

Demystifying the Bangladesh-India-US triangle



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On the evening of September 23, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi lifted off from New York after several days of engagements, including a QUAD summit and a meeting with US President Joe Biden. Several hours later, Dr Muhammad Yunus touched down in New York for four action-packed days that included meetings with Biden, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and many other top world leaders—but not the previously departed Modi.

There was something telling about the visits of these two men: the top leaders of Bangladesh and India were each seemingly working at cross purposes, with each going about his business in the US separately and without engaging the other. It's a sobering reflection of the state of Bangladesh-India relations today, following 15-plus years of foolproof, fulsome ties during the Sheikh Hasina era.

Each leader's visit to the US was also indicative of the present state of the Bangladesh-India-US triangle. It can best be described as an isosceles structure, with two long and sturdy sides represented by robust Bangladesh-US and India-US ties, and a short and fragile side marked by shaky Bangladesh-India relations.

Let's first take the Bangladesh-US relations. They're in a good place. Yunus is a man whom Washington likes, knows well, and is comfortable working with. A senior US delegation to Dhaka last month telegraphed a crystal clear message: we're here to help on the development, humanitarian and reforms front. It's a genuine pledge, and it was amplified at the highest level—by Biden himself—days later.

The India-US ties are also strong. Tension points do abound, from the Khalistan issue to each country's

friendly ties with the other's main rival. But strong strategic convergences over countering China limit their impact on the relationship. An increasingly multifaceted partnership—manifested by proliferating areas of cooperation on separate non-geopolitical tracks, from trade and clean energy to higher education and science and technology—provides further insulation against shocks to bilateral ties.

But then there's the troubled side of the triangle. Because New Delhi invested so heavily, and for so long, in Hasina and her party, it has limited links to those now in power and lacks the leverage to ensure its interests are properly addressed. Incidentally, this isn't just a BJP problem—the Congress party also enjoyed strong ties with Hasina, which go back to her father's close friendship with Indira Gandhi.

Additionally, while Indian media have wildly exaggerated security risks in post-Hasina Bangladesh, there have been threats to and attacks on Bangladeshi Hindus, prompting them to stage protests demanding more security. Also, hardline religious elements that are no friends of New Delhi have gained more space and influence. And from India's perspective, this isn't just about the return of Jamaat-e-Islami. Jashimuddin Rahmani, head of the banned al Qaeda-inspired militant group Ansar al Islam, was quietly released from jail on August 26. It may have been a matter of due process. But mere days after his release, Rahmani released a disturbing video in which he issued threats against India—including calling on India's enemies to break the country into pieces—if India "cast[s] an evil eye towards Bangladesh." This is deeply

concerning for New Delhi. India's fears about the present are informed by memories of the past: there are documented cases of abuses against Hindus during the BNP-led period of rule between 2001 and 2006. Additionally, during that same period, authorities intercepted a massive arms shipment

parties. All this has prompted New Delhi to double down on its long-standing Bangladeshi allies, especially Hasina. India is unlikely to turn her over to Dhaka if there's a formal extradition request. The Hasina factor could deepen bilateral tensions, complicating efforts to address challenges that loomed large

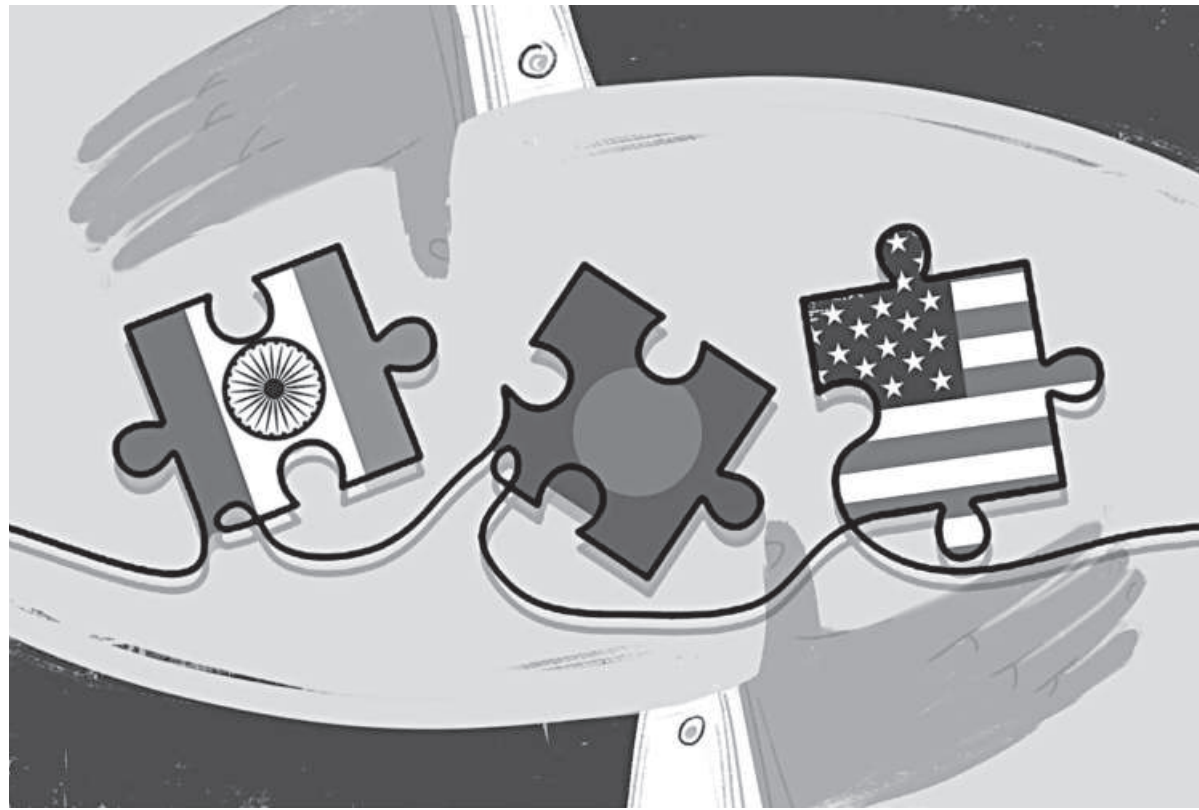
soon after Bangladesh's election (which Washington characterised as not free or fair), when President Biden penned a letter to Hasina welcoming the "next chapter" in bilateral ties—with no reference to rights or democracy. Washington would subsequently identify as priorities a range of issues, including

assistance, climate change—likely wouldn't appeal to him. He probably wouldn't take kindly to Yunus's past criticism of him either. Trump may take a different approach, preferring instead to view the relationship solely through the lens of great power competition, along with trade.

The Bangladesh-India relations are not doomed yet. Though New Delhi will be cautious, it's committed to continued engagement. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar recently met Bangladesh Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain in New York, and Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Pranay Verma met BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir. A formal BNP-Jamaat split, perhaps already underway, could provide openings for New Delhi to cultivate a new relationship with BNP. Additionally, India will likely reach out to Bangladesh's army that, because of the recent vacuum, has increased its political influence. Ultimately, India may conclude that given its economic and security interests in Bangladesh, it simply can't afford to lose Dhaka. Conducting delicate negotiations over border security, for example, is easier with a workable relationship with Dhaka.

Washington and New Delhi don't see eye to eye on Bangladesh. Their approaches to the new government are quite different. But they still have shared interests and concerns. Neither wants Dhaka to inch closer to Beijing—though the new government will likely be prepared to move closer to Beijing than did the previous one, because it won't be as concerned about how New Delhi might respond. Additionally, neither wants more space for hardline Islamists which, ideologically speaking, oppose them both. The Rahmani case—even if an unsettling outlier—will worry New Delhi and Washington alike.

Ideally, the Bangladesh-India-US triangle would be equilateral instead of isosceles. But for now, the best bet is to manage its volatilities and imbalances and better understand its intricacies, thereby helping it achieve some stability in a world increasingly on fire.



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

in Chattogram, bound for rebels in India's restive northeast. According to new scholarship that validates long-standing Indian suspicions, the arms transfer involved several BNP and Jamaat officials and a Bangladesh-based Indian rebel leader.

This helps explain why India is so uncomfortable about Bangladesh's radically changed new political reality, and why it will tread carefully in its relations with Dhaka. The unbanning of Jamaat is especially concerning for New Delhi, and will become more so if the group forms new alliances with other Islamist

even in better times, from border security to the Teesta River issue. It also risks fresh surges in anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh, which hurts bilateral ties as well.

All this said, geopolitics is never cut and dry. Let's clear up some misconceptions about the Bangladesh-India-US triangle.

The Bangladesh-US ties have experienced a reset. Yunus's arrival is a breath of fresh air for a relationship that became increasingly toxic due to US tensions with Hasina over rights and democracy. But the true reset arguably happened back in February,

several being emphasised now, such as reforms. The administration apparently concluded it was time to give renewed attention to subjects—strategic cooperation, trade, defence—that had previously helped boost relations, before being eclipsed by tensions over rights and democracy. Yunus's arrival will help consolidate that earlier reset.

However, these changes could prove short-lived. Another Donald Trump presidency could prompt relations to lose momentum. Key issues now driving partnership—development and humanitarian

BANGLADESH AT UNGA 2024

Glitter, gold, and ground reality



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When I first heard of the 2024 United Nations General Assembly theme, the picture of Abu Sayeed's final action in Rangpur flashed through my mind. The theme is simply "Leaving no one behind." It requires "acting together for the advancement of peace, sustainable development and human dignity for present and future generations." Bangladesh Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus befittingly completed that picture.

Historians may characterise Yunus's visit as the second most auspicious moment for the country in this august body. Entrusted with the duty to execute and institutionalise widespread reforms to essentially rebuild Bangladesh, Prof Yunus's presence rekindled the first Bangladeshi presence: when the country was admitted in 1974. At that time, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared "Friendship to all, malice to none" as the country's foreign policy orientation. At no other time has Bangladesh needed that approach more than right now.

Yunus made Upper Manhattan East Riverside glitter last week. US President Joe Biden dropped out of the US presidential election in July because *vox populi* thought him to be too old, but Yunus put the youth back in him. As the chirpier, younger octogenarian, Biden canoodled Yunus. Interestingly, the World Bank was doing the same to Bangladesh, first with economical support, then by opening legal windows to recuperate money looted by disgraced businessmen and former ministers and parliamentarians. Unsurprisingly, the IMF loan package window also widened.

That was not all. From the north of New York, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau exuberantly sought deeper bilateral relations, and from the south of the US, Brazil's avowed socialist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was enthusiastic to meet another "Global South" *compadre* and share a kindred spirit. He had preserved that for the previous prime minister's maiden visit to Brazil, but no love was lost when she cancelled it in late July.



Bangladesh Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus addresses the 79th United Nations General Assembly at the UN headquarters in New York, US on September 27, 2024. PHOTO: REUTERS

Two previous US presidents awaited Yunus: Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. The former first tasted microfinance magic as the governor of Arkansas in the 1980s, which prompted his Bangladesh visit in March 2000. Last week, he honoured Yunus as a family friend at a Clinton Global Initiative event. Obama is a fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner. Even Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris scheduled a private breakfast. Across the Atlantic, Yunus's advent energised British anti-money-laundering measures against ill-gotten Bangladeshi property holders, while Europe's most ebullient and charismatic populist leader, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and Yunus discussed their own "art of triumph" experiences.

Clearly, Yunus broke no boundaries. Bangabandhu would have been proud of him in a way his daughter was not. Is there mileage in that difference? The contexts differed, for one: baptised globally by the ideologically-driven Non-Aligned Movement in 1973, Bangabandhu kept a distance from geopolitics, but in true Caesarian style, Sheikh Hasina "came, saw, and conquered" everything, which, in a more materialistic age,

of change. Today's Bangladesh is not one of only surviving, but also growing. The fact that Bangladesh can actually grow from this can be reduced to at least three 1970s forces: microfinance, because of Yunus and Fazle Hasan Abed's talent; the millions of abjectly poor low-wage migrants remitting billions from menial, dangerous work abroad; and the money-minting RMG industry for employing penniless people and funnelling landless farmers into urban factories.

Economic growth outpaced social development, distorted politics, and ultimately plagued Rabindranath Tagore's *Sonar Bangla* environment. Three consecutive 15-year dynamics divided a homogeneous population: military rule; two political parties emasculating democracy from 1991; and then a popularly elected prime minister imposing totalitarian rule. The consequences were apparent: too many Bangladeshis were left behind or rather left out. So, fulfilling the UN's "Leaving no one behind" theme, Bangladesh must firstly inform the world what we have learnt from past mistakes; institutionalise, rather than verbalise, the desired changes; and flatten the playing field politically.

The most taxing but pivotal will be the third. It requires refuting the country's most veteran and historically venerable political party, the Awami League, into mainstream politics. Preventing that will only cement the zero-sum mindset that revolution and the UN 2024 theme seek to eliminate. Accommodating that demonstrates Bangladeshi maturity: sharply opposed politicians shaking hands instead of shooting each other, and negotiating at the table rather than through disruptive streetside showdowns.

Central to these is the youth. Positioned differently than previous young generations because of greater social media access and greater accumulation of lost hopes, today's youthful clamour is from the only place left: the tipping point. Resistance is inherent, but common bonding has never looked more promising.

Democracy also softens geopolitical indulgences. Especially now as the world recovers from the first pandemic in a century, it faces the most vicious populist atmosphere in a century, and stands on the brink of an economic crisis reminiscent of the 1930s. Fascism, Nazism, religious fundamentalism, market crashes, and machismo stare us in the eye. Can we still win? What must Bangladesh do? Our resources

limit us to only tackle problems nationally (institutionalise both democracy and sustainable development in one of the world's most vulnerable climate change victims), neighbourly (with both India and Myanmar), and regionally (both the Bay of Bengal and South Asia, this time with both India and Pakistan on an even keel).

Nationally, with *sine qua non* democracy, Awami League's participation is key: not all its members loot or abuse the principles of the country. So, invite them. Regarding tense relationships with the neighbours, tame common rivers, resume bilateral economic projects, harmonise growing indigenous unhappiness, and reassure the hapless Rohingya that they, too, won't be left behind. Regionally, revive SAFTA and SAARC to build South Asian identity, bridge Southeast Asian countries through BIMSTEC, and protect the common South/Southeast Asian life support, the Bay.

Global partnership helps on each of these fronts, just as containing corrosive global forces from penetrating local borders becomes our responsibility, too. Sudden surges like displaced Rakhine dwellers, money launderers, sex traffickers, smugglers and jihadists on the one hand, and surging ocean levels, salinity invading fertile farmlands, deforestation, and ignoring upstream river-dumps building a plastic paradise on the other, need urgent remedy. Drilling the Bay for fuel is insensible when solar/wind alternatives to fossil fuels promise more. Tossed plastics and dumped chemicals are worse. They boomerang on our own health through intoxicated fish consumption. Plenty on our plate need better dispensation. That's a people's job, not a politician's.

Only by holding hands with those around us can these be irreversibly tackled. Bhutan is our intimate backseat sedan co-traveller, India an umbilical partner, Myanmar too similarly conjoined, Nepal another backseat cohort, Pakistan a split sibling, and Sri Lanka the third backseat pal. Universally, caretaking means to pave the road towards meaningful democracy, but institutionalising that democracy is a parliamentary obligation. Both go together, but both only get together if the concept of leaving no one behind becomes the common denominator. That was the most enlightening lesson for Bangladesh at the UNGA. It exposed the widest range of countries volunteering their warmth to steady our ship, a rare opportunity window in an age of diminishing warmth. It's now or never.