

Bangladesh After the Election: Strategic Autonomy or Strategic Drift

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Bangladesh's newly sworn-in Prime minister Tarique Rahman (2R) shakes hands with President Mohammed Shahabuddin during a swearing-in ceremony at the National Parliament building in Dhaka on February 17, 2026. |

Photo: Munir Uz Zaman / AFP via Getty Images

Introduction

The 13th general elections in Bangladesh, held on February 12, 2026, were more than just a routine democratic exercise; it represented a structural reset for a nation emerging from the shadows of Post-July Revolution state situation. Since August 2024, after Sheikh Hasina's ouster, the interim government under Muhammad Yunus steered the nation through reforms. After fifteen years of Awami League dominance, the landslide victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Tarique Rahman, has not only fundamentally altered the domestic political landscape, but also

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how the country positions itself internationally now. Dhaka now faces a critical decision: whether it'll pursue "Strategic Autonomy"—the ability to make sovereign choices based on national interest—or if it will a "Strategic Drift," where external pressures and internal instability dictate its path. This commentary examines that dilemma by exploring Bangladesh's recent election context, the pressures from major powers like India, China, and the United States, the changing domestic political landscape and whether the post-election era signals genuine strategic autonomy or risks drift amid geopolitical pressures.

The 2024 Catalyst: From Hasina's downfall to Interim Government

In the 2024 National Elections of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League won the polls overwhelmingly amid BNP boycott, but widespread allegations of rigging fueled discontent.² Protests erupted in July-August 2024 over job quotas, which eventually escalated into a revolution that forced Hasina to flee to India, dissolving parliament and triggering a constitutional crisis. Dr. Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate, formed an interim government. The interim government banned the Awami League, promised reforms and organise national elections by early 2026, they made a foreign policy reset from India-centric dependency. This upheaval exposed Bangladesh's internal fragilities like: economic inequality, youth unemployment, and authoritarianism; while reshaping its global positioning. Then the following 18 months of interim government under Dr. Muhammad Yunus faced many challenges fixing the nation's internal and external matters. On one side, they allowed Dhaka to diversify ties with nations, on the other hand, there were also strain in many external relations, as the nation grappled with "mobocracy," fragile institutions, and a surge in anti-India sentiment.

² Welle, Deutsche. 2024. "Bangladesh Vote: Sheikh Hasina Wins amid Opposition Boycott." Dw.com. Deutsche Welle. January 7, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-vote-sheikh-hasina-wins-amid-opposition-boycott/a-67908127>.

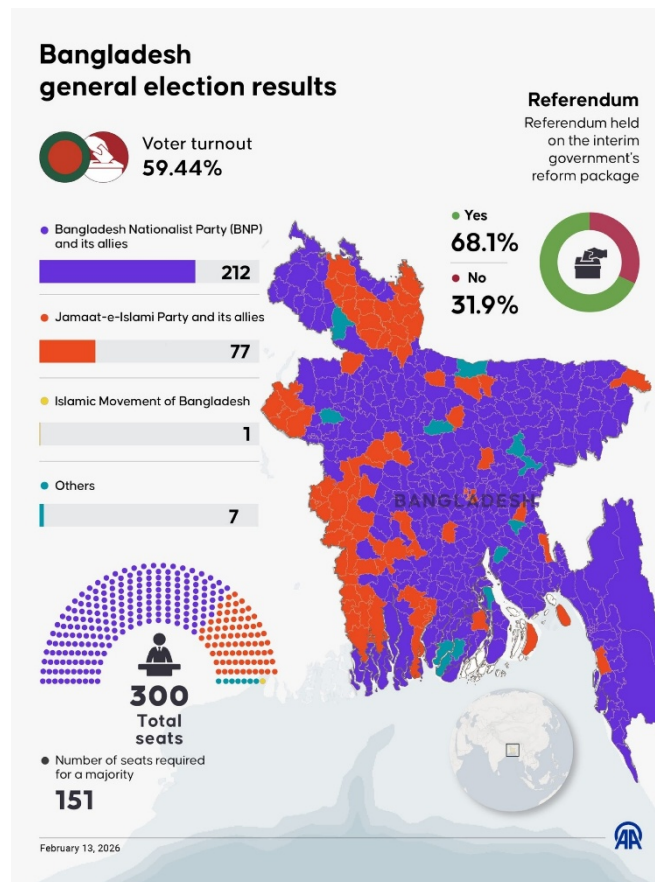


Chief Adviser Professor Dr Muhammad Yunus on Sept 27, 2024, addressed the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) at the UN headquarters in New York.

Under Yunus, Bangladesh adopted "360-degree diplomacy," declaring that our foreign policy will be no longer submissive but based on mutual respect and national interest.³ Key moves included visits to China (March 2025) yielding duty-free market access and investments, thawing ties with Pakistan via direct trade links (Reopening Air Route in Dhaka-Karachi) and military exercises, and engaging Turkey for defense production. Relations with the US saw \$200 million in aid for governance and trade, emphasizing democratic reforms. This shift countered Hasina's India alignment, which prioritized transit access but ignored Teesta water-sharing and border killings. The former Foreign Adviser of the Interim Government Mr. Touhid Hossain, in his opening address of the Bay of Bengal Conversation 2025, stated that, "Bangladesh insists on its sovereignty and the right to pursue its national interest. The Bay of Bengal region is becoming a strategic fulcrum, and Bangladesh intends to be a confident actor, not a passive corridor."

³ AA, Yenişafak English. 2026. "Yunus Declares Bangladesh's Foreign Policy 'No Longer Submissive' in Farewell Address." Yenısafak.com. February 16, 2026. <https://en.yenisafak.com/world/yunus-declares-bangladeshs-foreign-policy-no-longer-submissive-in-farewell-address-3714702>.

The 2026 Election: A Turning Point



After 2024 Revolution, Bangladesh entered a new chapter of political repositioning that saw an interim government under Dr. Muhammad Yunus before the 2026 vote. This shift in governance dynamics has altered the political terrain and opened space for diverse voices and new parties such as the National Citizen Party (NCP), which aims for a “second republic” and a revised political order. The 2026 election took place in the shadow of substantial national political upheaval. It saw a voter turnout of over 60%, a significant jump from the controversial 2024 polls. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) secured a two-thirds majority (212 out of 300 seats), while the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) emerged as a potent opposition force with 77 seats.⁴ During the elections, Bangladeshis also cast their votes in a referendum on the July Charter, which contains more than 80 proposals

⁴ Shamim, Sarah. 2026. “Bangladesh Election Results 2026: Who Won, Who Lost, What’s Next?” Al Jazeera. February 13, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/13/bangladesh-election-results-2026-who-won-who-lost-whats-next>.

to overhaul Bangladesh's system of governance, seeking to promote good governance, strengthening democracy, and advancing social justice through institutional reforms, while safeguarding the country against any return to authoritarian or fascist rule.⁵ The charter was drafted outlines a roadmap for constitutional amendments, legal changes and the enactment of new laws. Experts think that BNP's winning mark as a victory of the democratic force. Now, the challenge is to ensure good governance, public safety, law & order in the nation, which was the aspiration of July Uprising. Experts also believe that, now as the new parliament includes more diverse voices and competitive political engagement, the parliamentary function will improve. The electoral results will not only determine domestic dynamic, but also the external partnerships and ideological posture that will guide Dhaka's foreign relations.



Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chairman Tarique Rahman gestures to supporters during the final day of election campaign rally, ahead of the national election, in Jatrabari, Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 9, 2026.

REUTERS/Mohammad Ponir Hossain(REUTERS)

⁵ Jahangir, Abdur Rahman. 2024. "Bangladesh Seeks Extradition of Ousted Leader Sheikh Hasina from India." AP News. December 23, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-sheikh-hasina-extradition-india-6effef70de22f18c502a7791360ece08>.

Navigating the India-China-US Triangle

In the context of Bangladesh, Strategic autonomy means pursuing a foreign policy that is independent of undue influence from any one power; whether it be India, China, the United States, or any other global actor. This path emphasizes flexibility, diversified partnerships, and national interest as the guiding principle. For a state like Bangladesh, a populous South Asian nation with a rapidly growing economy and strategic geography, autonomy would involve balancing relationships with major powers while preserving freedom to choose cooperation that serves national priorities. It could mean engaging economically with China, maintaining security cooperation with India, and managing relations with the U.S. without aligning fully with any bloc.

Strained Ties with India: Neighborhood Tensions Rise

Bangladesh's foreign relations have historically been influenced by its larger neighbors. India remains a central player in Dhaka's foreign policy; in economic ties, trade, water diplomacy (e.g., disputes and cooperation over projects like the Teesta River), and security cooperation. However, recent developments show dual tracks of influence. Bangladesh's traditionally close ties with India strained last year, when Hasina fled there after a massive student-led uprising forced her from power. She currently lives in a secure government compound in New Delhi, but Yunus' government has demanded her extradition to face charges related to corruption and crimes against humanity, including allegations that she ordered a brutal crackdown on protesters that reportedly killed more than 1,000 people.⁶ India is still on their refusal decision to send Hasina back. Dhaka is now pursuing a Red flag Interpol notice to capture her. Other sources of tension include the Indian Border Security Force's killings of civilians along the border with Bangladesh. A Human Rights Watch investigation reported on the expulsions of ethnic Bengali Muslims from India's eastern states.⁷ Finally, there are lingering trade frictions, mainly due to high Indian tariffs. On the other hand, New Delhi accused Dhaka of creating an unsafe environment for minority

⁶ Hallam, Mark. 2025. "UN: Up to 1,400 Killed in Bangladesh Protests Crackdown." Dw.com. Deutsche Welle. February 12, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/un-up-to-1400-killed-in-bangladesh-protests-crackdown/a-71587345>.

⁷ "India: Hundreds of Muslims Unlawfully Expelled to Bangladesh." 2025. Human Rights Watch. July 24, 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/23/india-hundreds-of-muslims-unlawfully-expelled-to-bangladesh>.

Hindus living in Bangladesh, who at times have been attacked or killed, allegedly by members of Jamaat-i-Islami and its affiliated groups.⁸ The anti-India resentment among Bangladeshi population is rooted deep since Sheikh Hasina's ouster in 2024. It surged during 2026 campaigns, with BNP, Jamaat, and Gen-Z National Citizen Party decrying Delhi's interference. Youth blame India for endorsing rigged 2014/2018/2024 elections. In an interview, Bangladesh's Current Prime Minister Tarique Rahman stated that 'the people of Bangladesh have decided that relations will remain cool. So, I have to stand with my country's people'.⁹ Post-election, New Delhi fears encirclement as Dhaka eyes Chinese jets and Pakistani links, potentially redrawing South Asian security maps.

China: Economic Lifeline or Debt Trap?



Photo: bdnews24.com

⁸ Parkin, Benjamin, and John Reed. 2024. "India Accuses Bangladesh's Interim Leaders of Failing to Protect Hindus." @FinancialTimes. Financial Times. August 18, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/8c4b5078-ca21-4132-aad6-5120e975fbdf>.

⁹ Staff Correspondent. 2025. "Tarique Rahman Reveals Position on Relations with India." Prothomalo. Prothom Alo English. October 7, 2025. https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/4cbacz5zv?tpcc=south_asia_brief.

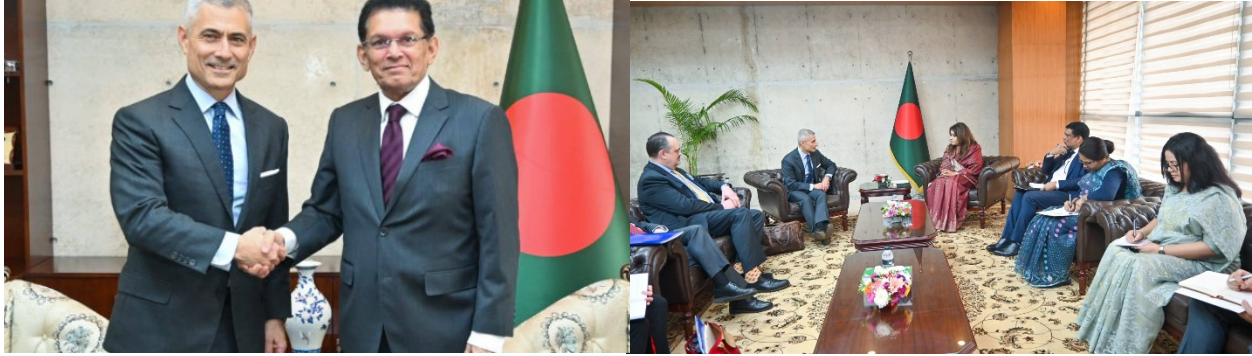
China remains Bangladesh's largest trading partner for more than a decade, with annual bilateral trade hovering around \$18 billion and imports of Chinese goods accounting for nearly 95% of the total.¹⁰ It is also the primary military supplier. Recent moves, such as the establishment of a UAV manufacturing plant and the invitation for China to work on the Teesta Project, have unsettled New Delhi. Through initiatives linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has supported projects such as bridges, power plants, industrial zones, and transportation networks that Bangladesh urgently needs to sustain its development trajectory. China's role in Bangladesh's economy has taken on renewed significance amid the country's recent political transition and post-election recalibration of foreign policy. After the interim government took over, Dhaka began exploring ways to diversify its external partnerships and reduce overdependence on traditional regional alignments. During this transitional period, Beijing moved quickly to support the new authorities, pledging deeper economic cooperation and offering investments, loans, and grants totaling roughly \$2.1 billion for infrastructure and industrial development.¹¹ The interim government also initiated discussions on a potential free trade agreement and expanded Chinese investment in Bangladesh's manufacturing sector, signaling a willingness to deepen economic engagement with Beijing.¹² After the 2026 election, the new government led by Tarique Rahman seeks economic stabilization, job creation, and infrastructure expansion, Chinese financing appears to offer a crucial economic lifeline capable of sustaining Bangladesh's development momentum. In the aftermath of the election, Dhaka's challenge is not simply whether to engage China, but how to structure that engagement in a way that accelerates economic development while preserving the strategic autonomy that the new political order claims to prioritize.

¹⁰ Agarwala, Tora. 2026. "China Set to Widen Footprint in Bangladesh as India's Ties Decline." Reuters, February 10, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-set-widen-footprint-bangladesh-indias-ties-decline-2026-02-10/>.

¹¹ "Explore Pacific Forum's Insightful Indo-Pacific Analysis." 2025. Pacific Forum. October 16, 2025. <https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-85-one-year-later-china-is-the-real-winner-of-the-2024-bangladesh-revolution/>.

¹² "Structural Ties, Political Change: Bangladesh, China and the next Government – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)." 2019. Nus.edu.sg. 2019. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/structural-ties-political-change-bangladesh-china-and-the-next-government/>.

Global Power Dynamics: United States and Others



The United States Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Paul Kapur, held meetings with Foreign Minister Dr Khalilur Rahman and State Minister Shama Obaed this morning, marking the start of his two-day visit to Dhaka.

Beyond the neighborhood, global power competition, especially U.S.-China rivalry also shapes Dhaka's strategic choices. The US interagency visits post-2024 pledged \$1 billion (2021-2026) for stability, with tariff reductions on garments aiding exports.¹³ A trade deal signed on February 9, 2026, which reduced tariffs on Bangladeshi apparel in exchange for large-scale energy and aircraft purchases (including 14 Boeing planes), highlights the "purchase diplomacy" currently in play. Bangladesh's post-election engagement with the West under BNP emphasizes advancing trade and security ties. US Assistant Secretary Paul Kapur's March 2026 visit signals deepening partnership, focusing on defense pacts potentially unlocking advanced arms sales.¹⁴ EU welcomed BNP's landslide as a democratic milestone. EU observers hailed the polls as credible and pledged support for reforms in democracy, rights, and rule of law. As Bangladesh prepares for Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation in late 2026, the transition from the "Everything But Arms" (EBA) scheme to the more stringent GSP+ (Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus) is the

¹³ U.S. Embassy Dhaka. 2024. "U.S. Delegation Meets Interim Government of Bangladesh to Underscore Continued Partnership - U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh." U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh. September 16, 2024. <https://bd.usembassy.gov/u-s-delegation-meets-interim-government-of-bangladesh-to-underscore-continued-partnership/>.

¹⁴ "A Fresh Move in BD-US Relations under BNP Govt." 2026. The Daily Observer . 2026. <https://www.observerbd.com/news/568031>.

government's top economic priority.¹⁵ The EU's stance remains strictly "performance-based." To maintain duty-free access, the new government must demonstrate the effective implementation of 27 international conventions covering labor rights, human rights, and good governance.

Strategic Autonomy: Policy Instruments and Practicalities

To actualize strategic autonomy, Bangladesh could adopt several policy instruments:

- a. Diversified partnership portfolio: Rather than tying its fortunes to any single state, Dhaka could deepen ties with a range of actors including ASEAN countries, the European Union, Japan, and multilateral institutions to reduce dependency on any one donor or security partner.
- b. Economic diplomacy: Bangladesh's export-led growth and its garment sector's reliance on foreign markets including the U.S. place economic considerations at the heart of foreign policy.
- c. Balanced security cooperation: Maintaining defense and security ties with India while exploring limited engagements with other partners could reinforce autonomy without compromising stability.

Risks of Strategic Drift

Strategic drift refers to a situation where a country becomes increasingly aligned or dependent on a single external power, consciously or unconsciously diminishing its policymaking freedom. For Bangladesh, drifting could manifest in several ways:

- a. Economic overdependence on a single partner; for example, heavy reliance on Chinese infrastructure financing could limit Dhaka's options in crisis scenarios.
- b. Security alignment that constrains independent decision-making; if Bangladesh were to enter a formal alliance with a major power, its choices during international disputes could be restricted.

¹⁵ "Bangladesh's New ILO Commitments Send Strong Signal to EU Trade Partners." 2025. Textile News, Apparel News, RMG News, Fashion Trends. December 6, 2025. <https://www.textiletoday.com.bd/bangladeshs-new-ilo-commitments-send-strong-signal-to-eu-trade-partners>.

c. Domestic political leverage by external powers; when domestic politics become a lever for foreign influence (as some analysts suggest is already happening in the region), this could erode autonomous policy spaces.

Policy Recommendations for Dhaka

To navigate the post-election geopolitical landscape effectively, Bangladesh must pursue a calibrated strategy that reinforces strategic autonomy while avoiding the risks of strategic drift. The new government should prioritize diversifying economic and diplomatic partnerships beyond traditional alignments, strengthening engagement not only with major powers such as China, India, and the United States, but also with middle powers including Japan, South Korea, and the European Union. At the same time, Dhaka must ensure that large-scale infrastructure and development projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative are evaluated through transparent financial assessments to prevent unsustainable debt exposure. Strengthening institutional capacity in economic planning, improving regulatory oversight, and maintaining a balanced diplomatic posture will be essential for safeguarding national interests. Ultimately, the post-election government should anchor its foreign policy in pragmatic economic diplomacy, leveraging external partnerships for development while ensuring that Bangladesh retains the flexibility to maneuver in an increasingly competitive regional and global strategic environment.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's geopolitical significance has grown considerably due to its location at the intersection of South and Southeast Asia and its expanding economic footprint. As a result, major powers such as China, India, and the United States increasingly view Dhaka as a strategic partner within the evolving Indo-Pacific landscape. While engagement with these powers offers opportunities for investment, trade, and security cooperation, it also introduces the risk of geopolitical entanglement if Bangladesh fails to maintain a balanced and interest-driven foreign policy.

Bangladesh stands at a strategic crossroads after the 2026 election. The choice between strategic autonomy and drift is not binary, rather it is a spectrum shaped by policy decisions, diplomatic engagement, and domestic strength. An autonomous strategy requires deliberate effort: diversified partnerships, strong institutions, and a clear understanding of national interest. Without these, Dhaka risks drifting toward dependency in ways that may limit its flexibility in critical moments. In the coming decade, Bangladesh's ability to navigate global power rivalries while safeguarding its sovereignty will define not only its foreign policy but also its capacity to translate domestic aspirations into international agency.