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Bangladesh/India

New Delhi faces the gravest geopolitical fallout from Sheikh Hasina's exit

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In the hours before Sheikh Hasina fled Gonobhaban, her official residence in Dhaka, on 5 August, Bangladeshi security forces killed scores of protesters who had joined a huge march to the capital demanding an end to her autocratic rule. Around the same time, it has since been reported, Hasina had pressured the army chief to enforce a curfew using deadly force, which would have meant the military joining the bloodbath. The army chief refused.

The prime minister's desperate hold on power finally slipped when security chiefs warned that the advancing protesters would reach Gonobhaban within an hour and they doubted their ability to contain the crowd. Speculation that India, her strongest international ally, would intervene in her favour proved unfounded, and Hasina was left at the mercy of the military, which ultimately facilitated her escape across the border. She wound up at a safe house in Delhi, trying but failing to gain asylum in the United Kingdom. All told, the weeks of protests against her government, which started on university campuses and escalated in reaction to brutal state repression, left at least five hundred dead, including more than thirty children.

The hasty exit deprived Hasina of the chance to address her supporters and her country, as she had planned on doing that day. A week or so later, reports emerged of her describing the speech to her associates and blaming the United States for orchestrating her fall, apparently because she refused to surrender control over St Martin's Island in the Bay of Bengal. Hasina's son denied all of this, but it could not have helped her already rocky relationship with Washington DC, which months ago had criticised the sham election that gave Hasina a fourth consecutive term in power.

Friendless in the United States, rebuffed by the United Kingdom – and, reportedly, also Europe and the United Arab Emirates – Hasina is finding few places to turn to. China and Russia, earlier her vocal supporters, also appear too distant or too reluctant to help. For now at least, the deposed despot remains moored in Delhi, her presence there a daily reminder to the people of Bangladesh of New Delhi's role in enabling her reign. Unsurprisingly, the Bangladeshi public's ire against India is only growing.

India likes to think of itself as the big brother in Southasia, and in New Delhi, too, Hasina's exit created shockwaves – in this case for the Indian big brother's failure to protect his little sister in her time of need. New Delhi struggled to issue a coherent response to the developments in Bangladesh for nearly 24 hours after Hasina fled. This delay was especially notable as India had previously been quick to label the growing protests against Hasina's rule, and her repression of them, Bangladesh's "internal matter". Now, even as thousands of Indian citizens returned home due to deteriorating security in Bangladesh, New Delhi remained silent until the Indian government convened an emergency all-party meeting.

The fact that New Delhi called an all-party meeting – something typically reserved for national-security emergencies – highlighted India's concerns over a potential influx of refugees from Bangladesh, which it has allegedly faced during past periods of turmoil. No such influx arrived this time, but India also has other security concerns in the country – not least that rebel groups from its restive Northeast could find safe havens across the border. That worry, to some extent, explains New Delhi's heavy investment in keeping Hasina in power and on its side, but acting as cheerleader to the despot has clearly now given New Delhi exactly the kind of instability it wants to avoid.

Since returning to power in 2009, after first holding office from 1996 to 2001, Hasina managed a delicate balancing act in Bangladesh's foreign policy, drawing praise for navigating the geopolitical rivalry between China and India. Over time, the balance increasingly favoured India and the bilateral relationship deepened to an unprecedented level.

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Beneath the surface, however, widespread public discontent built up against what many perceived as India's exploitative relationship with Bangladesh – encapsulated, for example, by a highly controversial and skewed deal to buy power from the Adani Group, a conglomerate intimately tied to the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi. This discontent erupted into a non-political “India Out” campaign following India's overt backing of the questionable re-election of Hasina and her Awami League party in January 2024.

As New Delhi got closer to Hasina, it successfully thwarted China's attempt to establish a deep-sea port in the Bay of Bengal, despite Bangladesh previously adding two Chinese submarines to its naval fleet. China's efforts to gain access to existing maritime ports in Chittagong and Mongla were similarly frustrated, while India secured concessions to use these ports and reportedly obtained management rights in Mongla. Hasina also agreed to India's proposal to establish a radar surveillance network along Bangladesh's coastline, and opened up new areas of cooperation, including defence procurement and collaboration on space technology.

One of Hasina's most controversial concessions was granting India corridor facilities for transporting goods through Bangladesh via road, rail and riverine routes. While bilateral trade quadrupled during Hasina's 15-year rule, it remained lopsided, with Indian exports to Bangladesh valued manyfold higher than Bangladesh's meagre USD 2 billion in exports to India. Following the “India Out” campaign, Indian exports to Bangladesh and tourism earnings from the country saw steep declines, reflecting popular resentment towards India's unwavering support for Hasina's authoritarian regime.

While the “India Out” campaign, driven primarily by social-media influencers, gained momentum after the Modi government's strong backing of Hasina's re-election, the ground for anti-India sentiment had already been laid by decades of grievances. These included the frequent killing of civilians along the two countries' border by India's Border Security Force, the lack of reciprocity in the sharing of waters from common rivers like the Teesta, regular derogatory comments in Indian politics about Bangladeshis regarding alleged illegal migration, and a perceived hypocrisy in India's stance over the rights of religious minorities.

Hasina's disgraceful exit has necessitated a re-evaluation of India's policy towards Bangladesh. There is a clear divide among Indian politicians and analysts, with some still denying that the uprising was a popular reaction to a brutal dictator and instead blaming it on Islamist forces or various international conspiracies. The more perceptive observers are noting Bangladeshis' growing resentment against India's perceived attempts to subvert their desire for democracy, justice and the rule of law through such things as spreading misinformation, stoking communal tensions and sheltering Hasina.

In fact, Bangladesh's latest election was not the first non-democratic vote in Hasina's favour that received New Delhi's full approval; in 2014 and in 2018, India had backed Hasina through unfree elections that returned her to office. This record has drawn lots of criticism within Bangladesh, including from Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate and chief adviser of the interim administration installed in Hasina's wake. “If there is a fire in the brother's house, how can I say it is an internal affair?” he asked, expressing disappointment with India's stance. On another occasion, he warned that destabilising Bangladesh would have repercussions throughout the surrounding region, including Myanmar and the seven states of the Indian Northeast.

The fallout of India's deep-rooted support for Hasina and the Awami League is that it now requires an urgent recalibration of its policy towards Bangladesh. The United States, too, must reconsider whether allowing India a free hand in its “backyard”, as Washington DC did, was a wise decision. While some US State Department officials, including a former ambassador to Dhaka, advocated for stronger measures to ensure a free and fair election in Bangladesh earlier this year, their efforts were stymied by intense lobbying from security advisers in alignment with the Indian view. The recent insurrection in Bangladesh may force a reassessment of this approach, with an understanding that concessions to autocratic regimes in pursuit of the United States's larger Indo-Pacific strategy

carry the risk of further unrest.

By going so deep with Hasina, New Delhi has painted itself into a corner. In contrast, China's swift response, expressing willingness to work with the new interim government, underscored its adaptability. Beijing had been eager to elevate its relationship with Hasina, and even invited her for an official visit following her dubious election victory. But India's diplomatic manoeuvring made New Delhi Hasina's first official overseas destination after regaining power, and her subsequent trip to Beijing yielded little in terms of the economic relief Bangladesh desperately needs as its economy continues to struggle. China will now have to navigate its relationship with Bangladesh's new leadership, particularly where it concerns the Belt and Road Initiative that has brought capital investment to the country at the cost of heavy debt.

Russia, another staunch supporter of Hasina's regime, now faces its own challenges in Bangladesh. For years, it accused the United States of interfering in Bangladesh's domestic politics, and dismissed calls for transparent and inclusive elections as disguised attempts at regime change. Here again, Hasina's downfall may prompt a re-evaluation of Russia's interests in Bangladesh, particularly in light of its investments in a nuclear power plant that has seen costs balloon to over USD 12 billion. As Bangladesh's new leadership will be scrutinising these projects, Russia may need to reconsider its approach.

And similar scrutiny could await Indian investments as well. The Hasina government's power deal with the Adani Group had already raised major red flags over its pricing, which heavily favours the Indian conglomerate. A closer look into its workings and how it came to be may bring out especially embarrassing revelations for the current Indian government, whose closeness to Adani is an open secret. The storm for New Delhi in Bangladesh could then get even worse.

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