

# Will the upcoming election stabilise Bangladesh-India relations?



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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Bangladesh and India have once again engaged in a verbal exchange of “he said, she said”. Last Wednesday, Bangladesh’s Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain fired the latest round in response to Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri’s comment on Bangladesh’s upcoming national election, characterising it as “completely unwarranted.”

Does this recent burst of comments and counter-comments indicate that things will heat up once again as the election approaches? The Indian foreign secretary, on October 6, said, “...India is firmly in favour of free, fair, inclusive and participatory elections in Bangladesh...” Such a remark is ironic and hypocritical, since India had remained silent on the state of democracy in Bangladesh for the 15 and a half years of uninterrupted Awami League rule, during which three questionable elections were held.

While the motive behind such remarks should be scrutinised, it is also necessary to take a fresh look at India’s trade, economic, and diplomatic relationship with Bangladesh. In fact, this has become a vital component of the agenda for all political parties in the run-up to the elections. Leaders of the July uprising, who have been instrumental in creating a national consensus to reassert

our identity, have been driving this objective domestically. Now, even the average man on the street notices the priority steering away from the “servile” perception that critics often attributed to the previous administration.

In June this year, the foreign adviser commented that the country’s relationship with India needs to be rebalanced or readjusted. Since August 5, 2024, when the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took refuge in India, the interim administration and the nation at large criticised the Indian government for supporting the Awami League administration. In most cases, India’s official response has been diplomatic, which can lead one to speculate that the neighbouring country is waiting for things to settle down after the elections.

For Bangladesh, the time has come to reassess our strategic priorities. The recent shift has been influenced by domestic political changes, a rise in anti-India sentiment, and unresolved bilateral issues. This has created the need for India to broaden its engagement beyond the political establishment and prioritise diplomacy on contentious topics such as water-sharing. However, it is not certain how much the dynamic can shift before the elections in February.

After the next elections, whichever

party or coalition comes to power, it must announce a bold initiative and push the “reset button” with regard to India. Some of the areas where the governments of the two countries can collaborate have been discussed in the media. Bangladesh has sought India’s backing to revive SAARC, and as the next chair of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), to broaden and strengthen our

projects. Bangladeshis justifiably believe that New Delhi bears collateral responsibility for sustaining Sheikh Hasina’s rule.

During the readjustment phase, the diplomats of both countries must avoid incendiary rhetoric. In the coming years, some of the thorny areas at the central, state, and local levels will be transshipment, water management and sharing, and security and border management.

with India, while at another level, Modi is sparring with Banerjee, West Bengal’s chief minister, who opposes the treaty’s renewal.

“The nature of any renewed GWT will therefore depend upon New Delhi’s ability to negotiate both its triangular relationship with Bangladesh and China and the power balance between central government and West Bengal,” wrote Amit Ranjan of NUS, in the latest issue of *Asian Affairs* in his article titled “A two-level game over the Ganges: The fate of Ganga/Ganges waters treaty between India and Bangladesh.”

Bangladesh cannot fully implement the Teesta River management project and achieve its goals without India’s participation, as the project’s effectiveness depends on managing the Teesta River’s flow from its upstream source, located in India. While China has expressed willingness to help finance and implement some aspects of the project, its efforts would be ineffective without an agreement with India on water sharing and release to ensure sufficient water availability.

In the past, our high commission in India has kowtowed to Indian officials in the South Block. Gone should be the days when our high commissioner, after a round of water sharing negotiations, declared, “What we have got not only met our expectation but exceeded our expectation,” in a moment of delusion. Our civil servants, regardless of their portfolio, need a refresher course in level-headed diplomacy in avoiding sycophancy. Our leaders, too, need to put an end to hatred and the blame game.

In the near future, New Delhi, on its part, will hopefully realise that Bangladesh’s continued economic development is in India’s strategic interests, while any development on the political or electoral front is for Bangladesh alone to deal with.



FILE VISUAL: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

regional alliances.

The basic premise of our foreign policy is, and should be, that we need to maintain a good relationship with our powerful neighbour and move away from the year of bitterness caused by past mistakes. An economic and political rift with India since late 2024 has hurt Bangladesh through trade restrictions, diplomatic tension, and stalled connectivity

In this regard, I am highlighting the forthcoming negotiations on the water flows of Ganges and Teesta. A scholar at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has cautioned that the fate of the Ganges Water Treaty (GWT), to expire in 2026, is uncertain, and aptly called it “a two-level game” in view of Mamata Banerjee’s warning to the centre. At one level, Bangladesh is playing the game

# Machado’s Nobel Prize puts Venezuela and US policy in the spotlight



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When Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado won the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, the announcement rippled far beyond the usual celebration of moral courage. To many, it wasn’t just about honouring her defiance against an authoritarian regime—it was also a symbolic pushback against a government the West has long criticised. And just like that, Washington’s long and uneasy engagement with Venezuela gained a new, moral dimension: human rights. Interestingly, Machado dedicated her Nobel to US President Donald Trump, praising his “decisive support” for Venezuela’s pro-democracy cause. She said Trump and the US remain key allies as her nation stands on the brink of victory in its struggle for freedom. President Trump later shared that Machado had personally called to dedicate her Nobel Peace Prize to him, saying she believed he “really deserved it.” Describing her as “very nice,” Trump mentioned his continued efforts to support Venezuela, calling the nation’s condition a “basic disaster.”

The UN Human Rights Office said the award mirrored “the clear aspirations of the people of Venezuela for free and fair elections, for civil and political rights and for the rule of law.” European leaders went

further. Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Commission, praised Machado’s “courage” and declared that her prize spoke for “every voice that refuses to be silenced.” Germany’s government chimed in, calling it a recognition of her “longstanding commitment to democracy and human rights.” The message was unmistakable—this year’s Nobel was not just about one woman. It was a statement about Venezuela’s political decay, and perhaps a quiet challenge to the US to redefine its own role there.

Machado’s story is one of defiance laced with tragedy. After winning the opposition’s primary in 2023, she was banned from public office and forced into hiding. Her rallies had drawn massive crowds, her economic plans—focused on privatisation and welfare reform—divided the public, and her calls for democracy drew fury from President Nicolás Maduro’s government. Arrested briefly and repeatedly harassed, she became both a symbol and a target. Most of her close advisers have either been jailed or fled the country. Still, her message hasn’t softened. She has accused the Maduro regime of running a “criminal mafia” and turning Venezuela’s institutions into hollow shells.

But the Nobel Peace Prize changes the

dynamics. It introduces a new layer to the US-Venezuela relationship. Earlier this year, when US warships appeared off the Venezuelan coast under the banner of a “counter-narcotics” mission, the move reignited old tensions. Washington said it was targeting drug cartels; Caracas called it provocation. The situation, as always, lived in the grey: part strategy, part messaging, part performance.

The US has long portrayed Venezuela

Why now?

Perhaps the Nobel offers a clue.

Through the lens of *The Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galeano, Latin America’s recurring crises often stem from external powers acting under moral pretexts—liberation, anti-corruption, or democracy-building—only to pursue their own interests. Peter H. Smith’s *Talons of the Eagle* dissects how Washington’s rhetoric of freedom often aligns neatly with its geopolitical goals. Daniel M. Goldstein’s *The Politics of Interventionism in Latin America* goes further, arguing that even “humanitarian” missions tend to fracture the very institutions they claim to protect. Read together, these works suggest that the US’s moral turn in Venezuela—now under the banner of human rights—may be less about altruism and more about strategic repositioning in a region slipping from its influence.

Inside Venezuela, the picture remains grim. Sanctions have devastated the economy. Inflation continues to shred savings. Millions have fled. Hospitals run short of medicine; power cuts are routine. For ordinary Venezuelans, these grand geopolitical narratives—whether told from Washington or Caracas—mean little. Their fight isn’t about ideology or sovereignty; it’s about finding bread, fuel, or a working bus.

Maduro, meanwhile, has perfected the language of resistance. Each US move strengthens his narrative of a besieged homeland. “We are prepared, but not for war,” he declared in January, accusing Washington of trying to provoke conflict. He appeals for dialogue, but always with a hint of defiance. And when the Nobel Prize was announced, his government dismissed it as Western propaganda.

It’s a script both sides know well. The more Washington pressures Caracas, the stronger Maduro’s nationalist posture becomes. The more authoritarian he appears, the easier it is for Washington to justify pressure in the name of freedom. Both feed off each other’s hostility.

This loop has gone on for decades. From Hugo Chávez’s defiant oil diplomacy to Maduro’s survival through economic collapse, Venezuela has been a mirror for US anxieties about its waning influence in Latin America. The drug war gave one excuse, democracy another. Now, the Nobel Prize offers a new moral anchor—human rights.

And yet, Washington is stuck. Sanctions haven’t toppled Maduro. The 2019 Guaidó experiment failed. Direct military action would be politically toxic and militarily chaotic. Venezuela’s terrain is unpredictable, its armed groups fragmented, its loyalties uncertain. Even “limited” strikes could spiral into a regional mess.

So, for now, the US operates in a grey zone. With Machado’s Nobel win, Washington finds itself under renewed pressure to act, but every move carries a cost. Support her too openly, and it fuels Maduro’s claims of foreign meddling. Stay silent, and it betrays the image of moral leadership the Nobel has suddenly revived.

Caught in between are Venezuelans who have run out of patience. Their country, once among the richest in Latin America, now limps along on crumbling infrastructure and fading hope. They want stability, not slogans. That’s the irony at the heart of this story. The Nobel Prize might be intended as a beacon of hope, but it also risks becoming another piece in a geopolitical chess game.

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as a “narco-state.” Yet analysts have long questioned the accuracy of that framing. Yes, Venezuela’s geography makes it a transit point—its border with Colombia and its Caribbean access make trafficking easier. But even US intelligence reports admit that the bulk of cocaine entering America still moves through Central America and Mexico, not Venezuelan shores.

So, if Venezuela isn’t the main artery of the global drug trade, why the military pressure?

**CROSSWORD**  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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15 Lobed organ  
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18 Bar concern  
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20 “\_\_\_ Boot”  
21 Roadhouse  
22 Long-winged seabird  
24 Play parts  
25 Ottoman rulers  
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32 Hockey’s Bobby  
33 Braying beast  
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**YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS**

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