

From Ballots to Balance: Resetting Bangladesh's Foreign Policy After the Election

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Introduction

The world of international politics is currently marked by instability and uncertainty. The ongoing conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan continues to influence regional security dynamics.² At the same time, tensions in the Middle East have intensified, particularly following Israel's recent strikes on Iran.³ These developments reflect a broader pattern of geopolitical competition and conflict that is reshaping global alignments.

In this context, Bangladesh's geopolitical position is increasingly important. Its location in the Bay of Bengal places it at the intersection of South and Southeast Asia. The situation in neighboring Myanmar remains unstable, with ongoing internal conflict affecting border security and refugee issues. Relations with India are still in a process of normalization, while Pakistan has shown renewed interest in improving ties. Meanwhile, both United States and China continue to view Bangladesh as strategically significant. Against this backdrop, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government has declared a "Bangladesh First" foreign policy approach. The emphasis, according to party leaders, is on prioritizing national interests and maintaining balanced relations with major powers.

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² Staff, Al Jazeera. 2026. "World Reacts to Eruption of Fighting between Pakistan, Afghanistan." Al Jazeera. February 27, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/27/world-reacts-to-eruption-of-fighting-between-pakistan-afghanistan>.

³ Burke, Jason, and William Christou. 2026. "US-Israel War on Iran Dramatically Expands across Middle East." The Guardian. The Guardian. March 2, 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/02/us-israel-war-on-iran-dramatically-expands-across-middle-east>.

However, given the multiple external pressures and regional complexities, an important question remains: will the current government be able to formulate and implement policies that consistently place the country's and its people's interests first? This commentary will examine the possible and probable foreign policy paths the government may choose in the coming years.

Gradual Normalization: Bangladesh–India Relations in a Changing Context

Bangladesh is now taking steps toward normalizing its relationship with India. In recent years, following the fall of the previous government, there has been persistent anti-India sentiment within the country.⁴ To address this, the government is currently focusing on gradual, practical measures. For example, India had previously suspended certain tourist and other types of visas for Bangladeshi citizens, but steps are now being taken to lift these restrictions.⁵ Such small but concrete measures are intended to help normalize bilateral relations in a steady and manageable way.



Source: The Business Standard

⁴ Mehedi Hasan Marof. 2025. "Why Do Anti-India Sentiments Simmer across Bangladesh?" Netra News — নেত্র নিউজ. January 19, 2025. <https://netra.news/2025/anti-india-sentiments-simmer-across-bangladesh/>.

⁵ "Indian Tourist, Other Visas for Bangladeshis to Resume Soon: Shama Obaed." 2026. The Business Standard. February 27, 2026. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/indian-tourist-other-visas-bangladeshis-resume-soon-shama-obaed-1372656>.

However, Bangladesh's foreign policy toward India should be guided by realism rather than emotion. India is Bangladesh's largest neighbor, a major trade partner, and an unavoidable geographic factor. Any policy built on confrontation will be costly, but blind alignment will also weaken bargaining power. The government must recognize that stability in Dhaka–Delhi relations is essential for border management, connectivity, energy cooperation, and regional trade. At the same time, unresolved issues such as water sharing, border incidents, and trade imbalance require structured and consistent negotiation. A mature policy would treat these as long-term diplomatic files requiring patience and technical engagement.

The government can also work to reduce over-dependency on India by diversifying our relations with other regional and international actors, like China and Western countries. Strategic flexibility should be maintained, engaging with multiple partners without being seen as taking a stance against India or siding with anyone. Backchannel diplomacy and continued dialogue with India's political and security establishments should be maintained, avoiding a confrontational stance. In essence, the focus should be on continued, interest-driven engagement that maintains Bangladesh's sovereignty, strengthens its hand and secures its long-term relationship with India.

Sustainable Partnership with China

Bangladesh's government should approach its relationship with China with caution and strategic balance. Beijing expects continuity and stability in Dhaka's foreign policy regardless of political change. Therefore, the government should reassure China that core economic cooperation will continue, especially in infrastructure, trade, and industrial investment. At the same time, it should clearly communicate that all future cooperation will be assessed strictly on transparency, financial sustainability, and national benefit. Bangladesh should also be careful regarding crossing geopolitical "red lines." China views Bangladesh as strategically important in the Bay of Bengal, while other powers such as India and the United States also have significant interests in the region. The government should therefore avoid allowing Bangladesh to be drawn into strategic rivalry. Engagement with China should remain economic and development-focused, not security-heavy. Diversifying partnerships with Western countries and regional actors would strengthen Bangladesh's bargaining power and prevent over-reliance on any one country.

Besides, Bangladesh should approach the proposed Teesta project with China carefully and strategically.⁶ The government should first ensure that detailed feasibility studies, environmental assessments, and transparent cost evaluations are completed before finalizing any agreement. It should negotiate loan terms cautiously to avoid excessive financial burden and ensure long-term sustainability. At the same time, Dhaka should keep diplomatic communication open with both China and India, given the Teesta's regional sensitivity. Most importantly, the project should be structured in a way that prioritizes Bangladesh's water security, local livelihoods, and national development interests above geopolitical considerations.



Source: The Financial Express

Nevertheless, the government should adopt a measured recalibration. This includes negotiating better trade access to the Chinese market, encouraging joint ventures that generate employment, and ensuring technology transfer rather than debt-heavy infrastructure alone. In essence, relations

⁶ 32nd anniversary issue-I. 2026. "The Financial Express." The Financial Express. 2026. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/china-ready-to-execute-teesta-project>.

with China should be steady and practical. Focus should be on maximizing economic gains while preserving strategic autonomy and policy flexibility.

Development-Focused Diplomacy with the United States

Bangladesh should be focusing on economic priorities, policy autonomy and balanced diplomacy while maintaining relation with the USA. Washington views Bangladesh as strategically important within the Indo-Pacific framework, while also remaining attentive to governance, labour standards, and democratic practices.⁷ Therefore, the BNP government should adopt a steady diplomatic posture that reassures the United States of continuity in cooperation, without appearing overly dependent or politically aligned.

Trade should be the core area to engage. The United States is one of the biggest export partners for Bangladesh, especially in the garment industry. Bangladesh should improve its trade negotiations to secure export competitiveness. Rather than making agreements based on compulsion, Bangladesh should look for mutual benefits in trade agreements, such as better access to markets, high-value manufacturing opportunities, and supply chain diversification.⁸ Engaging stakeholders in the United States through consistent dialogue and diplomacy on trade issues and reforms is crucial to secure investment.

At the same time, the government should also be careful about entanglements in strategic issues. We all are aware of the sensitive nature of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and its implications. Bangladesh should avoid entering into bloc-oriented relation with the US. Relations with the US can continue in areas like maritime security, combating terrorism, and disaster response without compromising strategic neutrality. This way, Bangladesh can continue to have a development-oriented partnership with the US without becoming entangled in great power rivalry. This is

⁷ "US Lauds Interim Govt for Qualitative Changes in Labour Rights, Business Environment." 2024. The Business Standard. December 12, 2024. <https://www.tbsnews.net/foreign-policy/us-lauds-interim-govt-qualitative-changes-labour-rights-business-environment-1016851>.

⁸ Md Obaidullah. 2026. "Why US-Bangladesh Rushed through a Pre-Election Trade Deal - Asia Times." Asia Times. February 5, 2026. <https://asiatimes.com/2026/02/why-us-bangladesh-rushed-through-a-pre-election-trade-deal>.

particularly important since Bangladesh enjoys huge economic relations with China and shares borders with India.

Domestic reforms will, therefore, play an important role in determining the course of relations. Labour standards, transparency, and stability are significant factors for the perception of Bangladesh in Washington. Strengthening the governance and institutional frameworks will not only benefit the economic front, but the diplomatic front will also benefit. However, BNP must follow an interest-based approach to increase economic relations, keep the political dialogue open, maintain policy space and ensure that cooperation with the United States contributes directly to Bangladesh's long-term growth and strategic flexibility rather than limiting its options in a competitive global environment.

A Balanced Policy Toward Pakistan

Pakistan has been actively seeking to establish positive relations with Bangladesh following the change of government in August 2024. Since then, there have been several high-level visits and engagements from Pakistan.⁹ At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the historical context of 1971. While Pakistan has expressed regret over the events of that period, it has not issued a formal, direct apology that Bangladesh recognizes.¹⁰ This historical aspect should remain a significant factor in shaping the bilateral relationship.

While historical grievances, particularly the 1971 war and the unresolved issue of genocide, remain sensitive, engagement is a necessity practically for regional stability and development. BNP should strike a balance between acknowledging the memory of the past and seeking a forward-thinking engagement that does not undermine national dignity and legitimacy. Any strategy to engage should reflect a message of equality, sovereignty, and focus on the outcome to serve national interests.

⁹ "Bangla-Pak Ties Grow, but '71 Still Unreckoned." 2025. The Daily Star. 2025. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/bangla-pak-ties-grow-71-still-unreckoned-3970876>

¹⁰ jagonews24.com. 2023. "Beyond the Past: How Far Can Bangladesh and Pakistan Progress?" Jagonews24.com. 2023. <https://www.jagonews24.com/en/national/news/85216>.

The economic cooperation should be the focal point of Bangladesh's strategy. There are economic cooperation prospects between Pakistan and Bangladesh, such as trade, investment, and joint ventures, especially in areas such as garments, medicine, and agriculture.¹¹ Bangladesh should try to establish agreements that promote mutual benefits, protect export competitiveness and promote technology transfers and employment generation. Taking small but definite measures such as removing trade barriers, holding more talks, and establishing sectoral cooperation can be a good starting point without making risky, high-profile agreements that might attract domestic criticism. Economic cooperation is a good way to promote cooperation without appearing to be dependent on each other, which might undermine Bangladesh's strategic independence.

Although the engagement with the Pakistani government is necessary, the government of Bangladesh needs to be flexible and balanced in its policy towards the region. For example, the engagement can be in the areas of disaster management and regional connectivity, but the government needs to be careful so that it does not create tensions with India and other actors of the region. Communication and dialogue with the Pakistani government will help resolve any misunderstanding between the two countries. Altogether, BNP's approach toward Pakistan should combine cautious pragmatism, economic engagement, and strategic neutrality.

Way Forward: Strengthening Global Partnerships Within & Beyond Major Powers

Bangladesh needs to adopt a diversified and multi-aligned approach towards its foreign policy, not only involving the United States, China, and India, but also the European Union and other global players. The EU happens to be one of the biggest trading partners for Bangladesh, especially for garments, pharmaceutical products, and other products. In the context of the graduation of Bangladesh to the status of a developing country, the country needs to forge stronger economic relations with the EU. We should not depend on the support of only a handful of global players, as this might put the country at a disadvantage.

¹¹ Siddiqui, Ahmad. 2025. "Pak-BD Trade Prospects." Breccorder. October 14, 2025. <https://www.breccorder.com/news/40387217>.

Apart from trade relations, the multi-aligned strategy also gives Bangladesh the opportunity to strengthen its diplomatic maneuverability. By entering into relations with multiple countries including European countries, ASEAN countries, and international institutions, Bangladesh is likely to gain from these countries in terms of investment and development assistance.¹² At the same time, it is also likely to reduce the chances of over-dependence on any single country or group. All the relationships should be interest-based and people-oriented.

Bangladesh, therefore, needs to strike a balance between pragmatism and neutrality. Bangladesh needs to build stronger relations with Europe and other countries, while at the same time maintaining relations with the key players of the region. Reforms within the country, such as governance, transparency, and institutional development, are the key to the credibility of the country. These will make it more attractive to the international community.

In conclusion, therefore, a forward-thinking, multi-dimensional approach to foreign policy, based on economic diversification, pragmatism, and neutrality, will ensure that Bangladesh protects its national interests, builds strong international relations, and deals with the complexities of the international system.

¹² “Bangladesh Must Adjust.” 2025. The Daily Star. 2025.
<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/bangladesh-must-adjust-3833031>