

Forging Future Alliances: Bangladesh's Interim Government and the Next Era of Regional Cooperation

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Source: East Asia Forum

Introduction

As Bangladesh enters a new phase under its interim government, the country stands at a crossroads not only in its internal governance but also in its regional relationships. Sheikh Hasina's resignation has opened the door for a reevaluation of Bangladesh's foreign policy, creating fresh opportunities to reshape alliances and strengthen regional ties. This period of transition offers a unique moment to redefine Bangladesh's role in South Asia and beyond.

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In a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, where economic competition, security dynamics, and climate challenges are ever-present, Bangladesh's interim government must navigate delicate diplomatic terrain. It is an opportunity for the nation to engage more deeply with its neighbors—India, China, Myanmar, and ASEAN members—while fostering partnerships with global powers. With Bangladesh strategically positioned between South and Southeast Asia, the country's ability to balance its relationships could determine the success of the next era of regional cooperation.

This time of political recalibration is not just about maintaining stability at home. It is about laying the groundwork for a more connected and influential Bangladesh in the regional and global arenas. How the interim government manages these new possibilities will shape the country's future standing and the legacy it leaves for the next generation.

Balancing Internal Stability with Diplomatic Engagement Amid Political Change

As Bangladesh's interim government steps into power amidst a period of political change, its first priority must be to establish stability and build trust within the nation. Political transitions, especially following the resignation of a long-serving leader like Sheikh Hasina, can lead to uncertainty, unrest, and a vacuum of leadership. Therefore, before engaging in diplomacy and recalibrating foreign relations, the interim government must ensure that the domestic landscape is secure and inclusive.



Source: Inkstick Media

First and foremost, the interim government should focus on addressing the concerns of the people, ensuring that their voices are heard, and that governance is transparent. Demonstrating a commitment to the welfare of the general population, as opposed to favoring a particular political party or elite group, will be crucial in gaining the trust of the public. This trust is essential for maintaining internal peace and ensuring that political transitions do not escalate into conflict. Stability will only be achieved when the government is perceived as a guardian of the people's interests, not as an extension of any particular political agenda.

Once stability is ensured, the government must communicate to the international community that Bangladesh is entering a new phase—a "New Bangladesh."² This message should emphasize that the country's foreign policy will be geared towards relationships that bring tangible benefits to the general population. By clearly articulating that future diplomatic engagements will prioritize the welfare of the broader citizenry rather than the interests of a specific political class, the interim government can reposition Bangladesh as a reliable and forward-thinking partner in the region. And also, the government should reaffirm its commitment to regional peace and cooperation, focusing on issues like trade, security, and climate resilience, all of which directly impact the lives of ordinary Bangladeshis. Diplomacy should be approached from a pragmatic standpoint—one that seeks not only to strengthen ties with traditional allies but also to explore new partnerships that align with the nation's development goals.

Relation with India in the Time of Change

The previous regime under Sheikh Hasina consistently leaned towards India, without making significant progress on critical issues like border killings, the Teesta water dispute, and other bilateral concerns. But now the interim government must approach relations with India more cautiously, ensuring that every decision prioritizes Bangladesh's national interests. Already India has taken a big risk by giving shelter to Sheikh Hasina, especially since she has lost support in Bangladesh, and the Awami League is struggling to survive politically.³ Even though Yunus might

²Mithu, Mohasin. "What We Need for a New Bangladesh." *The Daily Star*, August 8, 2024. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/what-we-need-new-bangladesh-3672381>.

³Pandey, Anbarasan Ethirajan and Vikas. "Sheikh Hasina Poses a Bangladesh Conundrum for India," September 2, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg4ypkpx1rqq>.

try to make things better and stable with India, there is still a high chance that the India-Bangladesh relation might go through some significant changes. This is mainly because of India's past support for the Hasina government, which may create tensions.



Source: The Business Standard

One of the key challenges the interim government faces is managing the influence of some groups which has historically fueled anti-India sentiment. To avoid these voices from dominating the narrative, the interim government should emphasize that its priority is to serve the people's interests, not align with any political or religious faction. In addition to this, India had expressed concerns about potential attacks from Islamic extremists, which is why they have strengthened security along the borders.⁴ The interim government should reassure India that there is no immediate threat and urge them to avoid spreading misinformation about minority attacks in

⁴“What Does Sheikh Hasina’s Resignation Mean for India-Bangladesh Relations?” *Al Jazeera*, August 12, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/8/12/what-does-sheikh-hasinas-resignation-mean-for-india-bangladesh-relations>.

Bangladesh. While there have been isolated incidents, India's portrayal made it seem as though the entire minority community was under attack.⁵ The interim government should also make it clear that external interference, including from India, should only occur with Bangladesh's consent in its internal matters. Moreover, Bangladesh should focus on resolving existing disputes with India at first. Once these issues are addressed, the two countries can move forward with discussions on new agreements and partnerships.

Relation with China

Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen has been meeting with members of Bangladesh's interim government, including Professor Muhammad Yunus, to discuss enhancing cooperation between the two countries.⁶ China reassured Bangladesh that it remains committed to strong bilateral relations, despite political changes. Ambassador Yao emphasized China's principle of non-interference and expressed hope for Bangladesh's stability and development.⁷ China is also engaged in ongoing and completed infrastructure projects in Bangladesh and is discussing how to advance these projects further, offering support in areas like education and infrastructure to help Bangladesh tackle its current challenges.

China is being cautious about Bangladesh's new interim government, mainly to protect its investments in infrastructure, such as energy and transportation projects. Bangladesh holds significant importance for China, as it has received substantial investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has contributed to major infrastructure developments in Bangladesh, including the Padma Bridge Rail Link, power plants, and ICT infrastructure. As Bangladesh is strategically positioned next to Pakistan, it plays a crucial role in China's efforts to demonstrate the success of the BRI in South Asia, particularly to its domestic audience. So, China's focus is ensuring its investments continue and that the new government remains friendly.

⁵"Falsehoods Over Attacks on Minorities in Bangladesh Flood Indian Media," September 23, 2024. <https://www.newagebd.net/post/Foreign%20affairs/242328/falsehoods-over-attacks-on-minorities-in-bangladesh-flood-indian-media>.

⁶Xin, Liu "Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Interacts With Members of Interim Government." Copyright 2021 by the Global Times, n.d. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202409/1319155.shtml>.

⁷Xin, Liu "Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Interacts With Members of Interim Government."

The interim government should prioritize maintaining a balanced and respectful relationship with China by emphasizing mutual benefits. While ensuring that existing projects like infrastructure and energy initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) continue smoothly, they should also reassure China that Bangladesh values its partnership. At the same time, the interim government can explore new avenues for cooperation in areas such as technology and education. By focusing on transparency and open communication, Bangladesh can strengthen its ties with China while safeguarding its own national interests and development goals.

Relation with the USA

During the interim period, Bangladesh's relationship with the United States needs special attention. In 2022, trade between the two countries exceeded \$9 billion, making the U.S. a key economic partner.⁸ Bangladesh's exports, especially in the garment sector, reached over \$8 billion, showing how vital the U.S. market is.⁹ The interim government should focus on maintaining this partnership, especially given global economic challenges. The U.S. has raised concerns about labor rights and democracy in Bangladesh. To strengthen ties, the interim government should address these issues through open discussions with U.S. officials and show a commitment to improving labor conditions and supporting democratic values. Engaging in transparent and constructive dialogue with U.S. officials is important, demonstrating a clear commitment to improving the condition of the workers, paying heed to their demands. By doing so, Bangladesh can not only secure its economic interests but also improve its international standing and reputation for good governance. The interim government should seek to balance economic cooperation with clear actions on human rights and governance, ensuring that relations with the U.S. remain positive and beneficial.

Crafting a More Balanced and Multilateral Foreign Policy

To balance the interests of India, China, and the United States, the interim government in Bangladesh should focus on building a strategy that emphasizes neutrality and mutual benefit. Instead of leaning too far towards any single country, Bangladesh should position itself as a nation

⁸Md Saiful Islam "Key Roles of Interim Government in Foreign Diplomacy,"The Daily Observer, n.d. <https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=485509>.

⁹Md Saiful Islam "Key Roles of Interim Government in Foreign Diplomacy".

open to collaboration with all. By emphasizing its role as a bridge between major powers, the interim government can create space for diplomatic flexibility. For instance, it can emphasize common interests like regional stability and economic growth, where all three nations—India, China, and the U.S.—stand to benefit from cooperation rather than competition.¹⁰



Source: The Quint

Bangladesh's interim government should prioritize a strategy of active diplomacy that emphasizes its sovereignty and independence. This means ensuring that its foreign policy is not seen as aligning too closely with any particular nation's geopolitical goals. By taking an open, non-aligned approach, the government can reinforce its image as a nation that values constructive, equal partnerships, whether it's attracting investments from China, trade support from the U.S., or regional collaboration with India. Additionally, Bangladesh can use multilateral forums like the United Nations, SAARC etc. to highlight its role in fostering regional peace and stability, which all three countries value. This strategy would not only help Bangladesh safeguard its national interests but also ensure that it remains a respected and autonomous actor on the global stage.

Apart from this, Bangladesh should look beyond its usual allies and work on strengthening ties with non-traditional partners like the Middle Eastern countries. With over 4 million Bangladeshi workers living in the Middle East, their remittances contributed more than \$22 billion to the

¹⁰“Bangladesh's Interim Govt Seeks ‘balance’ of Relations With ‘big Countries’: Foreign Affairs Advisor.” *The Economic Times*, August 9, 2024. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/bangladeshs-interim-govt-seeks-balance-of-relations-with-big-countries-foreign-affairs-advisor/articleshow/112408541.cms?from=mdr>.

economy in 2023, making this region crucial for Bangladesh's economic health.¹¹ The interim government should prioritize protecting the rights and well-being of these workers while also seeking new areas for collaboration, such as energy and technology. Recent agreements, like the labor deal with Saudi Arabia aimed at safeguarding workers' rights, should be extended to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations to ensure broader protection and deeper economic cooperation.

Addressing the Myanmar Conflict and Rohingya Repatriation

On the Rohingya issue, the interim government should continue to highlight the immense burden Bangladesh is shouldering by hosting over a million refugees, while simultaneously advocating for sustainable solutions. It is crucial to maintain international pressure on Myanmar for safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation of the Rohingyas. And also the government must ensure that the refugee camps in Bangladesh remain safe and well-supported through international aid. In addition to this, Bangladesh must prioritize efforts to prevent the spillover of the Myanmar conflict into its territory, particularly to avoid further refugee flows. The government should strengthen border security, while also working closely with international partners and organizations to address the root causes of the conflict.

Conclusion



Source: Radio Free Asia

As Bangladesh transitions under interim leadership, the country faces a vital moment in redefining its role on the global stage. This government has the rare opportunity to reshape foreign relations

with a focus on neutrality, mutual benefit, and strategic alliances. The delicate balance between traditional partners like India, China, and the U.S., along with new opportunities in the Middle East and beyond, offers Bangladesh a chance to craft a more multilateral and diversified foreign policy. By prioritizing national interests, ensuring stability at home, and engaging diplomatically abroad, the interim government can lay the foundation for a resilient, progressive Bangladesh that thrives on collaboration and positions itself as a bridge between competing global interests. The decisions made now will not only shape the next era of regional cooperation but will also determine Bangladesh's legacy on the world stage for years to come.