America's midterm reckoning and its implications for Bangladesh



The Republican Party's loss of control of both chambers of Congress represents a major electoral setback for US President Donald Trump. PHOTO: UMIT BEKTAS/REUTERS

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For many Americans, the debate over Donald Trump's foreign policy boiled down to how to afford another week. According to the Chicago Council's pre-election survey, 86 percent saw the Iran war as driving up living costs; 81 percent said the same about tariffs. Voters did not have to follow every diplomatic controversy to understand that decisions made in Washington, D.C., complicated their lives.

That explained the Democrats' overwhelming victory in the midterms. Republicans will lose control of Congress in January 2027, depriving Trump of a Congress he could easily rely on. The consequences will be felt far beyond the United States, but losing control of Congress does not deprive the President of his constitutional powers.

Costs were just part of the picture. According to an AP Voter Poll, almost seven out of ten voters believed that Congress did too little to restrain the power of the presidency. Corruption was also an important issue. Voters were unhappy not only with Trump's policies but also with the way he governed.

Democratic success among young voters, Hispanics and moderates challenged the idea that Trump's 2024 win had fundamentally changed the American political landscape. The coalition that won the election could split up in the next one. Voters gave him a second chance, not an unlimited mandate.

Democrats should now consider how to exercise their power. Committee chairmanships will allow Democrats to investigate the President's actions, while control of Congress will strengthen their position in spending negotiations. In the Senate, Democrats can reject nominations to the courts, cabinet and diplomatic posts. If used properly, these powers will complicate Trump's attempts to conceal wrongdoing.

However, Democrats will not control the government. Without Republican support, Democrats cannot override a presidential veto. Moreover, most legislation will need some Republican support in the Senate to pass, since most bills require 60 votes to overcome a filibuster. Democrats should expose Trump's actions while trying to achieve something he will not block.

Investigations will not make healthcare less expensive or reduce costs for any family. Democrats should choose which battles to fight and which improvements to deliver, alongside investigating Trump. Two years of constant televised confrontation without visible results outside Washington will give voters plenty of reasons to become disappointed again.

Discussion about 2028 has already started. Trump cannot become President for a third time under the Constitution. JD Vance, Trump's Vice President, blamed the Iran war for the Republicans' defeat, suggesting an attempt to separate his future political career from the administration's record.

Such separation will be very difficult. Vance will need Trump's support, but he will also have to convince voters who rejected the administration in the election that he would govern differently. Vance cannot claim to have been a passive witness to the administration as Vice President. He will have to explain when and how he disagreed with the President.

Democrats will have their own candidates too. Governors Josh Shapiro, JB Pritzker and Wes Moore will have an opportunity to become better known across the nation. Governing a state allows them to offer something more substantial than campaign slogans – a record that voters can examine. Healthcare, education and state management will determine whether that record is enough to advance their political careers.

Bangladesh should develop a foreign policy capable of withstanding changes in the presidency and congressional majority.

However, winning a gubernatorial race does not guarantee victory in the presidential election in the same state. Midterm turnout usually differs from turnout in presidential elections. Moreover, according to the AP Voter Poll, only about half of voters had a positive view of the Democrats. Some voted Democratic only to stop Trump, rather than out of support for the party. Democrats must find ways to win their support.

Abroad, the temptation to interpret the result as a signal of US retrenchment will be strong. It is too early for such an interpretation. With growing domestic opposition, Trump may try to conclude a diplomatic deal that he could later present as a personal success. He may also become more aggressive if he believes foreign leaders perceive him as weak. Foreign governments should be prepared for either possibility.

Iran will be the first test. Investigations and restrictions on war financing could push Trump towards concluding an agreement. However, Congress cannot negotiate an agreement on the President's behalf. Disputes over financing could become arguments over responsibility for American troops. Americans' patience will not last long when families bear the costs of the war without understanding the objectives of the fighting.

It is not necessary to interpret this as a signal that the United States wants to retreat from the world. According to the Chicago Council survey, 58 percent wanted active US participation in world affairs. That preference leaves room for a foreign policy based on engagement, but it also requires greater scrutiny of the costs of military engagements. Fewer expensive wars, more stable trade relations and more secure supply chains would provide stronger reasons to support US engagement in foreign affairs.

European and Ukrainian governments will find more supportive partners in Congress when it comes to providing aid and blocking concessions to Russia. European governments should make use of that opportunity without overlooking their own capabilities. Any legislative action may still require Republican support, and the White House will continue to play a major diplomatic role. Europe's security needs a stronger foundation than the hope that the next US election will correct the outcome of the previous one.

Beijing will probably see this as an opportunity to negotiate a better deal. Pressure to reduce costs could make Trump more willing to discuss trade agreements. Democrats will probably push harder on Taiwan, human rights and Chinese investments. Chinese and other Asian governments will have to pay greater attention to consultations on some issues while accepting greater uncertainty on others.

Israel will face tougher scrutiny over military assistance and its treatment of Palestinians. In the rest of the Middle East, governments that have relied heavily on access to Trump should develop additional contacts in other parts of Washington. Agreements with the President become more vulnerable without support from other parts of the US government.

Trade policy requires caution. A Democratic majority does not necessarily mean the cancellation of tariffs introduced under powers delegated to the President. Exporters should not expect Democrats' concerns about American workers' living standards to translate into enthusiasm for increasing imports. More stable regulations would be a reasonable goal. Exporters should not count on quick relief.

Bangladesh will face direct consequences from events in Washington. The United States remains one of our main trading partners. Changes in the American economy and trade policy influence factory orders, employment and foreign exchange earnings.

Bangladesh should continue negotiations with the administration while developing contacts with congressional trade committees and American importers. These efforts should proceed in parallel. It would be wrong to expect Democrats to resolve our trade problems, since their voters also want protection from economic insecurity.

Stronger congressional support could help sustain assistance to the Rohingya and maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. However, elections do not guarantee the restoration of aid. Bangladesh will have to make a convincing case consistently to both parties.

Progress in protecting labour rights, ensuring responsible governance and safeguarding minority rights can be part of that case. These are not concessions intended to please Washington. They matter for Bangladesh and give its diplomats a stronger foundation for seeking support.

Bangladesh should develop a foreign policy capable of withstanding changes in the presidency and congressional majority. This means working with both US political parties, expanding partnerships elsewhere and avoiding the construction of foreign policy around individual personalities.

Democrats will have to prove that accountable government can improve people's lives. Republicans will have to decide whether loyalty to Trump offers them a political future. The election has opened up possibilities for greater restraint. The dependability of American power will depend on what happens after the election.

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Can Bangladesh turn connectivity with Thailand into strategic leverage?

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A four-day shipping connection between Chattogram and Thailand's Ranong Port may look like a modest logistics improvement. For Bangladesh, it raises a foreign policy question: can a new maritime link create strategic options as ports, supply chains and geopolitical competition become more interconnected? The route will not replace the Strait of Malacca or make Bangladesh a regional hub overnight. Its value depends on whether Dhaka can convert geography into commercial leverage through reliable services, balanced trade and regional cooperation.

The first direct shipping service between Chattogram and Ranong began in September 2026. At the fourth Bangladesh–Thailand Foreign Office Consultations on 30 October, both governments welcomed the connection and said it could reduce transportation time from approximately 15 days to four. The Bangladesh foreign ministry's account of the consultations places the route within a wider agenda covering trade, investment, labour migration, energy and regional cooperation. That is the right context: a shipping service becomes strategically relevant only when it supports a wider economic relationship.

A strategic route, not a replacement for Malacca

Ranong lies on Thailand's Andaman coast; Chattogram is Bangladesh's principal seaport. A direct connection creates a shorter option for cargo moving between Bangladesh and Thailand's western maritime gateway and may strengthen links between South Asia and mainland Southeast Asia. But four days is an expected port-to-port transit time, not a door-to-door guarantee. Cargo moving onwards to Thailand's Gulf coast or East Asia may still require road, rail, feeder or conventional sea connections. The route's value is specific, not universal.

The Strait of Malacca remains central to global commerce, linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans and carrying substantial energy flows. The US Energy Information Administration estimates that around 23.2 million barrels per day of oil passed through it in the first half of 2025, according to its global chokepoint data. Chattogram–Ranong cannot displace this artery, but it can provide another option for selected cargoes.

The commercial imbalance is the first test

The central challenge is cargo availability in both directions. Thailand's trade with Bangladesh is heavily imbalanced. According to 2025 UN Comtrade figures compiled by Trading Economics, Thailand exported about US$913.54 million worth of goods to Bangladesh, while its imports from Bangladesh were approximately US$88.04 million. The gap is visible in the reported Thai exports to Bangladesh and Thai imports from Bangladesh. These are total merchandise values, not container figures for the new service, but they raise a basic commercial question: can operators secure enough return cargo to sustain competitive rates?

Dhaka has recognised the problem. At the October consultations, Bangladesh asked Thailand to import more pharmaceuticals, jute and jute products, and to reduce duties on Bangladeshi goods. Bangkok said it would consider the proposals and called for early discussions on a bilateral free trade agreement. Thailand's own summary of the bilateral consultations also highlights trade, investment and connectivity as shared priorities. Yet diplomatic willingness does not guarantee market access. The route will not correct the imbalance unless Bangladeshi firms can meet Thai standards, find distributors and compete on price.

Bangladesh should focus on export sectors with realistic demand. Pharmaceuticals and jute-based products were raised during the talks; garments, seafood, processed foods and leather goods merit market testing. Each faces different certification and sanitary requirements. The government should help exporters identify Thai buyers and resolve regulatory barriers. Success should be measured by repeat orders and export growth, not trade missions.

Port capacity and the missing links

Bangladesh has a substantial maritime base, but also faces a concentration risk. Chattogram handled 3.409 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) in 2025 and processed about 92 percent of the country's seaborne general cargo and nearly 98 percent of containerised imports and exports. These figures show why domestic port efficiency is central to the corridor's success. A faster overseas leg cannot compensate for delays in berth allocation, container handling, customs, road access or inland depots.

Ranong is a smaller port whose regional role is still developing. In the first seven months of Thailand's 2026 fiscal year, it reportedly handled 7,000 TEUs, 106,000 tonnes of cargo and 217 vessel calls. Container throughput rose 55.56 percent year on year, but the volume remains modest compared with Chattogram. The reported operating figures for Ranong Port show growth, but not yet the capacity of a major regional hub. This asymmetry can be useful if the route serves specialised cargo at a manageable scale.

Bangladesh should assess Ranong's handling equipment, storage, customs facilities and onward transport before shifting large volumes. Operators should publish sailing frequencies, freight rates, actual transit times and records of delays. Businesses need predictable door-to-door costs, not simply a four-day sea passage.

From bilateral shipping to regional architecture

The corridor's greater potential lies in the Bay of Bengal's regional institutions. BIMSTEC brings together Bangladesh, Thailand and other littoral and nearby states. Its Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, supported by the Asian Development Bank, treats ports, maritime transport, road and rail links, multimodal systems and trade facilitation as interconnected elements of regional integration. Chattogram–Ranong can provide a practical demonstration of this agenda, but only if the maritime service is linked to inland transport and compatible border procedures.

BIMSTEC members have also signed an Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation, listed in the organisation's official register of agreements. Bangladesh can use this framework to pursue port cooperation, information exchange, maritime safety and more predictable shipping procedures. Still, a regional agreement cannot, by itself, eliminate customs delays or infrastructure gaps. Implementation—not merely the existence of an agreement—will determine whether the corridor becomes a working example of regional cooperation.

Thailand's support for Bangladesh's aspiration to become an ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner and its accession to RCEP adds a diplomatic dimension. The route may demonstrate Bangladesh's commitment to regional connectivity, but it offers no shortcut to either process. Both require separate political engagement and domestic preparation. Dhaka should treat the corridor as supporting evidence, not a substitute for integration.

The geopolitics of resilience

Thailand's interest in Ranong is part of a wider effort to strengthen its Andaman-facing economy. Its proposed southern Land Bridge was presented as a way to connect the Andaman coast with the Gulf of Thailand and offer an alternative to Malacca. Yet concerns over cost, demand and environmental impacts have challenged the megaproject. In July 2026, Thailand moved to scale back the US$30 billion plan and focus instead on expanding Ranong Port and related rail links, according to Reuters' report on the revised project. For Bangladesh, the lesson is to plan around realistic port improvements rather than depend on a grand infrastructure vision that may not materialise.

Dhaka should welcome Thai investment where it improves capacity, but assess proposals against demand, financing, environmental safeguards and local impacts. A corridor dependent on a single operator, port or political initiative is not resilient. Leverage comes from multiple workable options, not from creating a new dependency.

Security must accompany connectivity. The October consultations addressed human trafficking, arms smuggling, online scams and narcotics, and the two sides agreed to consider establishing a joint committee. Increased cargo traffic requires effective screening, vessel monitoring and intelligence-sharing. A faster route that weakens border oversight would create new vulnerabilities.

What Bangladesh should do next

Bangladesh should establish a corridor coordination mechanism involving both governments, port authorities, shipping companies, customs agencies and exporters. It should publish quarterly data on sailings, transit times, freight rates, cargo volumes, delays and the imbalance between inbound and outbound cargo loads. Dhaka should also pursue targeted access to the Thai market and pilot electronic documentation, advance cargo information and risk-based inspections.

It must also improve Chattogram's road and rail links, inland depots and port operations, while connecting the service to BIMSTEC's maritime agenda on safety and harmonised procedures. These steps could transform a bilateral shipping link into a platform for regional economic diplomacy.

A four-day voyage is an opening, not leverage in itself. The route will matter only if it attracts regular cargo, expands Bangladeshi exports, reduces total delivery costs and gives firms a dependable alternative. Bangladesh need not claim that it can challenge major maritime chokepoints to benefit from a secondary route. In a region shaped by competition over access and supply chains, Dhaka's advantage will come from widening its options and demonstrating that connectivity delivers measurable gains.



Delegations from Bangladesh and Thailand attend the fourth Foreign Office Consultations in Bangkok on 30 October 2026. Both sides welcomed the launch of direct shipping between Chattogram and Ranong ports to strengthen bilateral trade and connectivity. PHOTO: BANGLADESH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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