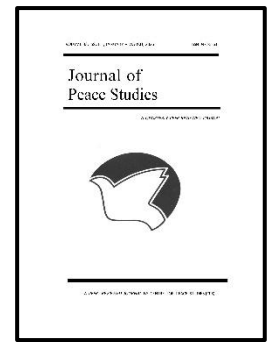


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OPINION

The Delhi-Dhaka Reset: Tarique Rahman's Balancing Strategy

Imran Khurshid*



Who could have imagined that India-Bangladesh relations would change so dramatically in just over a year? During the tenure of Mohammed Yunus as head of the interim administration, ties between the two countries deteriorated sharply. So severe was the situation that India's Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs, in its report tabled on 18 December 2025, described it as a grave national security challenge. The report stated:

"India faces its greatest strategic challenge in Bangladesh since the Liberation War of 1971. The challenge in 1971 was existential, a humanitarian crisis, and the birth of a new nation. Today, the threat is subtler but probably graver, more

serious; a generational discontinuity, a shift of political order, and a potential strategic realignment away from India."

Quoting an expert who deposed before the committee on June 27, 2025, the report added:

"The collapse of Awami League dominance, the surge of youth-led nationalism, the re-entry of Islamists, and intensifying Chinese and Pakistani influence collectively marked a turning point. If India fails to recalibrate at this moment, it risks losing strategic space in Dhaka not to war, but to irrelevance."

Strategic Drift and Deterioration under Yunus

Under Yunus, an overtly anti-India agenda defined Bangladesh's

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policies and actions. He unnecessarily alienated India through provocative statements, repeatedly criticising its northeastern states by calling them “landlocked” and positioning Bangladesh as the “guardian of the ocean” for the region, implying strategic superiority. He also repeatedly used harsh language against India, claiming that it was attempting to destabilise Bangladesh—a claim formally rejected by New Delhi. Beyond rhetoric, Yunus invited strategic engagement of China and Pakistan to undermine Indian interests, with frequent visits by officials from both countries reflecting this shift. He also sought to undermine India’s position in South Asia by attempting to create alternative regional arrangements with India’s adversarial partners, thereby challenging New Delhi’s regional influence. In a widely reported controversy, he presented a book as a gift to a Pakistani general, which contained artwork that depicted a map of Bangladesh incorporating parts of India’s northeastern states, triggering outrage in Indian media and political circles.

Domestically, Yunus was highly autocratic and repressive, as recently stated by President of Bangladesh Mohammed Shahabuddin, who said, “I was kept completely in the

dark. I was not informed of his foreign visits, and some of my own planned trips were blocked. He controlled all key decisions and movements, sidelining the office of the President,” reflecting his authoritarian personality, marginalisation of constitutional institutions, disregard for accountability, and lack of transparency in governance. Instead of addressing internal challenges, Yunus consistently externalised problems by blaming India rather than taking steps to fix them. His administration repeatedly used an anti-India narrative in official communications, further straining bilateral relations.

Yunus’s regime also prioritised secret agreements with the United States, signed on 9 February 2026, just three days before the national elections on 12 February 2026, after first agreeing to a non-disclosure arrangement that restricted public access to the details of the deal. He signed one-sided trade agreements with the US, apparently to show that he secured lower tariffs than India; in reality, the deal was disadvantageous, as it allowed access for American agricultural and other products into the Bangladeshi market, with potential long-term consequences, which could prove devastating for

Bangladesh's largely agrarian economy in the long run. Meanwhile, radical elements of Jamaat gained influence, leading to more attacks on minorities. Numerous incidents of violence, vandalism, and intimidation were reported by human rights organisations and minority groups, with bodies such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council documenting hundreds, and in some cases over 2,000, attacks on minorities, although his administration often downplayed these as "criminal" rather than communal.

His administration attempted to erase Bangladesh's cultural heritage, shift its identity from Bengali to religious, dilute historical atrocities committed by Pakistan, and undermine India's role in Bangladesh's independence struggle. He also sought to rewrite the history of Bangladesh, with emerging revisions to official narratives and textbooks appearing to downplay the role of India in the nation's independence struggle. Economic conditions worsened significantly: inflation remained high, food prices surged, GDP growth slowed, and unemployment rose.

The garment industry, the backbone of Bangladesh's

economy, faced mounting challenges, including factory closures, declining exports, and rising production costs, further impacting employment and industrial stability. Rising costs of raw materials and freight further squeezed profit margins and made operations difficult for factories.

A Pragmatic Turn

Today, under the new administration of Tarique Rahman, things are beginning to change. Rahman, the BNP leader, has demonstrated pragmatism from the very beginning. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the first world leaders to congratulate him, describing the result as reflecting the confidence of the Bangladeshi people in his leadership and reaffirming India's support for peace, cooperation, and shared development goals. Modi also invited Rahman to visit India shortly after his inauguration, signalling New Delhi's desire to engage closely with Dhaka's new government. Rahman's statements and actions reflect a clear, rational vision for India-Bangladesh relations. In letters to PM Modi, he emphasised three points, showing his understanding that strong ties with India are vital for Bangladesh's economic development, stability, and

prosperity: first, a "Bangladesh First" approach, ensuring foreign policy is guided by national interest; second, protecting Bangladesh's interests with all neighbours, including India, China, and Pakistan, on an equal and mutually respectful basis; and third, building relationships on mutual respect, trust, and sincere cooperation, reinforcing historical and cultural connections while addressing shared challenges. He recognises the historical, geographical, and economic interdependencies between the two countries and understands that good relations benefit the Bangladeshi people, their industries, and employment.

Rahman's diplomacy has been consistent: from Eid greetings emphasising peace and prosperity to the recent celebration of Bangladesh's Independence Day, where he strongly criticised Pakistan for its historical atrocities. Unlike the Yunus administration, which tried to dilute India's role in the liberation struggle, Rahman reaffirmed history, saying:

"In the history of freedom-loving Bangladesh, 25 March 1971 remains one of the most disgraceful and brutal days. On that dark night, the Pakistani occupation forces carried out one of the most heinous genocides in history against

unarmed people in the name of Operation Searchlight... The genocide of 25 March was a pre-planned massacre."

Translating Vision into Action

Concrete steps underline this shift. Bangladesh's intelligence chief, Major General Mohammad Kaiser Rashid Chowdhury, recently visited New Delhi and held high-level talks with senior Indian security officials, including R&AW Chief Parag Jain and DG of Military Intelligence Lt Gen RS Raman, marking the first major security engagement under the BNP administration and signalling a mutual interest in rebuilding strategic trust. The foreign minister of Bangladesh, Khalilur Rahman, is scheduled to visit India on 8/ April/ 2026 for bilateral talks in New Delhi, including meetings with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and other senior Indian officials, as part of efforts to reset and strengthen ties and discuss shared concerns such as energy cooperation, watersharing agreements, border management, and broader bilateral cooperation. Reports also indicate that Prime Minister Tarique Rahman is expected to visit India soon to further strengthen bilateral ties. Domestically, steps are being taken toward better governance and

depoliticisation, including inquiries into the previous cricket board chief, previously associated with political interference that harmed bilateral ties, and moves toward broader cultural and sporting cooperation, exemplified by allowing the broadcast of the IPL in Bangladesh, reflecting a willingness to normalise relations at multiple levels.

Rahman's mantra, "Not Dilli, Not Pindi, Bangladesh before everything," reflects his commitment to national interests while fostering strong regional ties. The recent statements by Bangladesh's envoy Riaz Hamidullah underscore this direction:

"India and Bangladesh should address difficult and sensitive issues amicably... Dhaka is committed to maintain a mutually beneficial partnership with New Delhi... In trade, security, or sharing natural resources, difficult issues ought to be addressed forthright with sincerity and candour."

He further emphasised in clear terms: "Bangladeshi soil will never be used against India or in a way that harms Indian security interests." This assurance highlights Dhaka's intent to maintain peaceful, cooperative relations while protecting its own national interests.

These statements reinforce that Rahman's government seeks to rebuild trust with India, ensure regional stability, and base cooperation on mutual respect and shared goals.

Consolidating the Reset

India-Bangladesh relations have begun to undergo a remarkable reset. Where there was once unease in New Delhi due to Yunus's anti-India policies, Tariq Rahman's pragmatism, vision, and respect for history have paved the way for a positive, mutually beneficial partnership. As C. Raja Mohan, a leading strategic affairs analyst, rightly observes, the India-Bangladesh relationship now requires "fresh political impetus," with New Delhi needing to adopt a "changed mindset" to rejuvenate cooperation. This moment, therefore, is not just about diplomatic correction but about strategic opportunity. Rahman's leadership offers both countries a chance to rebuild trust, deepen engagement, and translate their shared history and geographical proximity into tangible economic and strategic gains. His leadership is not only good for the people of Bangladesh but also for the strategic and economic ties between the two nations. ■

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