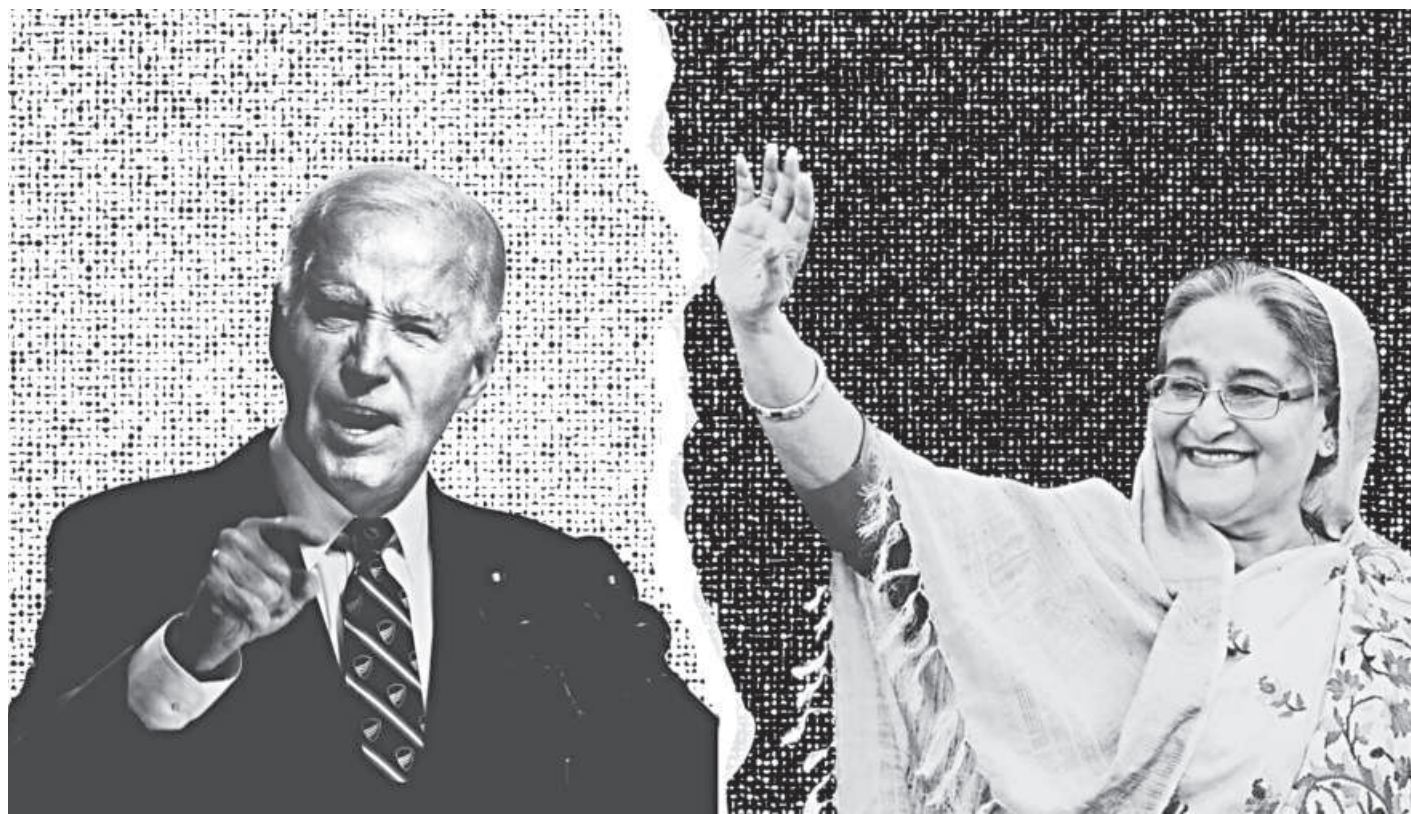


THE FUTURE OF BANGLADESH-US RELATIONS: WHAT US EXPERTS THINK



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

What's next for US policy in Bangladesh?



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When the US Department of State declared, on January 8, that Bangladesh's national election the day before was "not free or fair," it was indirectly acknowledging a major policy setback.

For many months, the Biden administration used Bangladesh as a test case for its values-based foreign policy. It advocated tirelessly for greater respect for human rights, for democratic principles, and especially for free and fair elections. It deployed various tactics—relentless public messaging, meetings with political party leaders, written appeals for different political parties to work out differences, and sanctions and visa restrictions.

It's unclear why the administration chose to pursue its democracy agenda so robustly in Bangladesh (and it should be noted that this agenda was also pursued, albeit less emphatically, during the Trump administration). One reason may have been a strong expectation of success: unlike some other countries where the US has sought to promote democracy, Bangladesh does have a legacy of democratic institutions and achievements—meaning it shouldn't be as heavy a lift to advocate for something with a precedent. US officials have also been heartened by the reductions in the Rapid Action Battalion's (Rab) abuses since Washington sanctioned it in 2021.

But the US state department's assessment concedes its policy fell short. So why, despite all its efforts, was the election—in Washington's own view—marred by violence, crackdowns on the opposition, and irregularities?

Some would point to the limits of US leverage in foreign policy. Others would argue that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will never respond to pressure from a country against whom she has long harboured grudges, or that she wouldn't want to create the conditions for BNP's possible return to power because of the retributive policies against her and other AL leaders that would surely follow. Still others would contend the US didn't go far enough, that it didn't sufficiently raise the costs for Dhaka—such as by imposing trade sanctions, which would have hit Bangladesh hard given its current economic struggles and deep dependence on the US as an export market.

The question now is: what's next for US policy? Will Washington deploy harsher tactics that it believes may better incentivise Bangladesh's government and broader political class to slam the brakes on a slide towards authoritarianism? Or will the US dial it down and take a softer approach to democracy promotion? Alternately, will it jettison its values-based approach altogether and replace it with an interests-based lens? Or will it try for a middle ground that balances both approaches?

Washington's next moves will be shaped by two key considerations: its assessment of the degree to which the AL hindered free and fair polling, and its future goals for its relationship with Bangladesh.

The administration will examine the extent of AL-perpetrated irregularities and election-related violence. How it evaluates BNP's boycott of the election will also be critical. Will Washington put

more weight on the boycott itself (which would emphasise BNP's stubborn refusal to participate in an election not overseen by a neutral government) or on the broader factors that drove the boycott (especially the non-level playing field generated by AL's relentless crackdowns on BNP)? If more weight is given to the latter, there are higher chances of muscular US policy responses. The US state department has laid out additional signposts, calling on Dhaka "to credibly investigate reports of violence and hold perpetrators accountable. We also urge all political parties to reject violence." Washington will be watching on these fronts, too.

However, even if the administration renders the harshest possible judgement on AL complicity in an unfair election, that doesn't guarantee harsh US responses. And this gets to the matter of Washington's objectives for the broader US-Bangladesh relationship.

Amid all the attention on bilateral tensions over democracy and elections, it's easy to forget that US-Bangladesh relations have actually strengthened considerably in recent years. The US is the top destination for Bangladesh exports, and the biggest source of FDI in Bangladesh. In 2020, the two sides announced a new vision for boosting economic cooperation in areas ranging from tech collaborations and air travel to blue economy initiatives and energy security. Commercial cooperation has been further energised by the launch of the US-Bangladesh Business Council, as part of the US Chamber of Commerce, in 2021.

Additionally, over the last decade or so, US officials have started to view Bangladesh

Region: its military base in Djibouti, its ships' presence from the Bay of Bengal to the Andaman Sea, and of course its deepening ties with Dhaka and backing for Bangladesh's first submarine base. Meanwhile, witness Russia's intensifying engagement with Dhaka. Unsurprisingly, US officials now call Bangladesh a strategic partner.

Consequently, US-Bangladesh relations have been busy in recent years: high-level diplomatic engagements, military exercises, business leader delegation visits, and extensive US humanitarian assistance—from support for Rohingya refugees to pandemic assistance. Washington is the top supplier of humanitarian aid for the Rohingya crisis, and it has provided more Covid vaccines to Bangladesh than to any other country.

Given this expanding partnership, Washington will want to avoid leaning too heavily on the tensions-prone, values-based aspect of bilateral ties—because that risks damaging the relationship. It will likely look to balance the values- and interests-based dimensions of its relations with Dhaka.

But that will be a delicate balance. Washington needs diplomatic space with Dhaka to try to push back against Chinese and Russian influence in Bangladesh. But that space shrinks if Bangladesh is pushed into a corner with tough trade sanctions. Previous punitive US tactics—visa restrictions, Rab sanctions, suspensions of GSP benefits—weren't as harmful to bilateral ties because those measures weren't as damaging for Bangladesh on the whole.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's democratic backsliding constrains efforts to expand cooperation. Dhaka's crackdowns on internet freedom may deter prospective US tech investors. Bangladesh's poor labour rights record precludes the International Development Finance Corporation—Washington's main investment arm in the Indo-Pacific—from sponsoring infrastructure projects. And if Bangladesh's security forces ramp up abuses, the US' Leahy law—which bans US assistance to foreign militaries implicated

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with more strategic significance. The origins of this shift may lie in the scholarship of influential US foreign policy analysts, most prominent among them being Robert Kaplan, which highlights the importance of the Indian Ocean Region for US interests. In recent years, going back to the Trump era, Bangladesh has been emphasised in multiple Indo-Pacific strategy documents published by the Pentagon and the US state department, with emphasis on potential for cooperation on counterterrorism, counter-piracy, counter-narcotics, and maritime issues.

Intensifying great power competition has made Bangladesh's strategic significance come into even sharper relief in Washington. Consider China's deepening influence in the Indian Ocean

in serious human rights violations—could kick in, jeopardising deeper military cooperation.

In the coming weeks, expect a reoriented US focus away from elections and more towards promoting rights and democracy in Bangladesh more broadly—though more visa restrictions are possible for those that hindered free and fair polls. Meanwhile, the administration, impelled by commercial and strategic interests, will continue to push for deeper partnership.

Bangladesh will remain a test case for Washington's values-based foreign policy. But so long as it keeps bumping up against the relationship's strategic imperatives, the experiment could grow increasingly untenable in a world order where realpolitik so often prevails.

'Precisely what the US government expected from a flawed process'

Daniel Markey, senior advisor for South Asia Programs at the United States Institute of Peace, speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star about the US perspective on Bangladesh's January 7 election.

Can you describe what are—in your view—the implications of Sheikh Hasina's victory for US foreign policy in South Asia?

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's victory was precisely what the US government expected from a flawed process. US pre-election policies did little or nothing to deliver a free and fair election with full participation of opposition parties, and the lead-up to the election exposed deep differences over these issues between Washington and Dhaka. This can only be seen as a setback for those who'd hoped—in vain—that US pressure might steer Bangladesh down a more inclusive and democratic path.

Upcoming elections in Pakistan and India are also likely to expose the limits on Washington's ability to champion democratic practices in large and distant societies. Overall, many US officials—including top members of the Biden administration—appreciate that a less democratically-oriented South Asia will be a more difficult region for the United States to operate in. That said, the United States works with many undemocratic states around the world and, in some cases, finds shared interests—rather than values—to be a workable if not preferable foundation for cooperation.

An article in *The Wall Street Journal* has deemed it as a "defeat for Joe Biden who has centred his foreign policy on democracy." What is your take on this?

These elections ended up being a setback for US-Bangladesh relations and a retreat from inclusive democratic practices in Bangladesh, which is also a setback for Bangladesh itself. The Biden administration's emphasis on democracy led it to take a relatively outspoken position on Bangladesh—certainly when compared to India and China. But realistically, US expectations about the effectiveness of these policies had to be tempered. That said, I'm not sure there

Bangladesh has important trade relations with Washington but is far less relevant than India in geopolitical terms.

How do you expect this victory and the return of the Awami League government to affect Bangladesh and India's relationship? Did Modi's India take a different, more hands-off approach this time?

I perceived that Modi's India backed Sheikh Hasina to the hilt and anticipates that she will remain India's best choice for relations with Bangladesh. I expect India will stick with this strategy for as long as possible.

With Bangladesh's balancing act and relationship with China and India, are there any implications of this victory for China-India relations?

No, the convergence of India and China in support of Sheikh Hasina and Awami League is not an indicator of wider

India, witnessing China's deepening ties to Pakistan and expanding military presence along the LAC, will be increasingly sensitive to every move China makes in Bangladesh. To preserve national sovereignty and to avoid new friction with either major neighbour, Dhaka may find it useful to further diversify its international ties—with the US, Japan, and Europe—in order to avoid being sucked into a zero-sum India-China competition.



Dr Daniel Markey

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was a better balance to be struck. Had Washington pushed the democratic agenda more forcefully, it would have left US-Bangladesh relations even more fractured today. If Washington had simply ignored increasing political repression in Bangladesh, it would have betrayed US values and—I believe—interests as well.

How do you perceive this to impact trade ties with the US and EU?

My understanding is that Bangladesh faces other trade challenges unrelated to its politics, but also to its "graduation" from the LDC status which, over time and in combination with other factors, will make it difficult for Bangladesh to achieve rapid growth without new reforms and a diversified economic approach.

Do you anticipate the US' response to Bangladesh's election coming from a perspective of balancing its relations with India, especially after the DoJ indictment?

No, I do not think that Washington perceives relations with Bangladesh as any means of "balancing" relations with India. The two are related, of course, but tend to run on different tracks and at different levels of priority. We will see where the DoJ indictment goes, but Washington has for over two decades perceived India as a significant world actor and potential strategic partner.

convergence. To the contrary, India will remain concerned about Chinese activities in and with Bangladesh, just as it is concerned about Chinese activities and influence across the South Asian region. India-China tensions will persist and may worsen if the two cannot find a way to better resolve their contested land border.

From the standpoint of China-India relations, this status-quo conclusion was favoured by both parties. Do you foresee any challenges in this balancing act for Awami League as it embarks on its fourth consecutive term in government?

Awami League has been playing this game for a long time now. It clearly appreciates the requirements and challenges of that balancing act as well as the opportunities it creates. But the level of difficulty in finding a balance will likely increase with China increasing involvement in Bangladesh's economy and, by extension, its politics and even national defence. India, witnessing China's deepening ties to Pakistan and expanding military presence along the LAC, will be increasingly sensitive to every move China makes in Bangladesh. To preserve national sovereignty and to avoid new friction with either major neighbour, Dhaka may find it useful to further diversify its international ties—with the US, Japan, and Europe—in order to avoid being sucked into a zero-sum India-China competition.

Lastly, what does this election result say about the future of democratic governance in Bangladesh?

The lead-up and conduct of the election is just the latest example of the fact that there is no longer sufficient space for free and open political competition in Bangladesh. The consolidation of power and authority in Sheikh Hasina raises fundamental concerns about whether the state can ever find a way to healthy democratic governance. And relatedly, this also raises questions about how it can achieve sustained political stability or economic growth for its citizens without democratic legitimacy. These core concerns, and not any particular animus toward Sheikh Hasina (or support for BNP), are the reasons why Washington was so concerned about the conduct of Bangladesh's national election. In the end, the Biden administration and many others in Washington really do believe that democracy offers the best route to peace and prosperity within and between states.