the latter at the losing end because of its geographical position being the lower riparian state. Bangladesh shares 54 rivers with India and for only two rivers the two states have signed an agreement –the Ganga and Kushiara rivers. In light of the recent remarks by Bangladesh's Environment, Forest, and Climate Change Advisor, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, the country aims to discuss water issues with India. There are three major water-related concerns creating anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh. Firstly, irresponsible control of the water channels by India has caused severe floods in Northern Bangladesh causing more than 13 deaths and leaving 4.5 million affected. Nahid Islam, the advisor in the current interim setup, blamed India for opening the sluice gates of the Tripura dam without prior notice. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs has denied any such intentions and has claimed that the excessive rains are behind the flood. However, the public in Bangladesh is accusing India despite all the clarifications.

Secondly, the construction of dams on combined rivers is a bone of contention between the two countries. In 1975, the Farakka Barrage construction over the Ganga in West Bengal resulted in troubles in Bangladesh. Although the two countries signed the Ganga Water treaty in 1996, there are concern in Dhaka to renegotiate it. New Delhi is also planning to build Tipaimukh Dam on the Barak River in Assam. The construction of the dam will seriously impact the water flow in Surma and Kushiara rivers in Bangladesh, severely damaging agriculture in dry seasons. The Teesta river dispute also remains elusive as both countries are still unable to reach a consensual agreement. The diversion in the Teesta river from the Indian side has also caused trouble for farmers in Bangladesh.

The third point of concern between India and Bangladesh is the reassessment of the water agreements. The Ganga Waters Treaty will expire in 2026. The interim government has hinted that Dhaka will 'forcefully' advocate for its rightful claims over water sharing with India. This renegotiation of the Ganga Waters Treaty can become a thorn in bilateral relations. Because of the adverse impacts of climate change in South Asia, both India and Bangladesh will try to preserve the most share of the Ganga river for themselves. The regional stakeholders in India, particularly West Bengal's CM Mamata Banerjee, have intensely criticized the Central government on the Ganga

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<sup>3</sup> "Clock ticking on Sheikh Hasina's India stay after Bangladesh revokes her Diplomatic Passport," Hindustan Times, August 24, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/clock-ticking-on-sheikh-hasinas-india-stay-after-bangladesh-revokes-her-diplomatic-passport-101724494651690.html>.

Waters Treaty and Teesta river agreement. –Hence, internal opposition to water agreements in India; and the rising water needs in India and Bangladesh may create troubles for both countries in the coming future. Dhaka has also hinted at involving the international community to play its role in the water crisis between Bangladesh and India, that may further trouble policy-makers in Delhi.

### **Insurgency in India's Northeastern States**

Prior to 2009, one of India's major concerns towards Bangladesh was national security because of insurgent movements operating in the Northeastern States of India. India alleges the presence of safe havens for the group in Bangladesh. In 2004, India handed over a list of 194 insurgent camps inside Dhaka which were purportedly used as safe havens. According to Indian accounts, groups including the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), and All Tripura Tiger Force were operating from Bangladesh and created troubles in India's Northeastern States.<sup>4</sup> Sheikh Hasina in coordination with Indian authorities launched various counter-terrorism operations. She also extradited some of the most wanted insurgents including Anup Chetia, the leader of ULFA to India.<sup>5</sup> New Delhi has concerns that in a post-Hasina Bangladesh, the security cooperation between the two countries might recede, giving more room to these insurgent movements to resurge and create security issues for India.

### **Divergence on Regional Politics**

Although Sheikh Hasina was considered a pro-India ruler, she sought to 'balance' her country's policy outlook between China and India. In domains of defence, economy and diplomatic outreach, Dhaka was able to garner interests from both countries. The new government in Dhaka has also expressed the intention to have smooth and positive relations with all countries including China and India. Bangladesh's Foreign Affairs advisor, Muhammad Touhid Hossain, said: "Our policy is to maintain good relations with all countries while protecting our national interests."<sup>6</sup> However, analysts anticipate that the post-Hasina government will likely have a qualitatively different approach from Skeikh Hasina's government.

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4 Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, "India-Bangladesh Defence Cooperation: Coming of Age at last?" *ORF*, August 21, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-bangladesh-defence-cooperation-coming-of-age-at-last>

5 Haroon Habibampvijaita Singh, "Dhaka hands over top ULFA leader to India," *The Hindu*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ulfa-leader-anup-chetia-handed-over-to-india-by-bangladesh/article7865894.ece>.

6 "Bangladesh interim govt says it intends to maintain 'smooth and positive' relations with all, including India and China," *The Economic Times*, August 11, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/bangladesh-interim-govt-says-it-intends-to-maintain-smooth-and-positive-relations-with-all-including-india-and-china/articleshow/112448353.cms?from=mdr>.

The major divergence that may emerge between Delhi and Dhaka is the former's propensity of seeking to act as a regional hegemon. Hasina was highly responsive towards India's sensitivities in the region, including keep a strong check on Dhaka's policy towards Islamabad. When India boycotted the SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016, Bangladesh supported New Delhi's decision. But the recent statements by Muhammad Yunus highlight the new government's commitment to revive regional cooperation. Dr. Yunus, in a recent meeting with the Pakistani High Commissioner in Bangladesh and in a telephonic conversation with the Prime Minister of Pakistan discussed the significance of SAARC as a top regional forum.<sup>7</sup> It remains to be seen how New Delhi would react to this proposition, which in general is in the intent of the broader SAARC membership.

### Conclusion

Under Sheikh Hasina's government, India enjoyed cordial relationship, as the former was more cautious about India's interests and sensitivities. With the new government in Dhaka, there are new challenges in the bilateral relations. So far, Dhaka has not asked to extradite Sheikh Hasina. But if it does, this will push India into a dilemma as to whether to protect its old friend or adhere to the Extradition treaty signed between two sovereign countries. This issue will likely determine the nature of bilateral relations in the time to come. Further, it seems that Dhaka will consider signing the Teesta Water Treaty on redefined terms and renegotiate the Ganges Waters Treaty in the better interest of both states. Moreover, the issue of security cooperation will also be redefined during the new administration in Dhaka. These all indicators suggest that the post-Hasina bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India will face significant challenges owing to redefined priorities and divergence of interests.

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7 Ariful Islam Mithu, "Pakistan PM, Bangladesh's Yunus discuss Revival of SAARC," *Hindustan Times*, August 30, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/pakistan-pm-bangladesh-s-yunus-discuss-revival-of-saarc-101725030098275.html>.