

BANGLADESH'S CHINA TURN: WHAT IT MEANS FOR SOUTH ASIA?

by
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Introduction

A recent [report](#) by a Chinese news outlet highlighted comments from a senior Bangladeshi officer, who stated that “China is very important to us,” underscoring the significance of China as an investment partner. He emphasized the longstanding bilateral relationship between the two countries and suggested that the progress made over the past 50 years could serve as a benchmark for further strengthening ties. While this stance appears to be a continuation of Bangladesh's broader diplomatic approach toward China, particularly evident after Muhammad Yunus assumed the role of Chief Advisor of the interim government, the implications for South Asia may be far from benign.

Yunus' recent visit to China attracted further attention when he referred to India's northeast as a [‘landlocked region’](#) dependent on Bangladesh's port connectivity. This remark was perceived in New Delhi as a strategic provocation, reportedly sparking discussions about terminating cargo transshipment privileges through Bangladesh. These developments raise critical questions: What exactly is Dhaka attempting to recalibrate? Is this a case of strategic balancing gone awry, or are we witnessing a new regional order in South Asia?

Is Bangladesh's Relationship with China More Than Friendship?

In the wake of photographs circulating of a discreet meeting between diplomats from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China in Kunming, renewed debate has emerged around Bangladesh's foreign policy choices. To avoid things getting more sensitive, the Foreign Affairs Adviser to Bangladesh's interim government [publicly denied](#) any intention of joining a bloc-based alliance with the other two countries. However, the symbolic weight of such a meeting cannot be easily dismissed, especially when seen within the broader

pattern of China exploiting economic and political vulnerabilities across the Indian Ocean Region to deepen its strategic footprint.

Economically, Bangladesh's ties with China have remained strong, even during former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's tenure. Politically, however, Dhaka has sided with India on multiple fronts, most notably in diplomatically isolating Pakistan and [boycotting](#) the 2016 SAARC Summit. But recent political transitions in Bangladesh, coupled with Yunus' leadership as Chief Advisor, have triggered a sense of mistrust in New Delhi. This apprehension is far from unfounded, particularly after Bangladesh's [naval participation](#) alongside Chinese vessels in Pakistan's AMAN-25 maritime exercises. Despite Dhaka's diplomatic assurances that no strategic blocs are being formed, its actions increasingly suggest otherwise.

Bangladesh has consistently condemned the terror attack in Pahalgam and has projected itself as a reliable actor in the region. Yet, it simultaneously pursues deeper [defense cooperation](#) with countries like Turkey, including discussions around joint producing facilities in Chattogram and Narayanganj – signaling a strategic recalibration. While these choices assert Dhaka's agency, they also reflect a departure from its earlier alignment with Indian strategic interests.

From Beijing's side, two notable developments have been the [modernization deal](#) of the Mongla Port and the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project. Back in 2020, the previous government under Sheikh Hasina had accepted Indian financial support for upgrading the Mongla seaport. During the [recent visit](#) of the Foreign Affairs Advisor, China proposed a heavy investment in the same port, among other areas of cooperation. This reflects China's interest in using this port to secure a larger foothold and more efficient presence in the Bay of Bengal. Beijing's offer of a Tk 35.93 billion loan for the proposed port development is just [one of the 27 projects](#) agreed upon during President Xi's visit in Dhaka in 2016. With Yunus now in office, China's re-entry into these strategic zones demands closer scrutiny.

Equally significant is Chinese participation in the Teesta Project, which has long been seen as a point of India-Bangladesh collaboration due to shared water interests. During Sheikh Hasina's time, she had [indicated](#) that the project would go to India. The interim government's decision to [allow Chinese involvement](#) constitutes a shift and possibly a direct challenge to India. The move adds a layer of complexity, given China's history of dual-use infrastructure projects and their long term regional implications. News of the Chinese [proposal](#) of constructing airfields in the region, more recently in Lalmonirhat district, introduces another troubling dimension. Taken together, these developments suggest that Bangladesh is no longer simply engaging in strategic balancing, but may instead be actively reshaping the regional equation.

How New Delhi and its 'Strategic Partners' Need to Respond

In recent years, the nature of leadership across India's neighborhood has undergone significant [political flux](#). From Sri Lanka to Pakistan, China's growing presence in South Asia has moved beyond economics into a more multidimensional effort, reflecting its long-term strategic ambitions in the region. As the case of Bangladesh illustrates, China is increasingly being viewed not just as an investor, but as a reliable development partner, which will be very difficult for players like the United States, or even regional powers like India, to counter unless China is viewed as a multilateral threat.

Under Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh pursued a cautious and careful balancing act between India and China. It would be incorrect to assume that Chinese influence got a sudden boost only after the change of leadership. From the development of smart cities to [infrastructural projects](#) like the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project, China has maintained a consistent

and strategic investment presence in the country. This pattern extends beyond Dhaka to South Asia's more economically vulnerable states.

While the term 'debt trap' is often used to describe Chinese loans, it does not fully capture the picture when it comes to South Asia. A [study](#) by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace shows that countries like Nepal and Bangladesh have shown financial prudence: where Bangladesh has preferred Chinese soft loans, while Nepal has leaned towards grants. These choices challenge the simplistic narrative of coercive Chinese financial lending.

For New Delhi and its strategic partners, understanding Chinese intentions requires a more nuanced approach. The key to Beijing's growing footprint lies in its consistency. While New Delhi might find it difficult to revamp its relations with a neighbor like Bangladesh in the context of provocative remarks of Yunus regarding Northeast India, it needs to tread carefully considering the political changes in the region, where China continues to leverage the vulnerabilities of neighboring states. The presence of Chinese military equipment, airfields and ports present in yet another South Asian country beyond Pakistan poses a significant strategic challenge for India. Rather than confrontation, New Delhi must present a consistent and credible alternative that fosters regional solidarity.

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