



# Conditional Reset: India's Calculus in Post-Election Bangladesh

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## Conditional Reset: India's Calculus in Post-Election Bangladesh

*By Nimisha Kesarwani*

### SYNOPSIS

*Bangladesh's February 2026 elections returned Tarique Rahman's BNP to power, offering India a window to reset a relationship badly damaged by the Yunus interim government's tilt toward China and Pakistan. But India must resist naive optimism. Jamaat-e-Islami's historic surge, with its seats concentrated along India's border, is a structural security threat, and Rahman's early moderation may be posture rather than policy. New Delhi's engagement must be generous in economic partnership but firm on red lines.*

### COMMENTARY

The February 12, 2026, elections were the first general elections held in Bangladesh since the toppling of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government in the July 2024 student uprising. The [BNP won 209 of 300 directly elected seats](#), while the Jamaat-e-Islami's 11-party alliance emerged as the principal opposition with 77 seats. However, legitimacy questions persist. The Awami League, the ruling party for 15 years, was barred from contesting leaving a significant share of the electorate without a representative on the ballot.

### Tarique Rahman: Pragmatist or Populist?

[Tarique Rahman](#), 60, is a deeply polarising figure. The son of BNP founder Ziaur Rahman and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, he returned from 17 years of self-imposed exile in London on December 25, 2025, just days before his mother's death on December 30. His return galvanised the BNP's campaign, and he was sworn in as Prime Minister on February 17, 2026.

Rahman notably avoided anti-India rhetoric during his campaign, a departure from BNP tradition., Indian [Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first foreign leader to call him](#) after his victory. India has invited him to a state visit, and [visa services](#) are being restored across all categories as a confidence-building measure.

The critical question is whether the absence of anti-India rhetoric was a strategic campaign posture or a genuine policy shift. [His “Bangladesh First” framing](#) could equally be used to justify protectionist economic nationalism, renegotiate water-sharing agreements, or resist Indian security requests.

### **The Yunus Interlude: Strategic Damage Assessment**

Before examining the Rahman government’s foreign policy trajectory, India must honestly reckon with the structural damage inflicted during the 18-month Yunus interim government, which systematically reoriented Bangladesh away from India, with consequences that will endure regardless of the elected government’s preferences.

The most alarming development was the [China-Bangladesh drone and military deal](#), signed on January 27, 2026, barely two weeks before the election, between the Bangladesh Air Force and China’s CETC (Chinese Electronics Technology Group Corporation). The deal established a civilian and military drone manufacturing facility in Chittagong’s SEZ, approximately 100 kilometres from the Indian border, the same site India had been promised for its own SEZ development in 2015.

Separately, the [United States concluded a trade deal](#) with the Yunus government on February 9, 2026, three days before the election. Both deals, signed by an unelected caretaker government in the days before a scheduled election, set a troubling precedent that India should formally raise in bilateral diplomatic channels.

On Pakistan, the Yunus government broke a taboo that had endured since 1971, [resuming direct trade links, restoring direct flights after 14 years](#), and initiating high-level military-to-military dialogue. Pakistan’s strategic calculus is clear. It offers little economic value to Bangladesh but considerable strategic value as an irritant on India’s eastern flank. This realignment could become a durable problem if the Rahman government does not actively reverse it.

The Teesta River remains an unresolved flashpoint. The [Ganga Water Sharing Treaty with India](#) expired in 2026 without renewal. A mass rally at Chittagong University in October 2025 called for China to manage the Teesta, and further demonstrations erupted across the Rangpur division. [Yunus explicitly asked China for a 50-year river management master plan](#), a direct challenge to India’s role as the upstream riparian power.

India’s response to the Yunus interlude was largely passive. Modi met Yunus only briefly on the sidelines of the [BIMSTEC summit in Bangkok](#) in April 2025 and avoided substantive engagement throughout. The new government offers India a re-entry window, but structural reversals require sustained effort and clear conditionalities.

## The Minority Crisis

[Bangladesh's Hindu minority](#), approximately 13 million people, or 8 per cent of the population, down from over 22 per cent at Partition, faces a situation that is both a humanitarian concern and a strategic pressure point for India. Post-August 2024, mobs targeted Hindu communities in several regions, motivated by a combination of religious hostility, economic predation, and political retribution against Awami League-aligned communities, many of whom are Hindus.

The 2026 elections produced only [four minority MPs](#), all on BNP tickets. With Hindus at 8 per cent of the population, proportional representation would require approximately 25 minority members in a 350-seat parliament. The inclusion of two Hindu ministers in Rahman's cabinet is a positive signal, but it falls far short of structural protection.

[Jamaat-e-Islami won 68 seats](#), nearly quadrupling its previous best of 18 seats in 1991. Its 11-party alliance holds 77 seats, making it the principal opposition. A party that [opposed Bangladesh's 1971 independence from Pakistan](#), is operationally tied to Pakistani intelligence, and whose chief, Shafiqur Rahman, has publicly stated that no woman can lead the party, now controls the opposition benches in parliament.

Crucially, [approximately 70 per cent of Jamaat's seats](#) came from constituencies in Khulna, Rangpur, and Rajshahi, the western and northwestern divisions bordering India's West Bengal and Assam. This geographic concentration can be seen as a structural security concern for India.

## The Hasina Question

Sheikh Hasina's continued presence in India, following her flight from Dhaka on August 5, 2024, is the single most politically sensitive issue in the bilateral relationship. She was convicted in absentia by [Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal](#) in November 2025 and sentenced to death on charges relating to authorising lethal force against protesters, a verdict Bangladesh is demanding India act upon through extradition.

India has refused extradition. The trial was conducted in absentia, under a politically charged interim government, without due process guarantees that meet international standards. India and Bangladesh are bound by a [bilateral extradition treaty signed in 2013 and amended in 2016](#), which Bangladesh has formally invoked. [India's refusal is legally defensible](#) under the treaty's "political offence" provisions, though this defence is not watertight, as murder charges are explicitly excluded from that exemption.

Sheikh Hasina's son's political ambitions, potentially modelled on Tarique Rahman's own journey from exile to the premiership, must be carefully managed. India should not allow its territory to become a staging ground for Awami League political operations targeting the new Dhaka government.

## **The Siliguri Corridor and Northeast Security**

No discussion of India-Bangladesh relations is complete without addressing the Siliguri Corridor, the approximately 22-kilometre-wide strip of Indian territory connecting the eight northeastern states to the mainland. Any hostile military presence in northern Bangladesh, or infrastructure that could enable rapid force projection towards this chokepoint, poses an existential threat to India's territorial integrity.

The proposed tunnel infrastructure under the Siliguri Corridor should be fast-tracked as a national security priority, irrespective of the state of bilateral relations with Bangladesh. Security briefings on Bangladesh should be mandated for all Chief Ministers of states bordering Bangladesh, namely, West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura, so that state-level administrations have situational awareness and can contribute to border management.

## **Red Lines and Economic Leverage**

Any sustainable engagement framework between India and the Rahman government will require both sides to identify areas of threshold concern and to build incentive structures that make cooperation mutually attractive.

For New Delhi, these are likely to include, the configuration of the Chittagong drone SEZ and its implications for India's strategic depth; the status of the Ganga Water Treaty and the long-deferred Teesta agreement; the protection of religious minorities, which carries significant domestic political salience in India; the scope of Bangladesh–Pakistan [military-to-military engagement](#); and border management arrangements, which credibly reduce both irregular crossings and Border Security Force-related fatalities that periodically inflame bilateral sentiment.

The sequencing of how such concerns are raised matters as much as their substance. Privately communicated expectations, with reasonable timelines and face-saving space for Dhaka, are more likely to yield durable outcomes than public pressure that forecloses domestic political room for manoeuvring in Bangladesh.

Such communication should also be accompanied by commensurate incentives, including the restoration of full trade concessions, a reliable electricity supply, land transit rights to Nepal and Bhutan through Bangladeshi territory, and targeted investment in Bangladesh's underdeveloped eastern border districts. Each would address Dhaka's priorities while reinforcing the bilateral relationship's value to both sides.

The disruption to Strait of Hormuz supply lines has underscored the weight of some of these linkages. India's activation of the [Friendship Pipeline](#), which supplies diesel from Assam's Numaligarh refinery to Parbatipur under a five-year, 180,000-tonne annual agreement, provided Bangladesh with meaningful energy insulation during a period of acute global supply stress.

The episode underscores a broader point: India's structural economic influence over Bangladesh is real and substantial, but its strategic value depends on how it is institutionally framed. Linkages understood by both sides as part of a coherent bilateral framework carry considerably more weight than concessions extended without conditionality.

## **Conclusion**

The new dispensation in Dhaka requires a new approach from New Delhi, one that is generous in economic partnership, firm on security red lines, and patient in minority-protection diplomacy. The BNP government, with all its complexities, is a more tractable interlocutor than a Jamaat-led government would have been, and [Tarique Rahman's early signals have been cautiously constructive](#). A new beginning is welcome. But to be sustainable, it must be conditional, calibrated, and structurally grounded.

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