

China-Bangladesh Bilateral Ties after Sheikh Hasina's Departure: A Critical Overview

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has a long-standing companion and ally, China, which is one of the superpowers of the world economy. During the tenure of Sheikh Hasina in the years 2009 to 2024, Bangladesh was enjoyed with good relations with China with a lot of economic cooperation and strategic alignment. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also toured China in July, 2024 and signed a number of critical agreements. But on August 5, 2024, the fantastic twist of fate came when a new head of the state was ousted, and a new head of the government was elected. The new government that was introduced by Dr. Yunus seems to be easing into this transition very carefully. As much as China congratulated the new administration, the country appears to be walking extremely fine on this issue. The article analyses the geopolitical consequences of the change of leadership, which are geared towards economic, political, and social aspects. It uses a qualitative approach to study the strategic issues and opportunities of the new administration and the larger implication of the same in Bangladesh regional and global relations.

Key Words: China-Bangladesh Relations, Sheikh Hasina Overthrow, Geopolitical Repercussions, Leadership Transition, Strategic Challenges

Introduction

The bilateral relation between China and Bangladesh is among the most crucial pillars to South Asian Politics in view of numerous important concerns such as the geo-strategy, security, trade and investment. Chinese Bangladesh has had a makeover in the last twenty years with a direct impact on the relationship between China and Bangladesh particularly during the reign of the Sheikh Hasina Regime. China regarded Bangladesh as a powerful player in their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and at one point it became one of the largest trade and investment partners that Bangladesh had ever. However, the politics of Bangladesh changed radically on 5 the August 2024, following the commencement of Sheikh Hasina under a massive demonstration of Anti-discrimination Students Movement, which introduce an air of uncertainty and adjustment in the foreign policy of Bangladesh towards China. The purpose of this paper is to assess the China-Bangladesh bilateral relations following the exile of Sheikh Hasina through

consideration of multifaceted implications that would give a complete analysis of the background of the relations, political changes, economic changes, geopolitical plans, and the social aspects that form the bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh. This paper is divided into five chapters where chapter one explores the historical ties between Bangladesh and China by tracing the historical evolution of bilateral relations. Chapter two focuses on the shifts of political sphere in the Post-Hasina Regime by exploring leadership transition and ideological shifts, where chapter three explains the economic considerations by examining the investment and trade relations, and the infrastructure projects of China in Bangladesh. Chapter four explores one of the most significant issues of South Asian Politics by explaining the geopolitical considerations of China-Bangladesh Relation, which explores both the regional dynamics and China's strategic priorities in South Asia. In chapter five, lastly, social dimensions of the bilateral relationship between China and Bangladesh are addressed by examining the Public sentiment and cultural exchanges issues.

Historical ties Between Bangladesh and China

The history of China and Bangladesh spans more than two millennia and is mostly focused on the spread of Buddhism. During the Great Buddhist Pala Kingdom's rule in 1038 AD, Atisha Dipankar Srigyan, a well-known scholar and monk from what is now Bangladesh, visited Tibet. Even in ancient China, his enormous influence on the growth of Buddhism had a significant impact on religious trends throughout East Asia (Zhang, 2010). The fact that Chinese academics, monks, and tourists visited the Bengal region further strengthened these early ties and aided in the gradual development of diplomatic ties between the two nations (Jashim, 2011). Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, visited East Pakistan in 1950. The turning point in diplomacy was a significant one in Bangladesh) More so, the future leader of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, visited China between 1953 and 1957 (as a diplomat). In 1963, it was a highly symbolic gesture when a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim visited the grave of Atish Dipankar (Jashim, 2011). Sino-Bangladesh relationship however was not smooth in the run up till the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. China championed political solution to the East Pakistan conflict and was concerned on the mistreatment of people in East Pakistan in the independence struggle (Ibne, 2010). In 1975, this is when, following the independence of Bangladesh, China officially acknowledged the new state, and the process of improving the diplomatic relations started slowly (Chowdhury, I. A. 2020). Since the actual beginning of diplomatic relations in 1976, the improvement of bilateral relations was significantly contributed by the high-level visits between the leaders of the two countries. The key leaders including Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Mohammad Ershad conducted major official visits at this period (Zeitlin, 2005). The trend of strong diplomatic relations between China and Bangladesh continued despite the fears of the neighboring India. Trade pacts, visa waivers, and coordination in different fields added to

bilateral relationships. The former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Hasina took a trip to China in 2010 to enlist the support of several of her major national projects (Harun or Rashid, 2010). Such a visit was accompanied by another diplomatic group that included the opposition leader Khaleda Zia, which was an indication of the commitment between the two parties to furthering relations with China. The trade relations between the two countries have been experiencing a significant upward growth and that has been a significant force behind the enhanced alliance. A notable break in the relationship was the visit paid by President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh in 2016, which included the introduction of increased financial support, economic cooperation, and strategic partnership (Takendra, 2016). The domestic political conflict has been relatively low and the political stability of Bangladesh has been a critical factor in maintaining good relationships between the two countries. The relations were enhanced in 2019 when Sheikh Hasina visited China, which attracted attention of the world to the strategic importance of Bangladesh as one of the partners of China (Joyeeta, 2019). Wei Fenghe, China's Minister of National Defense, visited Bangladesh in 2021 and emphasized military cooperation (Xinhua, 2021). Given Bangladesh's impressive recent economic development, China's rapid economic growth and desire to build long-term alliances have found a suitable partner in that country (Kabir, 2017). The reciprocal advantages and strategic significance of Sino-Bangladeshi relations within the larger modern geopolitical environment are demonstrated by this long-lasting and developing relationship.

The Political Landscape

Post-Hasina Leadership Transition: Potential Candidates and Their Foreign Policy Orientations

Former British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston has a famous quote- "Neither our enemies nor our allies are everlasting." Our passions are timeless, and it is our responsibility to pursue them. It is true that the national interest comes first and last in any state's foreign policy (Mia, M. Miraj 2022: 374). Generally, we know that who or which party came to power in another country is not the main thing for them, but their interest is mainly in regional domination, trade and economy. Naturally, in the context of current international politics, there is a relationship between economy and politics in Bangladesh that cannot be separated. Most recently, Sheikh Hasina left the country on August 5 after resigning from the post of Prime Minister in the face of the student-Mass upheaval in Bangladesh. It is believed that the departure of Hasina government may lead to the deterioration of India-Bangladesh relations. At the same time China's influence with Bangladesh may increase (Voice of America, 11 August 2024). Professor Harsh V. Pant, research vice president of the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi, feels that Sheikh Hasina has effectively balanced Chinese and Indian interests from New Delhi's point of view. However, during its previous tenure in power, the

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was perceived as a pro-China political party (Daily Jugantar, August 11, 2024). Analysts say the movement in Bangladesh paves the way for the formation of a new government that could favor Beijing. However, many things are still uncertain (Ajker Patrika, 9 August 2024).

The assistant dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School at the National University of Singapore, Professor Kanti Prasad Bajpai, stated, 'What happens if the relationship between students and the military goes wrong? Or what will happen if the interim government does not work properly? '. It is not yet clear what exactly is going to happen. But many observers, like Bajpai, believe that Beijing will still benefit greatly from the move (Ajker Patrika, 9 August 2024). Hasina tried to balance diplomacy between the powerful regional rivals but was still considered close to India and fled to that country. According to Bajpai, Sheikh Hasina's opponents were always close to China. This means that this movement has put China in a better situation in Bangladesh. Moreover, even when Sheikh Hasina was in power, China maintained good relations especially with BNP and Jamaat-e- Islami. BNP's foreign policy is generally perceived to be pro-China (Dhaka Tribune, 28 March 2024). Whoever comes to power in Dhaka, it will be very easy for Beijing to work and strengthen bilateral relations (Dhaka Tribune, 25 August 2024). Foreign adviser Mohammad Tauhid Hossain most recently stated in a meeting with the Chinese ambassador that as long as Bangladeshis continue to have a favorable view of China, the close ties between Dhaka and Beijing will endure. "Bangladesh-China relations will remain strong because our relations are people-centric and the people of Bangladesh respect China," Hossain stated during a news briefing held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time (Xinhua, 15 August 2024). In their conversations, they also looked at how to advance China and Bangladesh's all-encompassing strategic cooperative alliance (New Age, August 14, 2024).

China has and continues to tread with extreme caution since the Bangladesh protests began (The Diplomat, 7 August 2024). Sheikh Hasina visited China when the movement was going on in the country. The protest started soon after Hasina supported by China in early July (MFA, 10 July 2024). On 5 August 2024, PM Hasina was forced to resign following a massive Student-Mas upheaval now called the 'Monsoon Revolution' (Khandaker Tahmid Rejwan, The Jamestown Foundation, 20 September 2024). China then quickly began contacting the new potential political leadership of Bangladesh (Global Times, 3 September 2024). Regarding the situation in Bangladesh, China Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Lin Jian of a stated-on August 6, 2024 that they are keeping a careful eye on the developments there. He also said, as Bangladesh's friendly neighbor and strategic development partner, China sincerely hopes that social stability will soon return to Bangladesh (BBC, 7 August 2024). In general, China has been working to improve relations with Bangladesh since Sheikh Hasina's downfall. After Hasina's resignation, Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka Yao Wen held a meeting with Chief Adviser of Bangladesh's Interim Government Dr.

Yunus and other advisers and expressed China's full commitment to work with the new political leaders (The Business Standard, 25 August 2024).

China's ambassador to Bangladesh, Yao Wen, stated that China's commitment to the advancement of China-Bangladesh relations will not alter, regardless of how much the country's internal circumstances change. Dr. Yunus, the chief advisor, met graciously with the Chinese ambassador on Sunday (UNB, 25 August, Prothom Alo, 25 August 2024). He praised the provisional administration. Also, congratulate Yunus. Additionally, the Chinese envoy stated that China adheres rigorously to the principle of non-interference in other nations' domestic affairs. The 'China-Bangladesh Year of People-to-People Exchange' in 2025 would be organized and managed in collaboration with Bangladesh, according to the Chinese envoy (Prothom Alo, August 25, 2024). China, however, is among the few nations that have mentioned working with the Dr. Md. Yunus-led interim government since Sheikh Hasina's overthrow. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (JIB), the country's two largest opposition parties, have historically prioritized maintaining close ties with China and Pakistan over India (Prothom Alo, 16 August 2024). Nilanthi Samaranyake, adjunct Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, in the South China Morning Post's 'This Week in Asia' he said, undoubtedly among the neighboring leaders, New Delhi had the closest and most durable relationship with Sheikh Hasina. He commented that Hasina's departure could signal a turn for the worse in regional relations for India (South China Morning Post, 14 August 2024).

When Sheikh Hasina was in power, she tried to maintain a careful balance in foreign policy with the two regional superpowers India and China (The Indian Express, July 12). If the pro-China BNP

or JIB come to power after a free and fair elections in Bangladesh, China will definitely try to take maximum advantage from this (Nikkei Asia, 8 August 2024). After Sheikh Hasina's departure, China quickly began reaching out to Bangladesh's potential new political leadership and is seeking to seize the opportunity to deepen bilateral ties despite the political transition in Dhaka (Khandaker Tahmid Rejwan, The Jamestown Foundation, 20 September 2024). China was able to fortify its relations with more pro-China political parties, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, when Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was overthrown in August. Particularly in the struggle for regional sway with India, the People's Republic of China (PRC) may exert more influence over Bangladesh (Khandaker Tahmid Rizwan, 20 September 2024, The Jamestown Foundation). The Chinese envoy also met with party leaders, including Jamaat Ameer Dr. Shafiqur Rahman and BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, shortly after Sheikh Hasina's cabinet collapsed.

In a briefing after the meeting with the Chinese ambassador, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said that we think that China's commitment to the people of

Bangladesh is their commitment to development and at the same time they have made it clear that they do not believe in Chinese hegemony. He said, I want to make it clear that BNP has always believed in the 'One China Policy'. We still strongly want to make that declaration. In that meeting, Fakhru and the Chinese ambassador strongly expressed that the Chinese Communist Party and Bangladesh Nationalist Party want to work together and their relationship will be strengthened (Tribune Desk, 21 August/BSS, 21 August 2024). Moreover, an important point is needless to say here that recently a delegation of four members of BNP visited China at the invitation of the Chinese Communist Party. And there, BNP Vice Chairman Asaduzzaman Ripon (Political Studies Plus Programming consisting of representatives of South and South Asian political parties and think tanks of the Chinese Communist Party to be held from November 7 to 16) led the delegation (The Daily Star, 7 November 2024). Not only that, the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh met BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia in December and presented her with a traditional Chinese wall banner and exchanged greetings with Begum Zia and inquired after her health (BSS, 4 December, The financial express, 4 December 2024).

In the month following the meeting with the BNP in August, the Chinese ambassador paid a courtesy call on the Ameer of the party, Dr. Shafiqur Rahman, at the central office of the Jamaat in Moghbazar of the capital. He termed Jamaat-e-Islam as a well-organized political party at that time (News18, 3 September 2024). One thing to note here is that after the trial of the 71 crimes against humanity started in March 2010, no diplomatic mission went to the office. In September of the following year, the police locked the office of the Jamaat. They got the opportunity to open the office only after the fall of Sheikh Hasina. In that sense, it would be appropriate to say that this meeting of the Jamaat with the Chinese ambassador was very fruitful and significant. In that meeting, the religious party Jamaat will get an opportunity to work closely with the ruling Communist Party of China. China's citizens wish to have cordial ties with Bangladeshis. China will contribute to Bangladesh's future growth, development, and prosperity (Samakal, 2 September 2024). The Communist Party invited members of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the nation's Islamic political parties, and China's ruling party to visit the country at the end of November, less than two months after the meeting. Then, Syed Abdullah Taher, a former member of Parliament, and Naib Ameer, a central figure in Jamaat-e-Islami, led this party. This is the first time that the CPC has formally invited representatives of Jamaat or any other Islamic group (The Daily Star, November 28, 2024).

Around the same time, China invited both (BNP-JIB) parties to their country. Here it is understood that keeping in mind the upcoming elections in Bangladesh, China is maintaining good relations with the opposition parties of the Hasina government. Whichever party comes to power in the elections, China will have more opportunities to work with them and Bangladesh-China bilateral relations can be strengthened. According to Hans J. Morgenthau, said in his famous book 'Politics Among Nations', the attitude of states is inherently selfish

and aggressive. In the politics of the current world system, there is a clash of interests and power. Neither side is willing to make concessions (Mia, M. Miraj 2022: 46). Be it India or China - no country will ever ignore any of their interests. Tom Felix Joehnk and Forest Cookson are two researchers who study the dynamic nature of South Asian geopolitics (Mia, M. Miraj 2022: 377). In their published piece "China and India's geopolitical conflict-war for Bangladesh," geopolitical struggle for Bangladesh. They claim that there are various reasons why China and India are vying for Bangladesh. For political, religious, and national security reasons, Bangladesh is crucial to India. Despite the fact that Bangladesh and China do not share a border, China depends on Bangladesh for its economic and regional dominance. Bangladesh is a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (East Asia Forum, April 11, 2018).

Ideological Shifts in Bangladesh and its impact on China's Projects and Agreements

When Sheikh Hasina's government steps down in 2024 and a new government takes over, various analyzes have emerged on the future of ongoing projects and deals with China. The new government may re-evaluate existing agreements and projects with China. In particular, the Sheikh Hasina government accepted India's proposal by rejecting China's proposed \$1 billion financing for water management project in Teesta River, much to China's displeasure. The new government may reconsider China's participation in the project, which could help improve relations with China. After Sheikh Hasina's resignation, China may see an opportunity to increase its influence in Bangladesh. In particular, China could strengthen its role as the largest lender and investor in Bangladesh. In order to build positive links with the new administration, China may attempt to forge ties with a number of political parties, such as the BNP and JIB. The new government will want to maintain relations with China, but it may be cautious about the terms of Chinese loans and investments, to reduce the risk of future debt trap. Besides, balancing diplomatic relations between China and India will be a key problem for the next government. The future of ongoing projects and deals with China under the new government will depend on the government's policies, diplomatic strategies and national interests. Maintaining relations with China is important to Bangladesh's economic and strategic interests, but the terms of loans and investments need to be cautious. But it is also true that the fall of Sheikh Hasina through the student movement has put China in Bangladesh at least in a better position than India and there is a chance for a new way forward for the country.

Economic Implications

China, as a growing superpower, is following an umbrella policy so that its regional superiority and economic and political partnership are ensured among its neighbor countries including Myanmar, Japan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Bangladesh has a "Closer Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation" with China since 1975 but the relationship went somewhat predicament during the last term of Sheikh Hasina because of the over-dependent on India.

China is increasingly taking many economic steps due to increased indirect influence avoiding the Indian monolithic decision in Bangladesh. Under the BRI, China spent 14.45b US dollars which increased the economic relationship of the two countries. If we look at the prior taken investment by Sheikh Hasina Regime.

Investment and Trade

China and Bangladesh have a good bilateral economic partnership that reached \$24 billion in 2022 and Bangladesh enjoys duty-free access to 97% of Chinese products, enhancing exports like garments and jute (Hossain & Islam, 2021). Vaccines and refined petroleum are China's top exports to Bangladesh, while knit t-shirts, tanned horse and cow hides, and light rubberized knitted fabric are Bangladesh's top exports to China (Sahoo, 2013). In 2023-2024, Bangladesh imported from People's Republic of China \$16637.1 million converted to 184845.7 BDT which is 26.4% share of the total import sector of Bangladesh (Bangladesh Bank, n.d.). The Imported products with budget from China are shown on Table-01.

Table 1. Detailed Imports from China, 2015-2020

| Sector | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | Total |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Primary Goods | | | | | | | |
| Cotton | 1780.0 | 1829.9 | 2053.1 | 2198.6 | 1702.0 | 1541.0 | 11104.6 |
| Mineral Fuels & Oil | 152.6 | 197.0 | 294.9 | 90.6 | 180.1 | 261.9 | 1177.1 |
| Fruits | 74.2 | 83.3 | 95.6 | 71.3 | 102.1 | 107.9 | 534.4 |
| Vegetables | | | 39.4 | 34.9 | 101.8 | 78.3 | 254.4 |
| Coffee, Tea & Spices | | | 31.5 | 48.7 | | | 80.2 |
| Salt, Sulphur | 133.1 | 90.6 | | | | | 223.7 |
| Sub-Total | 2139.9 | 2200.8 | 2514.5 | 2444.1 | 2086 | 1989.1 | 133374.4 |
| Secondary Goods | | | | | | | |
| Electric and | 2738 | 3186 | 3611 | 4561 | 3429 | 3533 | 21058.4 |
| Electronics | | | | | | | |

China-Bangladesh Bilateral Ties after Sheikh Hasina's Departure: A Critical Overview

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| Machinery | | | | | | | |
| Textile | 1715.8 | 1788 | 2184.5 | 2768.7 | 2526.6 | 2907.1 | 13890.7 |
| Chemicals | 819.1 | 725.5 | 796.2 | 1025.4 | 900.6 | 1185.8 | 5452.6 |
| Metal Products | 611.3 | 579.2 | 8231 | 950.1 | 698.6 | 963.5 | 4633.7 |
| Transport | 252.1 | 258.6 | 266.3 | 360.7 | 227.7 | 261.1 | 1626.5 |
| Medical Goods | 93.5 | 120 | 122.7 | 110.1 | 150.1 | 182.4 | 778.8 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Plastics and article | 213.6 | 238.7 | 297.9 | 385.2 | 417.5 | 861.5 | 2414.4 |
| thereof | | | | | | | |
| Paper and pulp | 118.4 | 130.3 | 173.9 | 215.3 | 165.7 | 212.0 | 1015.6 |
| Rubber and | 73.7 | 63.8 | 74.7 | 80.5 | 83.0 | 102.0 | 477.7 |
| Articles thereof | | | | | | | |
| Class and | | | 45.5 | 70.9 | 47.8 | 60.7 | 224.9 |
| glassware | | | | | | | |
| Footwear | | | 49.7 | 59.5 | 54.2 | 54.2 | 217.6 |
| Ceramics Products | | | 53.4 | 43.5 | | | 96.9 |
| Miscellaneous | 103.2 | 118.2 | 138.4 | 150.9 | 131.9 | 163.6 | 806.2 |
| Manufactured | | | | | | | |
| articles. | | | | | | | |
| Sub-total | 6738.7 | 7208.3 | 8645.2 | 10781.8 | 8832.7 | 10486.9 | 52694 |
| Others | 1179.5 | 1031.8 | 532.6 | 413 | 571.1 | 449.3 | 4177.3 |
| Grand Total | 10058.1 | 10440.9 | 11692.3 | 13638.9 | 11489.8 | 12925.3 | 70245.7 |

Source: (Bangladesh Bank, n.d.; Hasan & Lim, 2024)

China became a friendly investor who fulfilled Bangladesh's economic ambitions after Western nations refused to fund infrastructure projects in the country. China has significantly influenced investment patterns, especially in the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar) economic corridor (Mashrafy & Ullah, 2024). Bangladesh received \$24.1 billion worth of commodities from

China in 2021, compared to just \$652 million in 1995 (ORCA, 2024). China has taken many development projects and investments, The China- Bangladesh Friendship Talent Development Project is one of them which prioritizes the online- based education system through smart classrooms aiming to develop and maintain digital education and smart Bangladesh. During Hasina's visit to Beijing in July 2024, the two countries upgraded their ties to a comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership (THE STRATEGIST, 2024). Additionally, Chinese investment totaled 7.91 billion USD between 2010 and 2015, and it peaked in South Asia between 2016 and 2018 at 18.53 billion USD. Furthermore, 2022 saw the greatest amount in the South Asian region at \$24.1 billion. China's FDI Net Equity Capital Inflows to Bangladesh fell from \$210.62 million in 2021 to \$86.24 million in 2023. This is happened actually because of the over-dependence on India and the rivalry between India and China. As Sheikh Hasina made a close relationship with India which became a barrier to China investing properly in Bangladesh, the fall down of her regime has created a significant opportunity to enhance the bilateral relationship and inflow of FDI But if the BNP takes pro American policy, China-Bangladesh relation can be hampered. China had already invested in the Payra Power Plant, Dhaka Bypass Expressway and many textiles manufacturing zones but the regime change, India, a regional power, can seek to counterbalance China's influence under a new government, which might impact the scale or approval of Chinese investments in strategic sectors moreover a change in leadership may create uncertainties, particularly if new leadership adopts a more balanced or pro-Western policy.

Infrastructure Projects

As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes the Silk Road Economic Belt, a transcontinental route that connects China with South-east Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe by land, the two nations have signed 27 projects, nine of which specifically target road and connectivity improvements (EBRD, n.d.). Besides, China had already invested in Payra Power Plant, Dhaka Bypass Expressway and many manufacturing infrastructural zones. China invests much in the BRI projects which include the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project for which China provided \$3.3 billion loans linking Dhaka city with southern regions, Karnaphuli Tunnel Project, the first underwater tunnel in South Asia, for which Bangladesh borrowed \$1 billion from China linking Chattogram with the industrial belt, the Payra Power Plant, SEZs and Industrial Hubs meaning that Chinese companies are helping develop Economic Zones, including in Anwara and Chattogram to enhance manufacturing and exports within Bangladesh. China and Bangladesh upgraded their relationship from a "strategic partnership" to a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" on July 10, 2024, by signing 21 documents, including two renewed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), and announcing seven additional projects (The Daily Star, n.d.-a). Bangladesh and China have signed agreements for the 9th

China-Bangladesh Bilateral Ties after Sheikh Hasina's Departure: A Critical Overview

Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge Project, the Public-Private Partnership for Sustainable Infrastructure Development, the China-aid Construction of Nateshwar Archaeological Site Park in Bangladesh, and the Sixth Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge Renovation Project, also known as the Muktarpur Bridge, which spans the Dhaleshwari River and connects Dhaka to the Munshigonj district.

Table 2 lists these project-related vessels for the Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC), the general management and reclamation of the Teesta River, the establishment of an economic zone at Anwara in Chattogram, the improvement of the Akhaura-Sylhet rail track, the installation of digital connectivity, and the provision of water to municipalities.

Table 2. The ongoing major projects of China in Bangladesh

| Project Name | Description |
|--|---|
| The Sixth Bangladesh-China | It is known as the Muktarpur Bridge which connects the Munshiganj district over the Dhaleshwari River. |
| Public-Private Partnership for | a way for the public and private sectors to collaborate on infrastructure projects in a long-term contractual arrangement |
| The 9th Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge Project | In honor of Bangamata Begum Fazilatun Nesa Mujib, the bridge bears her name. The first day of construction was November 1, 2018. It is a project to build a bridge over the Kocha River that will connect the Khulna and Barishal divisions of Bangladesh (Dhaka Tribune, n.d.) |
| Nateshwar Archaeological Site Park | includes investing in cultural infrastructure, transferring technology, renovating and conserving Panam City and Nateshwar, working together to build the Bangabandhu Opera House (The Business Standard, n.d.). |
| Padma Bridge Rail Link | A rail link that connects to the Padma Bridge, which is the longest bridge in South Asia. |
| Four-lane urban highway around Dhaka | A 48-kilometer-long highway that is scheduled to be completed in 2025. |

Source: (Authors' compilation)

After the changing of leadership in Bangladesh, these infrastructural projects can fall into the stakes if the new government becomes pro-western or if the new government maintains balancing relations with India, Japan or the U.S, there could be reduced enthusiasm for Chinese-funded projects leading to greater competition for infrastructure deals.

Geopolitical Considerations

Both China and India- as regional super powers- have geo-strategical and security concerns considering many traditional and non-traditional security issues. Bangladesh also have some geopolitical calculations on the relationships with these two countries. The regional dynamics of South-Asia and China's politics in South-Asia, were significant during Hasina regime and will be significant after her collapse.

Regional Dynamics

China as a regional hegemony always wanted to encircle its trading areas around South Asia but India had become a vital barrier or competitor. During Hasina's tenure she tried to maintain a diplomatic balance between powerful regional rivals but she was still considered close to India, and she fled to that country. According to Bajpai, 'Sheikh Hasina's opponents were always close to China. This means that this movement has brought China into a better position in Bangladesh. Besides, Hasina has angered China by deciding to accept India's offer to finance the Teesta River water project. China had offered \$1 billion for the project. Analysts believe that Sheikh Hasina was rejected for \$5 billion during her last visit to China on 14 July 2024, and that this was because China was not included in the Teesta project. China wanted to expand the trade route through the Bay of Bengal without any Indian intervention. Furthermore, while the relationship between India and Bangladesh was ambiguous for Bangladesh and based on a zero-sum game for India, the relationship between China and Bangladesh has been built on a mutually beneficial strategy. In fiscal year 2021–2022, bilateral trade between Bangladesh and India reached \$15.93 billion, a threefold increase from US\$5.3 billion in 2012–2013. However, Bangladesh's exports to India only accounted for US\$1.98 billion of the overall commerce (ORCA, 2024). Now, China gets a great opportunity to expand its regional dynamics and expand its economic, political and strategic military relationship with Bangladesh. China may find it simpler to cooperate with the next government in Dhaka, according to Michael Kugelman, Wilson Center in Washington director of the South Asia Institute. "But how long the period of uncertainty will last is a matter of concern for China. China cannot afford to let this period of uncertainty last longer than it needs to ensure the security of its investments, other interests, and stakes in Bangladesh."

China's South Asian Strategy

Geopolitics is the connection between political power and geography (Mannan, 2018). Washington and Beijing want to increase their sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean region. As a result, both countries have various activities to get all countries in the region on their side. Due to India's greater influence, China's presence in Bangladesh was somewhat limited. Currently, Beijing can take advantage of India's negative stance on Bangladesh. Furthermore, Chicken Neck Issue creates a significant importance of Bangladesh to China because Bangladesh and China almost touch each other, separated solely by the slender Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the "chicken's neck," which serves as a crucial link between mainland India and its northeastern states, the region holds strategic significance. In the event of a potential Sino-Indian border conflict involving alleged Bangladeshi infiltrators, China might attempt to sever India's Northeast from the rest of the country by imposing a military blockade on the corridor. The success of such a move would largely hinge on Bangladesh denying India military access through its territory (Mannan, 2018). As Bangladesh is a strategic and vital neighbor of China and India and the regional hegemonic competition between China and India makes a critical situation but it is clear that due to the extra-reliance on India of the Awami League (AL) and zero-sum policy and projects, Bangladesh can make a good economic, political and military relationship with China. China as a regional super power will always be interested about chicken's neck to minimize the rising of India as another regional super- power. Bangladesh can use this as bargaining tool of its foreign policy for win-win relationship among Chin-Bangladesh-India.

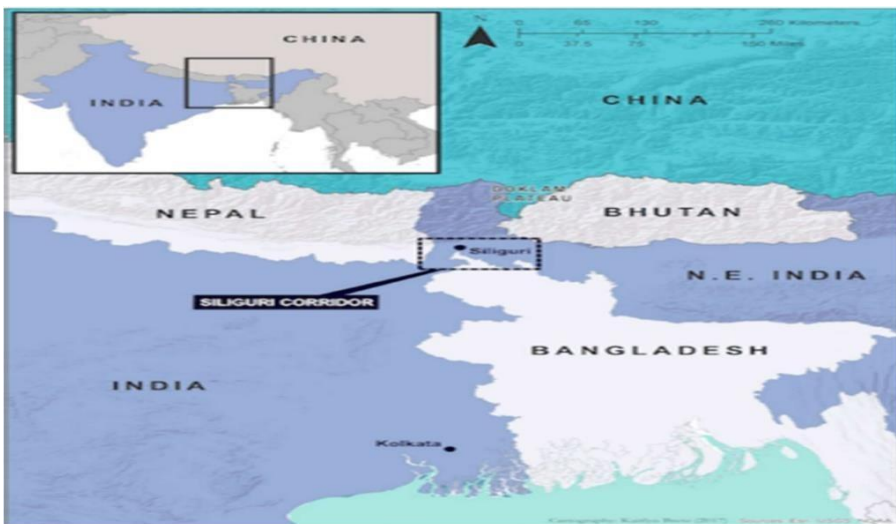


Figure 1. India's Siliguri Corridor. Map prepared by K. Bretz & P. McDaniel (UNC Libraries).

Once more, Bangladesh and Pakistan had virtually little communication during the Awami League tenure. There were significant barriers even in the area of interpersonal communication or commerce. Bangladesh is now able to give China access to the Bay of Bengal and, via it, the Indian Ocean, which is much sought after. The "Irrawaddy Corridor," which runs through Bangladesh and Myanmar and connects Kunming in Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal, provides China with land-based marine access that is essential for the development of its southern and western areas. Additionally, the corridor becomes more important for delivering gas from Myanmar's offshore installations to Yunnan and for repairing its shipping's vulnerability in key chokepoints in Southeast Asia. In terms of strategy, access agreements, especially in Chittagong and Myanmar's ports in the Bay of Bengal, guarantee a Chinese strategic initiative. Furthermore, through the Indian Ocean, Dhaka provides Beijing with convenient access to energy hubs in the Middle East,

Africa, and Iran. China's expanding economy has a huge demand for energy, and Bangladesh is the country's link to ensuring hydrocarbon security because it offers access to the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal. For China, the prospective deep seaport at Sonadia is strategically significant. The obvious choice of the collaboration according to that criterion has been Bangladesh. Also, the Chinese exerted a lot of pressure in the energy sector, hence, the reason why the Indian Ocean and its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) are vital in the energy supply (Homes and Yoshihara, 2009). Almost 80 percent of the imported energy to China is delivered through the Indian Ocean before passing through the Strait of Malacca that includes West Asian and African sources (Len, 2015). Due to China's unquenchable energy needs, the country will continue to rely on the Indian Ocean. Beijing is under tremendous pressure to ensure a steady flow of energy from abroad. In light of China's "Malacca dilemma," port facilities along Bangladesh's coast are crucial (Mannan, 2018). The new Bangladeshi governments would be impacted by these geostrategic factors pertaining to the relationship between China and Bangladesh.

Social Dimensions

Social dimensions is another pivotal element in relationship between any state actors or non-state actors, especially public sentiment and cultural exchanges have important implications on the relationship.

Public Sentiment

Since Bangladesh's independence, the two countries have had a cordial relationship because India has supported and granted sanctuary to its citizens. But there are grievances regarding India's handling of water-sharing disputes including the Teesta River Project, trade imbalances, and border killings. Some view India as overly dominant in regional politics, leading to a perception of

India as an overbearing neighbor. The Teesta River Project created a critical situation between China and India like Cold war and India pressurized the Bangladesh government to box China out of this project (The Diplomat, n.d.). Most of the citizen of Bangladesh are angered for the involvement of India in their project decisions and the uncertain flood from the Indian upward made the people factional. The trade imbalance between the two countries created more grievances within people. Bangladesh imported \$14.58 billion worth of goods from India in FY 2021–2022, but only US\$1.8 billion worth was exported to that nation. However, the statistics for the fiscal year 2020–21 were US\$1.09 billion for exports and US\$9.69 billion for imports (The Financial Express, n.d.). Consequently, the evolution of the Taka happened intensely and it impacted badly the living standard of the people through increasing price hiking. Another reason of increasing grievances among people is extra-judicial border killings. It is the most pivotal factor which shifts the good sentiment from India to China. From 2015-2020, a total of 1236 Bangladeshi citizens were killed at the Bangladesh-India border by BSF (Shahriar, 2021). On January 7, 2011, the BSF in Phulbari Upzilla, Kurigram, shot and killed a 15-year-old girl named Felani as she entered Bangladesh illegally from India. Her body was placed on the barbed wire fencing at the India- Bangladesh border. Moreover, the latest victim is Swarna Das, a 16-year-old schoolgirl, killed by BSF at the Bangladesh-India border in Kulaura Upazila of Moulvibazar (The Daily Star, n.d.-b). These types of extra-judicial killings by Indian forces create grievances among the people of Bangladesh and a lot of movements happened against India: 'Indian Quit' is one of them which is a social media movement in Bangladesh that calls for a boycott of Indian products. This anti-India attitude gives a great opportunity to China holding Bangladesh's economic, political and military sectors to avoid Indian influence. Economic benefits from Chinese investments and development aid are seen as significant and less politically conditional compared to Indian assistance and China's neutrality in Bangladesh's internal and regional issues appeals to many, fostering a perception of China as a less intrusive partner. A growing preference for Chinese products and technology, coupled with Chinese-funded mega projects, adds to China's favorability among segments of the population.

Cultural Exchanges

Bangladesh and China have cultural ties which have significantly contributed to the relationship between them. Student exchange programs, culture festivals, language training facilities and art and heritage partnerships are some of the initiatives that are bringing about mutual understanding. Confucius Institutes such as those set up in Bangladesh assist in the promotion of the Chinese culture and language, and the students of Bangladesh studying in China act as cultural ambassadors when they go back. The traditional Bangladeshi values can be connected with some elements of Chinese cultural practices and there was a possibility of enhanced people-to-people relationship. Nevertheless, further

efforts should be made to equal these exchanges so that there is a two-way flow, as the culture of Bangladesh should also be reflected and praised in China. Fostering grassroots relationships, including tourism and city-to-city relationships would promote these cultural links further, which would have the two countries establish a strong and lasting relationship based not only on economics and diplomacy but also on respect and understanding between them. Following the beginning Hasina and the end of much Indian dominance in Bangladesh, cultural interchanges between Bangladesh and China, could be more noticeable yet it is entirely dependent on how the Bangladesh and China seek to perceive this.

Conclusion

The exit of Sheikh Hasina is a historical landmark in the Chinese-Bangladesh relationships with far-reaching social, geopolitical, and economic consequences. Traditionally, Bangladesh, under the leadership of Hasina, turned out to be a significant Chinese ally in South Asia, and much Chinese investment in infrastructure and trade determined the development direction of the country. Her departure, however, brings about doubts over the continuation of these bilateral relations that are also being discussed by Chinese foreign affair department in their press briefing. Politically, one can see some shift towards foreign policy due to the change of leadership in Bangladesh. The opposition of ideologies by the candidates may twist the ties of Bangladesh with China; this will create a complex relationship between the international relations and the local politics. Economically, in case new leadership renegotiates or reassesses agreements, the feasibility of the Chinese investments and infrastructure projects, particularly under such programs as the Belt and Road Initiative, can be questioned. As China wishes to retain its power in the face of other competing regional countries, with India being one of them, the geopolitical impacts of Hasina's departure on South Asia are far-reaching. The political change is a significant event in shaping the change of Beijing strategy since Bangladesh is strategically positioned at the intersection of South and Southeast Asia. The future of the China-Bangladesh relations will also be influenced socially by the mood of the people and the cultural interactions. Although there is acknowledgment of economic gains related to Chinese investments, there is increasing concern of sovereignty and overdependence that can affect the general opinion, which can alter political decisions. To sum up, the departure of Sheikh Hasina leaves Chinese-Bangladesh relationships with a challenge and opportunity. The course of this alliance will depend on how successful the two countries will be in the process of working around the shifting political landscape and finding the balance between their mutual interests and the new ambitions of the leadership. This shift is a critical trial in the bilateral relations as the reaction that china will have on relation to the two-way change in foreign policy of Bangladesh will determine the direction of its influence in South Asia.

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