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# A long and complicated road for the return of India's presence in Bangladesh



After the massive and violent protests in Bangladesh, and especially after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's **exile**, India has few options to keep its big eastern neighbour in its political and economic orbit.

The intensity of the turmoil in Bangladesh, with the hundreds of casualties it has left behind and, more importantly, the political projections that are emerging as a result of the crisis, means New Delhi is likely to lose the close alliance it has cultivated with the Dhaka government for decades.

India has welcomed Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh Prime Minister since 2009, into exile as a great ally and friend. This act alone is antagonistic enough for the large insurgency movement in Bangladesh, which sees yesterday's prime minister as the cause of all the country's problems.

In doing so, New Delhi wanted to remain true to the tradition of friendship, as it gave shelter to Ms Hasina in the mid-1970s after the overthrow and assassination of her father, Mujibur Rahman, the founding president of Bangladesh.

However, the price India will pay for a longstanding close friendship could be high. If granting asylum to the ousted prime minister was a kind of historic commitment for New Delhi, any prolonged stay of Ms Hasina in India poses a diplomatic risk to relations with the present and future governments in Dhaka.

Therefore, speculations that Sheikh Hasina intends to seek asylum in the UK are beneficial for India, but at the moment, this option appears uncertain and unlikely to materialise rapidly.

## Uncertainty about the future government

What should worry the government in New Delhi even more are the developments in Bangladesh, where it is quite possible that the future government will consist of consistent

opponents of close relations between Bangladesh and India.

Army Chief Waker-uz-Zaman's interim military government has not yet announced which political option it will support for the future government. However, it is certain that nationalists, uninterested in close relations with India, will form the future government.

The fifteen-year reign of the fugitive Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was characterised by high economic growth and infrastructure development, with substantial support from India.

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However, the relationship with the neighbour did not serve as the primary trigger for the great dissatisfaction among the population, especially among young people, which led to brutal clashes that resulted in hundreds of deaths and ultimately led to a coup in the capital.

The root cause of the discontent is widespread corruption and a feeling of hopelessness among millions of young people, as well as the suppression of political opponents. Those who are dissatisfied, however, perceive India as a supporter of the Dhaka government's suppression of democracy.

## A third party's influence

India did not recognise the potential of this discontent in time; it held firmly to the alliance with Sheikh Hasina's government, so its current standing aside shows that it was not prepared for such a development.

Moreover, given the influence of India's geopolitical adversaries like China and Pakistan on the future development of events in Bangladesh, it is impossible to rule out the

**involvement** of a third country in instigating and supporting the unrest in Bangladesh.

The formation of the future civilian government around the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is currently highly likely, will put New Delhi in a long-term disadvantageous position compared to its close neighbour.

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The future nationalist government will undoubtedly be more inclined to cooperate with China and Pakistan than with India or even the West, which had no problem with India's support for the authoritarian government in Dhaka.

The BNP and the radical Jamaat-e-Islami party led and supported the mass protests that led to the overthrow of the government, so they will undoubtedly have the biggest say in shaping state policy in the post-military era.

For India, this means even the threat of anti-India violence in Bangladesh, which was widespread during the rule of these parties in the early 2000s.

The extent to which India's influence on Bangladesh's situation diminishes will depend primarily on the future government in Dhaka rather than the Narendra Modi government.

## Economy as a way out

One of the trump cards that India can use to try to maintain its presence with its neighbour and, above all, to mitigate the extremely negative geopolitical development on its border is to maintain a high level of economic and military support for Bangladesh.



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This **exchange** amounts to approximately \$13 billion per year and primarily relates to Indian exports to Bangladesh. However, in order to maintain and even expand India's economic presence in Bangladesh, the new government in Dhaka must approve it.

This puts India in a position to make concessions to its neighbour. This includes distancing itself from the previous government and Sheikh Hasina personally as a symbol of the overthrown autocratic rule.

“A peaceful, stable and prosperous Bangladesh is in India's interests. India should do everything to ensure that those conditions are maintained. Essentially you want to keep peace and calm,” Harsh Vardhan Shringla, a former Indian foreign secretary, **told** the BBC shortly before Sheikh Hasina resigned.

This is undoubtedly in New Delhi's interest, but it will require significant time and effort, as well as a shift in India's policy towards Bangladesh due to a long-standing, unreserved reliance on a failed political option.