

After 2026 election, Dhaka must set out clear India, China, and US policies



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Bangladesh often seems to treat foreign policy as subject to seasonal political moods. If one government is branded "India-friendly," another "China-leaning," then a third is cast as "Washington's favourite." In reality, Dhaka engages all three powers every day—on trade, loans, borders, security, climate, migration, the Bay of Bengal, etc. But it does so without a clearly stated hierarchy of interests and without a stable policy framework that survives elections and domestic political manoeuvring. This is a major weakness of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Moreover, political actors often use foreign policy as a weapon in partisan storytelling for a domestic audience. So India becomes a symbol, not a relationship. China becomes a chequebook, not a strategy. The United States becomes either a saviour or a conspirator, depending on who is speaking and who is under pressure.

After the 2026 election, the future elected government should do something basic but long overdue: set out three clear country policies—towards India, China, and the US—and ensure they enjoy broad political consensus and commitment so that they do not change regardless of the change in power. These policies should not be about ideological alignments or public relations exercises; they should instead serve as enduring principles that signal to the bureaucracy and the public what Bangladesh wants, what it will not trade away, and what it will prioritise when interests collide.

Why do clear country policies matter? Small and mid-sized states survive by being predictable abroad and disciplined at home. Geography already imposes certain permanent facts. India surrounds Bangladesh on three sides and shapes its river system, border economy, and security environment. China is the largest source of global manufacturing power and a major provider of capital for infrastructure. The US and the Western market system remain central to Bangladesh's exports, finance, and technology ecosystem. You can dislike these facts, but you cannot vote them out.

Yet relationships with these countries were often viewed as if they were personal friendships between leaders, short-term transactions, or exercises in emergency diplomacy, rather than

as long-term statecraft anchored in clearly articulated national interests and institutional continuity. This approach produces negative outcomes, frequently converting routine bargaining into narratives of national prestige. A water-sharing negotiation, a port decision, a visa issue, or a defence procurement discussion becomes a test of patriotism. Such framing undermines, rather than strengthens, a strategic foreign policy approach.

Over the decades, Bangladesh has produced some important diplomatic achievements. The 1996 Ganges water treaty, for instance, showed how tough geography can still be negotiated. The maritime boundary settlements with Myanmar and India expanded our legal certainty in the Bay of Bengal and strengthened Bangladesh's blue-economy claims. The 2015 land boundary settlement with India improved the lives of people in the enclaves. These are not Awami League or BNP moments; they are Bangladesh's achievements. But when they are treated as partisan trophies, the country weakens its future negotiating position.

One of the most persistent myths in Dhaka is that closeness to one power requires hostility to another. If you are "with" India, you must be "against" China. If you work with China, you must be suspicious of America. This may sound like common sense, and the geopolitics around them may also seem to suggest it, but it is really a lazy shortcut often favoured by Bangladesh's political and civil classes. They confuse alignment with engagement. Bangladesh already practises issue-based engagement. It relies on the US and EU markets for export earnings. It relies on Gulf states for labour markets and remittances. China and other Asian partners provide large-scale financing and industrial inputs, while neighbouring India is critical for border security and stability, transit geography, and river politics. This is not a choice between lovers or adversaries. It is a portfolio. The missing piece is strategy.

What should an India policy look like? India is not just another bilateral partner; it is an integral part of the neighbourhood structure. In most areas, India has more leverage. It is a nuclear power and an aspiring global power. But that does not mean Bangladesh cannot negotiate or exercise sovereign autonomy.

A serious India policy, therefore, begins by accepting this reality and managing it with steady discipline rather than chest-thumping. It should remain anchored in the files that never go away. Water sharing requires year-round negotiation capacity and technical preparation, not seasonal outrage. To save lives on the border and ensure security, both countries must work in a manner bound by law and accountability; otherwise, the issue turns

financial transparency, proper procurement where possible, and clear, plain-language debt assessments. When terms are hidden, suspicion grows, and that suspicion becomes a domestic weapon weakening Bangladesh's bargaining power with Beijing and others. Moreover, Bangladesh's China policy should treat technology as a security issue, not just a price issue. This will help reduce dependence in sensitive areas that foreign powers can turn

Washington only during crises, it will always negotiate from a defensive position. On security and regional strategy, Bangladesh should maintain a calm posture. As the Bay of Bengal becomes more contested, Dhaka should cooperate on maritime domain awareness, disaster response, and counter-trafficking, but avoid getting pulled into military postures that turn it into a frontline.

How should the next government do this?



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toxic at home. The relationship is also lived through people-to-people ties—visas, culture, and media narratives. If these spaces are left to suspicion and scandal, policy may always be hostage to anger. Above all, the baseline must be clear: reciprocal respect for sovereignty and a firm commitment to non-intervention in each other's domestic politics. Ultimately, an India policy should separate real bargaining from performative nationalism.

What should a China policy look like? China is no longer just about roads and bridges for Dhaka. As China increasingly shapes industrial policy, technology standards, defence choices, and strategic infrastructure, a clear China policy has become essential. The first rule should be productivity over ribbon-cutting. Bangladesh should prioritise fewer vanity projects and more reliable energy, efficient ports, rail freight, functioning industrial zones, and skills linked to real jobs. It should also incorporate risk management into Chinese funded projects, with greater

into leverage. And China should not be treated only as a lender; Dhaka should negotiate for market access, manufacturing relocation, and joint ventures.

What should a US policy look like? Bangladesh needs a clear US policy because Washington affects its economy even when it does not mention Bangladesh. Trade rules, labour standards, brand compliance, technology ecosystems, financial regulations, and sanctions policies can influence Bangladesh's economy overnight. A serious US policy must begin with the understanding that the export economy depends on reputation. It is about protecting Bangladeshi workers and keeping Bangladeshi factories and products inside the global supply chains.

A serious US policy also requires an engagement strategy that extends beyond a single embassy channel. The US system is fragmented. Congress matters. State-level business networks matter. Brands matter. Diaspora voices matter. If Bangladesh engages

Policy needs structure. The next government should publish a foreign-policy white paper within its first year, to be updated annually, with separate chapters on India, China, and the US. It should be written in plain language and debated in parliament. When policy becomes a public document, it becomes harder to hijack for vested interest groups. Institutional coordination must also be rebuilt. Several ministries—commerce, energy, shipping, home affairs, defence, and environment—conduct foreign policy by accident. Bangladesh, therefore, needs a strong inter-ministerial mechanism to set priorities, resolve contradictions, and track implementation.

Finally, our foreign policy should no longer be treated as a partisan identity or instrument, but as a shared national framework grounded in consensus, continuity, and clear interests. It should strengthen our negotiating hand regardless of who holds office.

How Dhaka's rental housing market marginalises Indigenous tenants



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The first lesson for many young people arriving in Dhaka, after leaving the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), is not learnt in a university lecture hall. It is learnt at the landlord's doorway. There, they learn quickly that a name, an accent, or a face can decide whether a rental house is "available" or "already taken." For Indigenous people, Dhaka's rental market is where their identity quietly turns into economic strain and social marginalisation.

Internal migration has long been a driver of Bangladesh's urbanisation. Rural households move to cities like Dhaka in search of work, education, and services that are scarce in their home regions. For CHT Indigenous communities, the push factors are even sharper: land dispossession, political insecurity, and decades of marginalisation at home combine with the pull of jobs, universities, hospitals, and other urban facilities in the capital. Housing, besides shelter, is the gatekeeper to everything else in city life. Yet, once they arrive, the first and largest cost they face is rent.

Dhaka's housing shortage and informality are well known. The city grows by hundreds of thousands of new residents each year, but the formal housing supply lags far behind demand. For low- and middle-income renters, this means crowded apartments, high advance payments, and heavy dependence on informal arrangements. For CHT Indigenous tenants, this difficult landscape is layered with discrimination, both explicit and subtle, that forces them into the most precarious corners of

the market.

Interviews with Indigenous tenants living in areas such as Mirpur, Mohammadpur, and Farmgate reveal a common starting point: finding the first living place depends almost entirely on kinship and co-ethnic networks. Newcomers typically begin by staying with relatives, friends, or other CHT tenants already embedded in the city. These ties reduce search costs and offer a temporary safety net, but they also concentrate migrants into a limited set of neighbourhoods and buildings. From the beginning, their choices are narrower than those of Banglalee newcomers with broader urban networks.

When CHT tenants step outside these networks and approach landlords directly, their identity becomes a filter. Some recount explicit refusals: being told that "tribal people" are not acceptable tenants, that neighbours will object, or that Indigenous customs do not fit the building. In other cases, the message is delivered more politely but no less clearly: the unit has just been rented, the owner "does not rent to bachelors from outside," or the advance suddenly becomes impossibly high. Even where no openly racist language is used, the pattern of doors closing at first contact is hard to miss.

Alongside outright rejection, many CHT migrants experience what can be called "slippery discrimination," which is hard to prove. They are shown only the smallest or darkest rooms in a building, told that higher deposits are necessary "for security," or nudged towards particular floors

and alley-side units that other tenants avoid. Paperwork demands rise too: extra guarantors, employer letters, or scrutiny of identity documents. Each separate request appears reasonable, but together they produce a consistent result: Indigenous renters pay more, accept worse conditions, and enjoy weaker tenure security than comparable Banglalee tenants.

Many tenants describe paying a large share of their modest incomes on rents that still do not buy privacy, safety, or dignity. The promise of urban opportunity sits uneasily with the reality of dark, overheated rooms and leaking roofs.

Economic vulnerability amplifies these disadvantages. Because many CHT migrants work in low-paid jobs, informal employment, or entry-level positions, they have little bargaining power with landlords. Advance deposits and key money can amount to several months of income, locking up savings that might otherwise support education, healthcare, or small investments. When incomes fluctuate or emergencies arise, rent becomes a constant source of anxiety. Households often cut back on food, medicine, or children's schooling to avoid defaulting and being forced to move suddenly.

Frequent moves are, in fact, a defining feature of many CHT tenants' urban lives. Unwritten agreements, rising rents, conflicts over utility bills, or tensions with neighbours can quickly end a tenancy. Without formal contracts, tenants have little recourse when asked to leave. Every move means new advance payments, new school commutes, and yet another attempt to convince a landlord that they are "trustworthy people." The cycle of search, negotiation, and resettlement consumes time, energy, and money, hampering the process of building stable lives in the city.

These housing realities have deep social consequences. Physical distance and long commutes limit participation in campus life, community activities, or civil society

organisations. Language barriers and memories of discrimination make some hesitant to interact with neighbours beyond co-ethnic circles. Women, in particular, face layered constraints: they must navigate both conservative attitudes towards female tenants and ethnic stereotyping. Curfews, visitor restrictions, and heightened surveillance inside buildings can make even "safer" accommodations feel like another form of control.

However, CHT migrants also display remarkable resilience and creativity in coping with these constraints. Many rely on dense social networks, relatives, and student associations to circulate information about available rooms, negotiate better terms, and provide emergency loans for deposits. Online platforms and messaging groups have become

informal housing markets where Indigenous tenants warn each other about exploitative landlords and recommend more welcoming ones. Shared apartments, rotating savings groups, and collective bargaining by groups of tenants are all strategies that soften, even if they cannot fully remove, the sharp edges of Dhaka's rental market.

Seeing these experiences only as a "housing problem" is a mistake. Housing is the key mechanism that transforms being Indigenous and being a migrant into a daily experience of economic insecurity and social distance. When a CHT Indigenous student must spend hours commuting from a distant, overcrowded building, or when a young Indigenous worker is repeatedly turned away from better-located apartments, the effects

ripple into education outcomes, job opportunities, mental health, and civic participation. Who lives where, and on what terms, shapes who feels they belong in the city at all.

Policy responses must therefore go beyond building more units or adjusting rent controls. At a minimum, Dhaka needs clearer rules around advance payments and deposits, standard written agreements that are simple enough for ordinary tenants to understand, and mechanisms for addressing discrimination in rental advertisements and first contact. Most importantly, landlords, policymakers, and urban professionals must recognise that rental housing is not an ethnically neutral market driven only by price and location. It is a social institution where prejudice, fear, and ignorance can quietly assign whole communities to the city's margins.

Ministry of Shipping
Bangladesh Land Port Authority
ACCESS-BLPA Component Project
Plot No. F-19/A, Sher-E-Bangla Nagar,
Agargaon, Dhaka-1207.

Memo No.: 18.15.0000.023.14.022-06

Date: January 19, 2026

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of the following works package:

SI	Tender ID No.	Name of Package	Last Date and Time for Tender Selling	Last Date and Time for Tender Security Submission	Tender Closing and Opening Date and Time
1	1176832	BLPA-W1A, Construction of Port Building, Parking Facilities for Passengers with ancillary works at Benapole Land Port.	27-Jan-2026, 13:00	27-Jan-2026, 14:30	27-Jan-2026, 16:00

This is online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP System Portal and no offline hardcopy will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender Documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any Branch of registered Bank up to date and time mentioned in the notice. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP Help Desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)

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