

FPRC Journal

a Quarterly research journal devoted to studies on Indian Foreign Policy

FPRC Journal-62

Focus:

India-Bangladesh Relations
Challenges and Opportunities

Foreign Policy Research Centre

NEW DELHI (INDIA)

FPRC JOURNAL (62) 2025 (2)

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ISSN 2277 – 2464

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India, 2025

Published by

Foreign Policy Research Centre

New Delhi (India)

www.fprc.in

Preface

This special issue of **FPRC Journal (62)** focuses on

India-Bangladesh Relations - Challenges and Opportunities

The manifold issues involved in the process have been identified by distinguished contributors of this special volume. They have also visualised the way forward for India in handling its relationship with Bangladesh in view of post- Operation Sindoor scenario.

We take this opportunity to express our heartfelt thanks to contributors who have shared our sentiments and accepted our invitation to enrich the contents of the Journal. They have always been a source of strength to us.

Dr. Mahendra Gaur
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The Questionnaire for Email Interview

1) India seems to lack clarity on how to deal with post-Hasina Dhaka.

How far do you agree that it was India's flawed diplomacy to count on one individual politician instead of nurturing strong people-to-people relations?

2) The issue of minorities has further strained India-Bangladesh relations, which are already tense due to the interim government's rhetoric and foreign policy choices. led by Muhammad Yunus. Do you agree?

3) What should India do as Pakistan and Bangladesh get close, and are seeking help?

4. Growing Chinese Influence adds a geopolitical dimension to India- Bangladesh bilateral tensions. Do you agree?

5. A return to the status quo in Delhi-Dhaka ties is unlikely, and arguably unviable given the changed external and internal realities. How far true?

INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Contributors

Email Interview: (Pages: 31-33)



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- 1) India seems to lack clarity on how to deal with post-Hasina Dhaka.
- 2) How far do you agree that it was India's flawed diplomacy to count on one individual politician instead of nurturing strong people-to-people relations?

ANS: True, India is still struggling in that sense. Hasina's ousting in mid-2024 was an intelligence and policy failure for India, as it didn't sense what was coming. Even Indian policy think tanks advising the government here were clueless about the rising anti-Hasina sentiments in Bangladesh and foreign interferences, though there were telltale signs. It is a fact that India's diplomacy overly relied on Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League's stature, becoming complacent and misreading the shifting sentiments on the ground, within the armed forces, and the international conspiracy to topple Hasina. The quota protest was the façade and a trigger, too.

For India, an inherent trust in Hasina fostered a perception of favouritism toward the Awami League-led government. This has alienated other Bangladeshi political parties and factions and limited people-to-people ties. The BNP and religious parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, have remained the least priority parties for India's strategic interests in Bangladesh. The pro-Hasina focus had, of course, benefited India in terms of security cooperation and border agreements, but her sudden ouster in August 2024 exposed the fragility of this approach.

Anti-India public sentiment in Bangladesh is at an all-time high at present, reflecting weak grassroots connections restricted only to Hindu and Buddhist minorities and pro-AL elite citizenry. Islamist groups of all kinds have been dead against India for a long time, with their misconceived historical grievances and Islamist causes. However, nurturing broader political and societal connections earlier could have mitigated the current bilateral and diplomatic chill.

3. The minority issue has further strained India-Bangladesh relations, already tense due to the interim government's rhetoric and foreign policy choices led by Muhammad Yunus. Do you agree?

ANS: The minority issue, particularly attacks on Hindus and their religious sites, has strained ties, along with false blasphemy charges against Hindus to kill or silence. Even though the Youns-led interim government dismissed the charges as exaggerated, from August 2024 to May 2025, hundreds of reported attacks on Hindus fueled India's concerns. Yunus's interim government supporters' rhetoric, including comments on India's northeast, anti-Modi statements, and alignment with China and Pakistan, has exacerbated bilateral tensions. India's sheltering of Hasina and Dhaka's extradition demands further escalated this widening rift.

4. What should India do as Pakistan and Bangladesh get close and seek help?

ANS: The April foreign secretary-level talks between Pakistan and Bangladesh and the latest (June 19) trilateral meet (Bangladesh, China, Pakistan) suggest a strategic drift of Bangladesh from its eastern neighbour, India. Additionally, direct trading between two Islamic nations, along with direct flights, has enhanced bilateral ties, further isolating India. However, India would have a chance to revive or regain control after the Bangladesh general election, which is expected to take place sometime in late 2025 or early 2026.

Until then, India should enhance its diplomatic outreach to Bangladesh's interim government and opposition, such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) or the newly floated student-backed political group, the National Citizen Party (NCP), to rebuild trust. An urgent mainstream and social media strategy in India is also necessary to calm the charged bilateral atmosphere. Any immediate offer of economic aid during calamities or emergencies to counterbalance Pakistan's influence, leveraging India's \$7 billion trade surplus with Bangladesh, would work in India's favour. While keeping its action against illegal Bangladeshis and Rohingyas (deportations), India may work with Bangladesh to strengthen border security, addressing concerns over common security problems such as Islamist terrorist groups (AQIS, IS Bengal or JMB, etc) while avoiding escalatory rhetoric or border clashes.

5. Growing Chinese Influence adds a geopolitical dimension to India-Bangladesh bilateral tensions. Do you agree?

ANS: Yes, the growing Chinese influence adds a geopolitical layer to the ongoing tensions between India and Bangladesh. Yunus's visit to China early this year (late March 2025) and his 'guardian of the ocean' rhetoric secured duty-free export access and discussions on the Teesta River project, signalling a pivot from Hasina's India-centric balancing act. China's \$1.4 billion in infrastructure investments and potential J-10C aircraft sales to Bangladesh heighten India's concerns about the vulnerability of the Chicken Neck/Siliguri Corridor. Again, the latest Kunming trilateral meeting between Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan appears to be a message to India that Chinese influence will remain in the region for the foreseeable future.

6. A return to the status quo in Delhi–Dhaka ties is unlikely and arguably unviable given the changed external and internal realities. How far is it true?

ANS: The statement is largely true. Hasina's ouster, Bangladesh's shift toward China and Pakistan, and anti-India public sentiment mark a structural shift. Again, as long as Hasina remains in India

or elsewhere, Bangladeshis would distrust India. Trade restrictions, like India's garment export curbs and Dhaka's \$21 million contract cancellation with an Indian firm, reflect new realities. Restoring the Hasina-era status quo is unviable without addressing Bangladesh's demand for equitable ties and India's minority concerns.

However, there are a few geopolitically grounded scenarios that could reshape India's role in Bangladesh, especially amid or post the 2025/2026 general elections: Though highly improbable, a coup attempt to purge Yunus or an Islamist takeover of Bangladesh, before or after the election, would bring back focus on India. A failed coup would discredit extremist factions and provide India with an opportunity to re-engage with centrist or moderate Islamist-leaning parties, thereby pushing for a more balanced policy orientation in Dhaka. Even though there is little chance to bring back Awami League's past influence, the party members are still active, and they could (with India's tacit help with the US in tow) seize any opportunity to orchestrate a Dhaka Spring (mass mobilisation) or choose to rebrand Awami League under a non-controversial figure to play a role.

Geopolitical dynamics can shift in a blink if there is a military-led coup, assassination of political leaders or in the event of natural calamities. In any case, India should remain positive, proactive and prepared to act swiftly during moments of uncertainty or rupture, whether through recalibration of its soft power, covert engagement, or international alliance-building.
