

# **SPECIAL** REPORT no. 225

## **Priorities for Prime Minister Hasina's New Term in Bangladesh**

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# Introduction

**B**angladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government was re-elected to power for the fourth consecutive time at the 12<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election in January 2024. PM Hasina returned to power amid US pressures to influence the elections through multiple means, including imposing visa restrictions on Bangladeshi citizens allegedly involved in compromising the polls;<sup>1</sup> not inviting Bangladesh to the Democracy Summits;<sup>2</sup> US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Peter Haas's meeting with the families of the victims of 'enforced displacements', including the BNP leader, Sajedul Islam Sumon;<sup>3</sup> and the imposition of sanctions on officials of Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion for reported human rights abuses.<sup>4</sup>

Hasina's victory may be a testament to the government's deft handling of global-power politics. At the same time, however, the boycott of the polls by the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP),<sup>5</sup> and the low 40 percent voter turnout on election day,<sup>6</sup> raise

serious questions about the country's domestic politics and the resilience of successive leadership.

On the economic front, Bangladesh is aiming to graduate from its Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026,<sup>7</sup> although persistent challenges are threatening to delay progress. Neighbourhood relations also demand consideration. While multifaceted cooperation has led to stronger bilateral ties, the Rohingya crisis continues unresolved. Curbing challenges to human security, such as climate change, has emerged as a critical aspect of bilateral and multilateral ties between Bangladesh and its neighbours. Defence is also an emerging area of cooperation between Dhaka and its Indo-Pacific partners, with Bangladesh having to reconcile its reported dissatisfaction with the Chinese manufacture of arms with its 'Forces Goal 2030'.<sup>8</sup>

In the wider Indo-Pacific, Bangladesh, having released its Indo-Pacific Outlook in 2023,<sup>9</sup> is keen on playing a bigger role in shaping the geopolitical dynamics in the region. While maximising its economic benefits and carving a niche for itself in global issues remains on the agenda, maintaining balance in its diplomatic relations is becoming increasingly challenging, with global powers vying for its support.

This special report deliberates on the challenges, opportunities, and priorities that will define Bangladesh's governance in the next five years. It brings together six analysts from India and Bangladesh who examine crucial areas for Prime Minister Hasina's administration: domestic politics; economic strategies; neighbourhood ties; engagement with global powers; defence initiatives; and climate change. The chapters outline key challenges in these domains and highlight priorities for the new government.

In the first essay, *Khondaker Golam Moazzem* notes how, in the last 15 years, under the Awami League regime, Bangladesh has recorded a largely positive macroeconomic performance. Bangladesh has experienced impressive economic growth, driven by the ready-made garments

industry, even as it has faced challenges such as high inflation and a decline in remittances. These challenges, compounded by other political and social concerns, have created an uncertain macroeconomic scenario that has kept investors at bay. Prompt and time-bound reforms in line with electoral promises are necessary to ensure the country's economic growth, especially vis-à-vis its target of attaining upper-middle-income status by 2031.

Examining the current domestic political challenges, *Pallab Bhattacharya*, in his contribution, argues that the real political challenge for Bangladesh involves arriving at an acceptable template for holding the elections towards the consolidation of democracy. At present, parliamentary democracy in Dhaka is marked by deep mutual distrust and suspicions between rival political parties that do not help in fostering a healthy democratic culture. Mitigating this challenge will require the insulation of constitutional bodies from political pressure and the fostering of an environment that allows expressing dissent. The opposition also needs to play a more participatory role in politics.

The Hasina administration has directed its attention to strengthening relationships with neighbouring nations, particularly India—a commitment that was underscored by PM Hasina recognising India as a “great friend” the day after her 2024 election victory.<sup>10</sup> *Riya Sinha* analyses India-Bangladesh ties in her chapter, and explores how Bangladesh’s relationship with India can be advanced by forging stronger economic links through hard and soft connectivity initiatives.

Alongside its relations with India, a key facet of Bangladesh’s foreign policy is its relations with major powers such as the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and the European Union. In his piece, *Niloy Ranjan Biswas* highlights a crucial task for the Bangladesh government: striking a pragmatic equilibrium between key foreign stakeholders who have divergent or conflicting expectations. This entails adeptly exercising foreign policy autonomy to drive necessary changes in alignment with national interests while navigating the cooperative or competing demands of the global powers.

In the domain of defence, *Kallol Bhattacharjee*, in his article, underlines that a critical challenge for PM Hasina in her new term is revising the strategic posture of Bangladesh’s armed forces. As clashes between the Myanmar Army and the Arakan Army along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border intensify, there is greater possibility of the

conflict spilling into Bangladeshi territory. It thus becomes more important to equip Bangladesh’s armed forces with better deterrence capabilities. At the same time, Bangladesh needs to diversify its sources of defence equipment, given its apparent dissatisfaction with the Chinese supply, while carefully navigating the unfolding geopolitical dynamics.

Finally, climate change has emerged as a massive non-traditional security concern for Bangladesh, finding a place in its Indo-Pacific Outlook as an arena for transboundary cooperation.<sup>11</sup> *Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury* assesses the country’s physical vulnerabilities to cyclones, flooding, and sea-level rise, highlighting not only the susceptibility of the coastal areas but the often overlooked gendered nature of the impacts. She emphasises that the Bangladesh government must prioritise community-led and -managed mechanisms for disaster risk management and for dealing with the ramifications of climate change.

- *Sohini Bose*

## 1

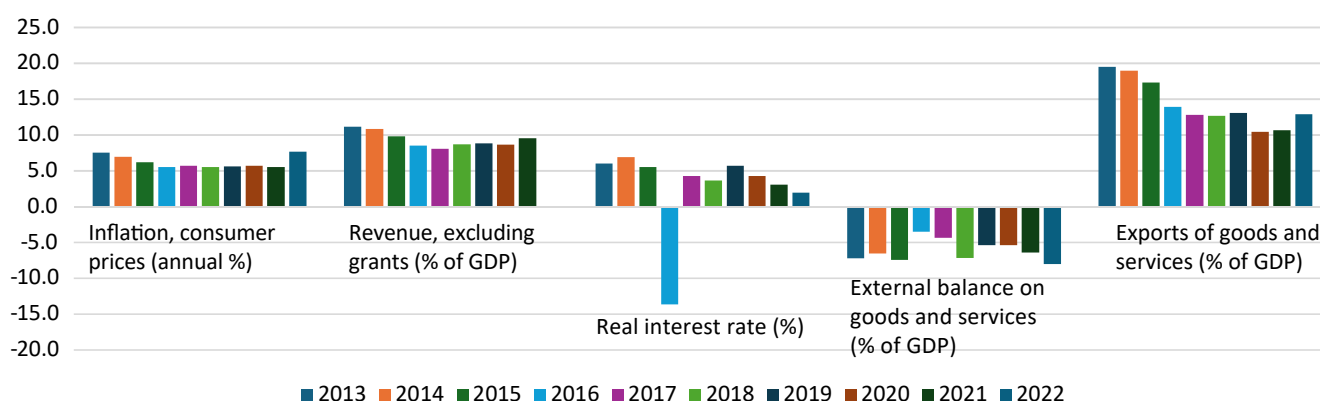
# The Awaited Promise of an Economic Boom

Khondaker Golam Moazzem

**F**ollowing its victory in the January 2024 Parliamentary polls, the Awami League has formed the government in Bangladesh for its fourth consecutive term and sixth overall in the country's history. Typically, a new government that assumes office benefits from the public mandate it obtained in response to its promises during the election campaign. The newly formed Awami League government, however, finds itself grappling with political, economic, and social challenges.

Politically, the elections did not ensure the “true” mandate of the people through participation in a free, open, and fair election.<sup>1</sup> Such circumstances are not conducive to a newly elected government aiming to pursue a development agenda that necessitates substantial restructuring and reform in crucial economic and social issues.<sup>2</sup> On the economic front, the country has been confronting a series of challenges, including high inflation, sluggish export growth, decline in remittances, resulting balance of payment issues, slow public revenue growth, and high commercial borrowing rates (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Macroeconomic Indicators (2013-2022)**



Source: World Development Indicators, 2024<sup>4</sup>

The weak political mandate of the winning political party also makes it difficult to manage challenges on the social front, including rising poverty during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic period, growing income inequality, lack of adequate employment opportunities for educated youth, especially for women, politically backed extortion, and corruption. Overall, the baseline scenario for the Awami League government during its five-year tenure does not appear to be favourable to achieve the sustained high economic growth that is required for Bangladesh to become an upper-middle-income country by 2031 (i.e., a per-capita income between \$4,466 and \$13,845).

### Achievements of the Past Decade

Despite challenges, macroeconomic performance under the Awami League over the last 15 years (excluding FY2020-FY2023) has been positive.<sup>5</sup> Macroeconomic stability led to the country maintaining a GDP growth rate of over 6 percent in the last decade, which helped reduce the rate of poverty (i.e. \$2.15 a day) from 11.8 percent in 2010 to 5 percent in 2022.<sup>6</sup>

Structurally, the economy moved from being agro-based to manufacturing- and service sector-led; the GDP share of the manufacturing sector increased from 22 percent in 2010 to 33.92 percent in 2023, while the service sector share consistently remained over 50 percent.<sup>7</sup> A number of domestic and export-oriented sectors have made significant contributions to economic growth, including ready-made garments (RMG), food processing, leather and footwear, plastics, ceramics, jute and jute goods, overseas employment, IT, healthcare, and transportation. Export-led growth has been driven by the RMG sector in the last decades, which contributed to 84.5 percent of total exports in FY2023.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the lower share of agriculture in the GDP, food security has been ensured by a gradual rise in food production in rice and non-rice crops, vegetables, poultry, fish, and meat.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the per-capita food intake increased from 875.89 gm per day in 2010 to 985.1 gm in 2022.<sup>10</sup> The inward flow of remittances from over 10 million overseas migrant workers also contributed to stabilising the country's balance of payments position over the last decade.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, Bangladesh's economic growth in the last 10 years has been led by three sectors—i.e., the three 'R's of rice, RMG, and remittances. While private-sector participation in these three sectors has driven economic growth, the role of the government is also noteworthy. Multiple factors are facilitating sectoral economic growth,

including: favourable trade, investment, and financing policies for the private sector; huge public investment for infrastructure development, including road, rail, port, bridges, and rural markets; public and private investment in energy and power sector development; improved utility facilities for the private sector; better access to credit for large, medium, and small-scale industries; and slow but rising foreign direct investment (FDI) in the manufacturing, services, energy, and communication sectors.

### **Structural Macro and Microeconomic Challenges**

Despite progress in certain macroeconomic indicators, Bangladesh continues to face various challenges at the macro and micro levels. These include excess expenditure for large-scale infrastructure projects; unplanned expansion of power-generation capacity, leading to fiscal pressure; lack of investment in the social sectors, especially education and health; and faulty subsidy policies for the power and energy sectors, which have squeezed the scope for the use of funds in social-sector related activities.

Large-scale public expenditure projects in infrastructure and other areas have caused over-expenditure due to poor planning, extension of project timelines, cost escalation, and lack of

proper maintenance of infrastructure during the post-implementation period.<sup>12</sup> A weak financial sector poses a massive challenge to low-cost, inclusive financing for the private sector. The challenges have been intensified by the dysfunctional capital market and the inefficient insurance market in the country.

The economy has been suffering from various micro-level challenges, such as widespread corruption in public sector-related services, including in registration, licenses, and public contracts.<sup>13</sup> The high cost of doing business because of corruption has burdened the private sector, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Access to credit remains a significant challenge for SMEs, and the problem is intensifying because of high rates of borrowing from banks. Inclusive development of market supply chains has deteriorated over the last decade.

During this period, the dominant corporate players operated the biggest commodity and manufacturing product markets in the country. These corporates have developed their own supply chains—from raw materials production and collection, to intermediate product development, to final manufacturing and marketing. There is little scope for SMEs to participate in these

supply chains at any stage, be it in raw materials, intermediate products, or capital machinery. In the absence of functional market-monitoring agencies, these dominant players are able to intervene in the market, which adversely affects competitive market prices and the efficient supply of goods.

### **Key Initiatives to be Undertaken by the New Government**

The ‘resource-based’ model of the previous decade may not support the moderate to high economic growth envisioned for the next decade, especially in the post-COVID era. Instead, an ‘efficiency-led’ market model may be more conducive to achieving accelerated growth. A transformation is necessary in nearly every sector, including agriculture, manufacturing, industry, and services. Without the market-based reform of these sectors, achieving the sustained economic growth required to become an upper-middle-income country will be a massive challenge.

- **Agriculture, Manufacturing, and Service Sector Initiatives**

The agriculture sector requires reforms, including the development of formal marketing channels for agricultural products, a market-based pricing system, improved storage facilities for perishable



goods, implementation of product standards, promotion of agri-products, implementation of international sanitary and phytosanitary standards and labeling of hygienic products, and the production and marketing of safe food in the domestic market.

The manufacturing sector is also in need of reforms towards ensuring the participation of SMEs in supply chains, ensuring access to low-interest credit for SMEs, strengthening the monitoring of marketing channels to reduce anti-competitive practices, making the capital market functional for SMEs, and implementing the online operation of public agencies related to registration, licensing, renewal, and export-import approval. Promoting FDI is an important factor in the diversification of investment, products, and markets in the export sector. Therefore, a one-stop service for FDI, which comes with a full package supply of logistics facilities, is vital.

- **Initiatives by Public Institutions**

While several initiatives have been undertaken to enhance the efficiency of services delivered by public institutions—such as the one-stop service (OSS)<sup>14</sup> of the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) and the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA)—most of these initiatives are yet to provide services in full.<sup>15</sup> In this context,

the following public institutions, among others, must enhance their business-friendliness for the private sector: National Board of Revenue (NBR), Bangladesh Customs, Registration of Joint Stock Companies (RJSC), Bangladesh Bank, private commercial banks, Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), PetroBangla, Titas (Gas Transmission and Distribution Company), and city corporations.

- **Initiatives to Strengthen Competitiveness Post-LDC Graduation in 2026**

With Bangladesh poised to graduate from its Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026,<sup>16</sup> market preferences currently available to the private sector will be gradually withdrawn. These include duty-free market access to both developed and developing countries; a waiver for paying necessary charges for intellectual property, especially in pharmaceuticals; the withdrawal of subsidies, especially on petroleum and agricultural products; and subsidised credit facility for exported products. Thus, the costs of production as well as of import from Bangladesh will increase. Without improvements in the level of productivity and efficiency, and reduction of wastage and unnecessary operational costs, Bangladesh will be hard pressed to maintain its competitiveness in local and global markets.

The country must also actively pursue bilateral trade and investment agreements with strategically important developed and developing countries, including India, Japan, China, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea, and Thailand. To do this, Bangladesh needs to develop its institutional capacities and negotiate for mutually beneficial bilateral treaties.

- **Initiatives for Strengthening Regulatory Practices and Local Government Institutions**

The Awami League government may be able to leverage its institutional experience to deal with various challenges and agents, including bureaucrats, private sector, development partners, and multilateral development agencies and make administrative decisions accordingly. The government needs to make urgent institutional reforms in the first half of its term (i.e., 2024-25) and design a plan of action for such reforms. The establishment of a market-based system, with the participation of key market players including SMEs, necessitates changes in laws, rules, and regulations as well as the strengthening of public institutions. Access to low-cost funds needs to be assured from both local and international financial markets through multilateral development banks (MDBs) and international private commercial banks. These low-cost funds will equip local government institutions with greater authority in resource generation and utilisation.

- **Cross-Border Collaboration and Technological Development**

To overcome the challenges associated with graduating from LDC status by 2026, the government needs to strengthen bilateral regional and sub-regional cooperation. To this end, the government could sign comprehensive economic partnership agreements (CEPA)/free trade agreements (FTA) that will ensure mutually beneficial deals that protect the interests of the local private sector and key strategic markets. A technology-driven market system needs to be developed that integrates all market-related transactions and operations and ensures a smooth and transparent system of service delivery. Bangladesh can take lessons from India's Aadhaar system, which has digitalised market operations and made transactions integrated and transparent.

Time-bound, targeted operations could help the Hasina government achieve at least some of the reforms that could ensure sustainable economic growth in the coming years, in alignment with the country's broader goal of achieving upper-middle-income status by 2031.

## 2

# Post-Poll Challenges and Prospects for Bangladesh

Pallab Bhattacharya

With the main opposition party of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) deciding to boycott the 7 January 2024 election to the Jatiya Sangsad (Bangladesh's national parliament),<sup>1</sup> the victory of the ruling Awami League (AL), led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was a near certainty even before the polls. AL eventually secured 222 of the 300 seats for which polls were held. Indeed, the main point of interest in the election was not how many seats the AL would win, but whether voters would care to turn out at all when one of the main political players was not even participating.

A decade ago, immediately after the 2014 national election which the ruling AL won handsomely, the opposition BNP had accused it of electoral malpractices and declared that it would not participate in any future elections unless they were held under a neutral caretaker government

comprising non-political persons.<sup>2</sup> Once the AL refused to relinquish power to such a caretaker arrangement, it was only expected that the BNP would boycott the 2024 polls. It was an extreme stand for the BNP to take, leaving it no room for flexibility. In 2014, the BNP had boycotted the polls as the ruling AL-led government refused to conduct elections under a neutral caretaker government. It then contested the 2019 elections, anticipating a change in the political situation after the conviction of its Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia in a corruption case in 2017. With its top leaders either jailed or exiled, however, the BNP could manage only seven of the 248 seats it contested. In 2024, the party seems to have reckoned a similar outcome and decided to stay away.

While Bangladesh did have caretaker governments in charge when its 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008 Jatiya Sangsad elections were held, the constitutional need for such a caretaker had been abolished by an amendment passed by the ruling AL in 2011. The insistence of the BNP on a caretaker government before the polls, despite it no longer being constitutionally required, reflects the BNP's and the AL's deep distrust of each other.

### **Impact of Caretaker Governments**

After the first election conducted under a caretaker government in 1991, which was won by the BNP, the opposition campaigned hard to make setting up such a government before every election, a constitutional necessity. Ironically, it was the AL which had been in the forefront of the two-year agitation, from 1994 to 1996, demanding this reform.<sup>3</sup> AL chief Sheikh Hasina, however, changed her position on caretaker governments following the events of 2007-08 when the then caretaker dispensation headed by Iajuddin Ahmed, ostensibly to cleanse the political system of 'money power', began filing cases against several politicians, including Hasina herself and the BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia. It arrested Hasina in October 2009 on the charge of extorting funds from a businessman—a claim which she denied.<sup>4</sup>

Whether the Iajuddin Ahmed government was right in pursuing the course it did has been much debated in Bangladesh. The consensus seems to be that, however noble the aim of cleansing the political system, it is beyond the remit of a caretaker government, which is unelected. Such cleansing has to be done through necessary legislation passed by elected representatives and enforced by them. It was widely believed that Iajuddin Ahmed's covert aim was to squeeze both Hasina and Khaleda Zia out of Bangladeshi politics.<sup>5</sup> He even tried to send both the women permanently out of the country. His caretaker government declared an internal emergency, suspended fundamental rights, banned political activities, and imprisoned many leaders. No wonder that not too long after the AL won power in 2008, it abolished the constitutional provision for a caretaker government in July 2011.<sup>6</sup>

With the outcome of the 2024 election a foregone conclusion, the AL government, and especially Bangladesh's election commission, faced the challenge of getting a respectable number of voters to exercise their franchise. Unlike in some other countries, there is no compulsory requirement for Bangladeshi citizens to vote in elections. According to Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal, the turnout in January 2024 was a little over 40 percent,<sup>7</sup> the third lowest in Bangladesh's history.

**Table 1. Voter Turnout in Bangladesh's Parliamentary Elections (1973 -2024, in %)**

Year	Voter Turnout
1973	54.91
1979	51.29
1986	61.10
1991	55.45
Feb 1996	20.77
June 1996	75.60
2001	74.97
2008	87.13
2014	39.58
2019	80.20
2024	40.2

*Source: Bangladesh Election Commission and Inter-Parliamentary Union*

### **Boycott a Self-Goal**

Political observers in Bangladesh are of the view that the BNP must rethink its strategy of boycotting elections if it wants to remain relevant. If the party stays out of elections, its cadres, with no position of power to compete for, are bound to get

progressively demoralised. After three consecutive terms, the AL faced considerable anti-incumbency sentiment before the January polls. Many believe that had the BNP contested, and had the polls been even reasonably fair, the BNP, even if it did not manage a clear majority, could have put up an impressive show, which would have served as a base to build upon for a future shot at power. After all, the party had convincingly won both the 1991<sup>8</sup> and 2001<sup>9</sup> parliamentary elections.

The BNP has been out of power for 18 years. It has staged many violent street protests, but these have had little impact. Among its allies, the Jamaat-e-Islami has lost most of its credibility after many of its leaders were convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh for war crimes committed during the 1971 liberation war. The party badly misses a charismatic leader, with its chairman, 78-year-old Khaleda Zia, ailing and having been convicted in a corruption case. Zia's son, Tareque Rahman, is regarded as an astute organiser but lives overseas and is remote-controlling the party.

However, it is also true that no other party has the wherewithal to mount an effective challenge to the AL. The Jatiya Party, founded by former military ruler H. M. Ershad, is badly divided;<sup>10</sup> the late president's wife, Raushan Ershad, and his brother, Ghulam Mohd Quader, are fighting over the party's control. It won only 11 seats in the January election.<sup>11</sup>

## Misreading International Positions

In the run-up to the January 2024 elections, the United States had openly disapproved of the fraudulent methods and coercive tactics the AL appeared to be pursuing to ensure results in its favour. In September 2023, it imposed visa restrictions on Bangladeshi politicians and officials “responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh.”<sup>12</sup> The BNP, however, made a serious mistake in assessing how far the US would go to pressure the AL into holding free and fair polls. Despite several meetings with US officials before the polls, it failed to obtain their support for its caretaker government demand.<sup>13</sup>

The US wanted to be seen as even-handed, but there was no way it was going to ignore India’s position on the Bangladesh elections. India is crucial to the US’s strategic interests in South Asia, where China has been aggressive in consolidating its presence across a range of infrastructure projects.<sup>14</sup> India had made it very clear that it supports Hasina’s AL,<sup>15</sup> given the Islamist links of the BNP and its support for the incipient ‘boycott Indian goods’ movement in Bangladesh.

Both the US and the United Kingdom have questioned the fairness<sup>16</sup> of the 7 January election. Yet their scepticism does not amount to a serious challenge to the election results; they are unlikely to impose any punitive measures that could hurt Bangladesh economically, especially its export of ready-made garments, its biggest foreign exchange earner.<sup>17</sup> In separate letters to Sheikh Hasina a month after the elections, both US President Joe Biden and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said they will continue to engage with Dhaka in promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>18</sup> Sunak also added his support to helping Bangladesh move out of the United Nations’ list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the next two years.<sup>19</sup>

## Bangladesh’s Real Challenge

The real political challenge for Bangladesh lies in arriving at an acceptable template for holding elections as part of its efforts to consolidate its democracy. Democratic culture needs to be expanded in the country, while insulating constitutional bodies like the election commission from political pressures. Bangladesh needs more space for dissent than ever before.

The prospects for such space, however, remain in doubt, more so with the passing of the Digital Security Act (DSA) in 2018 (later amended and renamed the Cyber Security Act (CSA) in 2023).<sup>20</sup> The Act confers on the government powers to arrest or fine anyone found spreading extremism, hatred, or sectarianism online. It sounds innocuous and high-minded, but in fact has already been misused to prosecute a number of journalists.<sup>21</sup> And the CSA is only the latest of a series of curbs on freedom of expression that the Hasina government has imposed.

As noted earlier, the biggest hurdle to a democratic culture taking firmer roots in Bangladesh is the deep distrust between the two leading political players, the AL and the BNP, and

the absence of communication between their top leaders. Many fear that the continued faceoff could lead to radical Islamist forces gaining ground. Islamists have been active in Bangladesh ever since the country was formed in 1971.

There is also heightened debate over the nature of the country's nationhood, with the BNP's espousal of Bangladeshi nationalism as a counter to the AL's Bengali nationalism. The former seeks an Islamic identity for Bangladeshi, subsuming all other identities, while the latter wants a secular identity built around the Bengali language.

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## 3

# Promoting Sustainable India-Bangladesh Connectivity

Riya Sinha

The January 2024 elections in Bangladesh highlighted strengthening relationships with neighbours as a priority in Dhaka’s foreign policy strategy. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in her election manifesto, emphasised “cooperation with the neighbouring countries in various areas including cross-border communication, transit, energy partnership, and equitable water sharing.”<sup>1</sup> Following her victory, she reaffirmed her commitment to the manifesto, while also highlighting India’s role in Bangladesh’s foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Hasina’s acknowledgement of India as a “great friend” a day after her electoral win exemplifies the strong relationship and bilateral connections between the two countries.<sup>3</sup> India views Bangladesh as an important partner in its Neighbourhood First and Act East policies, focused on South Asia and the Bay of Bengal

regions. As both nations aim to strengthen their bilateral relations, forging stronger economic links, both through hard and soft connectivity,<sup>a</sup> will be among the ways forward.

The strong ties between India and Bangladesh extend beyond the diplomatic sphere and encompass deep-rooted historical and cultural connections. The geographical proximity of the two countries, straddling a 4,096.7-km-long border, as well as their shared histories, have laid the foundation for a relationship that transcends the vagaries of political relations.<sup>4</sup> This has been evidenced through the increasing number of bilateral meetings since 2014, the settlement of land and maritime boundaries, and the conclusion of river agreements that could help foster deeper connectivity.<sup>5,6</sup> Economic cooperation now forms

a Here, ‘hard’ infrastructure refers to the physical infrastructure, and ‘soft’ infrastructure refers to institutions, norms, and digital processes.



the cornerstone of the bilateral relations, with Bangladesh emerging as India's largest trading partner in South Asia and its fifth largest export destination.<sup>7</sup> From a total trade of US\$5.8 billion in 2012-13, bilateral trade grew three times to US\$14.2 billion in 2022-23.<sup>8</sup> These figures underscore the need for strengthened connectivity to leverage the potential of greater economic engagement.

### **Current Connectivity Initiatives**

In the last decade, both countries have focused on establishing multimodal connectivity and increasing development cooperation. In land border management, India has established border haats with Bangladesh and increased the number of land ports from zero to five, with two more being planned till 2025.<sup>9</sup> Approximately 80 percent of the bilateral passenger movement and 75 percent of India's exports to Bangladesh take place via land ports.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, both countries have restarted six out of the seven pre-1965 railway lines, including the one between Akhaura in Bangladesh and Agartala in Tripura, India.<sup>11</sup> The first India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline has also been built, which enables the movement of refined diesel from Siliguri in West Bengal and Parbatipur in Dinajpur district of Bangladesh

to build infrastructure for trade in petroleum, which crossed the US\$1-billion mark in 2023.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, New Delhi and Dhaka have focused on the development of inland waterways for cross-border trade and movement, building on the 1972 Protocol on Inland Waterways Trade and Transit.<sup>13</sup> Between 2019-20 and 2022-23, there was a 71-percent increase in cargo traffic transported through inland waterways.<sup>14</sup> Beyond bilateral hard infrastructure development, India has also stepped up its development cooperation with Bangladesh, with the latter becoming the largest recipient of India's Lines of Credit, at US\$7.8 billion, which extends across sectors such as transportation, social infrastructure, and defence.<sup>15</sup>

The connectivity initiatives also expand to the trilateral level within South Asia. In the energy sector, India and Nepal signed an Agreement for Long Term Power Trade in January 2024.<sup>16</sup> This agreement will enable Nepal to export 10,000 MW of electricity to India, which can be further exported to Bangladesh through Indian transmission lines. India, Nepal, and Bangladesh are working on finalising the draft of a power trade agreement.<sup>17</sup> On the trade front, Bangladesh and Bhutan signed an Agreement on the Movement of Traffic-in-Transit and Protocol to provide Bhutan access to Bangladesh seaports,<sup>18</sup> which will be facilitated through Indian land ports.

At a sub-regional level, the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework, with joint working groups for Water Resources Management, Power/Hydropower, and Connectivity and Transit, is an important cooperation mechanism.<sup>19</sup> While there has been progress on ‘hard’ connectivity initiatives, ‘softer’ areas, such as standards and protocols, including the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) for the Regulation of Passenger, Personal and Cargo Vehicular Traffic signed in 2015, have stalled.<sup>20</sup> As a result, trade and economic cooperation between Bangladesh and its neighbouring countries has not reached its full potential. It is, therefore, important to balance both hard and soft indicators of connectivity in order to pave the way for sustainable connectivity in the region.

### **Measures to Strengthen India-Bangladesh Connectivity**

Ongoing efforts towards ‘hard’ infrastructure development need to be complemented with ‘softer’ interventions in order to ensure the holistic and sustainable development of cross-border connectivity that can reap economic dividends for both countries. There are six areas in which the two countries can cooperate bilaterally or through multilateral institutions.

- **Cooperation in trade facilitation**

India and Bangladesh would benefit from cooperation in trade facilitation, which includes

simplification, modernisation, and harmonisation of export and import processes to lower the time and cost of conducting trade. Following the completion of the National Time Release Study 2023, India, which ratified the World Trade Organization’s Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) in 2016, fulfilled all of its commitments within the stipulated time.<sup>21</sup> While Bangladesh also ratified the TFA in 2016, as a Least Developed Country (LDC), it has a flexible timeframe for the implementation of its obligations.<sup>22</sup> Current TFA commitment levels in the countries are 45 percent for Bangladesh and 100 percent for India.<sup>23</sup>

With its 2026 deadline for its LDC graduation, Bangladesh needs to advance its trade facilitation reforms. Areas where it can cooperate with India include addressing bottlenecks on the land border, such as the long detention time for trucks at Benapole and restrictions in the movement and clearance of goods from different land ports along the border. For instance, despite Tripura being a major exporter of rubber, exports are not allowed through the Agartala land port.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, even though there is an agreement between the Bureau of Indian Standards and the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution for the clearance of certain goods, this agreement is not recognised by customs authorities at all land borders due to various local political and economic factors.<sup>25</sup> Whereas customs authorities at the Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) of Agartala and Sutarkandi in

India accept Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution certificates, the Land Custom Stations at Ghoadanga and Changrabandha (in India) do not accept these certificates and instead send the product samples to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, both countries need to implement mutual recognition agreements in standards and conformity assessment across all land ports in order to streamline trade.

- **Mutual recognition of dry ports**

In order to decongest the borders, there needs to be a mutual recognition of dry ports as points of entry and exit. Currently, only land ports at the borders are recognised as ports by customs authorities, and there is no inland movement to dry ports or Inland Container Depots (ICDs). As a result, the transloading of cargo in border areas causes congestion. While the land port authorities in both India and Bangladesh have marked areas within the land ports for transloading, this is not a long-term solution. By mutually recognising ICDs as ports of entry or exit in the trade agreement, both countries will be able to facilitate the inland movement of goods and decongest the borders, which will lower the time required and costs of engaging in trade via the land border. This will also pave the way for the construction of more ICDs in India's Northeast region and increase cargo containerisation for bilateral trade.

- **Coordinated efforts towards infrastructure building**

India and Bangladesh need to make coordinated efforts towards infrastructure building, such as land ports, roads, and railways, in order to leverage the full potential of connectivity. For instance, while the Land Port at Dawki (India) is complete, Tamabil (Bangladesh) needs to be developed with better infrastructure facilities.<sup>27</sup> Linking Bangladesh's Matarbari sea port with land ports in India's Northeast can also benefit both countries. This coordination will ensure that infrastructure projects complement each other, optimising efficiency and creating a network that serves the collective interests of both countries. The integration of various ports and transport hubs facilitates commerce and contributes to regional economic growth.

- **Improved protocols for railway connectivity**

While several railway lines have been constructed and revived in the last decade, seamless rail connectivity between both countries is lacking. Field reports suggest that container cargo movement has not taken place in several months, and the frequency of the Gede-Darshana cargo train has reduced.<sup>28</sup> This is due to several challenges, including the unavailability of rakes,

lack of cargo-handling equipment at key loading stations, and limited movement of rail cargo through the ICDs.<sup>29</sup> Seamless railway connectivity is essential to support the growing trade between the two countries, as well as to enable India to transfer goods to the Northeast. Beyond bilateral initiatives, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal should also look towards establishing a sub-regional railway corridor that will help in the transit of goods, connect business centres in the region, and streamline border regulations. It will also allow the countries to move goods at scale and overcome the bottlenecks encountered in movement by road.

- **The India-Bangladesh Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)**

Both countries need to prioritise the early conclusion of CEPA. This is particularly the case for Bangladesh, which is set to graduate to an upper-middle-income country in 2031, after which it will lose its international support measures and preferential treatment in trade. India and Bangladesh concluded a joint feasibility study on CEPA in 2022 and made preparations for talks in October 2023.<sup>30</sup> Both countries need to expedite the trade agreement to reap the maximum benefits from growing trade. To this end, both countries

need to focus on gaining incremental agreements that will finally lead to a CEPA. For instance, bilateral Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) on standards, as mentioned earlier, will pave the way for achieving harmonisation in the long term under CEPA, and steps towards trade facilitation will help India and Bangladesh streamline trade processes. By addressing these issues, a CEPA can create a conducive environment for businesses, encouraging mutual investment and facilitating smoother cross-border trade.

- **Increased cooperation via alternative regional and sub-regional frameworks**

Both countries also need to strengthen cooperation through other regional and sub-regional mechanisms. This includes expediting the finalisation of the MVA under the BBIN framework to increase cross-border movement and improving cooperation through regional platforms such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Bangladesh is an important player in the Bay of Bengal region and the wider Indo-Pacific due to its strategic location as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. This has also led to a growing interest from external players such as Japan to

invest in the region and build sub-regional value chains, especially between Bangladesh and India's Northeast region. This increased interest was highlighted during the fourth India-Bangladesh-Japan Intellectual Conclave held in Shillong (India) in 2024.<sup>31</sup>

PM Hasina's renewed emphasis on improving relations and connectivity with the neighbourhood for economic growth requires a multifaceted approach. While there have been notable developments in cross-border connectivity initiatives between Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan, these developments need to be strengthened through a focus on 'softer' areas.

Addressing trade facilitation, coordinated infrastructure building, railway connectivity, trade agreements, regional cooperation, energy collaboration, and people-to-people connectivity will help Bangladesh create robust links, especially with India. The resulting achievements in trade and connectivity could also reduce the focus on existing political discord between the two countries. Improved connectivity promises not just economic benefits but also a foundation for shared prosperity and mutual benefit.

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## 4

# Pragmatism in Dhaka's Diplomacy: Balancing Relations with Global Powers

Niloy Ranjan Biswas

**B**angladesh's diplomacy has historically been undergirded by the principle, "Friendship to all, malice towards none." Yet, the country has also experienced the Hobbesian geopolitical construct<sup>a</sup> and found that being a so-called 'all-weather friend' in the current complex and multipolar world may be challenging.<sup>1</sup> Following the 2024 elections that saw Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina returning to power for a fourth consecutive term, a number of countries have expressed interest in furthering cooperation with Bangladesh to advance a friendly transregional network.<sup>2</sup>

For the new Hasina government, a critical challenge is whether they can deliver on their global and regional commitments while reconciling national priorities by striking a pragmatic balance between foreign stakeholders and their expectations. It should be noted that Bangladesh has thus far adopted an independent and unbiased foreign policy that is marked by the epistemological concept of change and continuity towards promoting its national interests and reflecting the mutual interests of friendly countries and international development partners.<sup>3</sup>

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a Thomas Hobbes, as a prominent philosopher of political realism in the study of international relations, identifies state's 'self-help' situation is critical in an anarchic international system. A permanent friend in IR, therefore, is largely underappreciated. Read: Erik Gartzke and Alex Weisiger, "Permanent Friends? Dynamic Difference and the Democratic Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, No. 1 (March 2013): 174.

## Between Geopolitics and National Interests

Bangladesh's location at a critical geopolitical junction between South Asia and Southeast Asia has gained the country strategic attention from global powers. Although the state's recognition coincided with the peaking of the Cold War, Bangladesh has been consistent with its non-aligned position. In the post-Cold War era, the United States (US), the European Union (EU) countries, and China have emerged as the largest export destinations and import sources, therefore contributing to Bangladesh's growth momentum.<sup>4</sup> Bangladesh views India and China as its two most important neighbours to ensure sustainable growth through the development of mutual interests.<sup>5</sup> Dhaka's current diplomacy prioritises economic development towards achieving its target of becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2031.<sup>6</sup> To do this, Bangladesh requires supplies of resources that can foster its infrastructural development and expand its export-oriented growth.

The Indo-Pacific Outlook document, released in April 2023, reflects Bangladesh's balanced stance.<sup>7</sup> The vision outlined in the document seeks to reassure its Western development partners of further collaboration while confirming that Bangladesh will not be party to any security alliances against countries in the Indo-Pacific.

Critics have argued that Bangladesh's cautious step in framing the Outlook was a half-hearted effort

towards appeasing the West.<sup>8</sup> However, a strained relationship with China would cease Beijing's investments in Bangladesh's infrastructural development and destabilise the region by extending the competition between India and China. Bangladesh also cannot afford to undertake Cold War-type bandwagoning with other powerful countries. Therefore, the only available option is a pragmatic alteration of changes and continuities in practices that are aligned towards the national goal of building a knowledge-based society by 2041.<sup>9</sup> Global powers in the Indo-Pacific are also keen to engage with Bangladesh for mutual strategic advantage, as the country's growth will be pivotal for regional development.<sup>10</sup>

## Bangladesh's Ties with Global Powers

Bangladesh's relations with global powers are dependent on trade and investments. In 2020-21, Bangladesh imported US\$61.6 billion and exported US\$40.1 billion worth of goods and services.<sup>11</sup> Despite the negative balance, import and export volume increased by 39 percent and 32 percent, respectively, from 2021 to 2022.<sup>12</sup> China, India, Singapore, the US, and Japan are the major importers, and the US, UK, and EU are the primary export destinations for Bangladesh.<sup>13</sup> Bangladesh's relations with these countries and groups are not

transactional but underpinned by shared values and mutual interests. Bangladesh's diplomatic endeavours with its global power partners are summarised in the following paragraphs.

- **The United States**

Bangladesh and the US enjoy amicable bilateral relations despite a few challenges. One of the crucial concerns for Bangladesh is the unilateral imposition of sanctions by the US in December 2021 on Bangladesh's specialised security force, Rapid Action Battalion, and its officials on alleged human rights violations.<sup>14</sup> High tariffs on Bangladesh's apparel products that are exported to the US are another area of concern, since this reduces Bangladesh's competitiveness in the US market.<sup>15</sup> While the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) was suspended in 2013 on the grounds of workers' rights and safety issues,<sup>16</sup> both countries engage in regular discussions to remove any differences in this regard and facilitate Bangladesh's inclusion in the new GSP programme. At the same time, Bangladesh and the US have collaborated in internationalising the Rohingya crisis, and the US has supported Bangladesh's claim for the safe repatriation of the Rohingyas to their homeland in the Rakhine State of Myanmar.<sup>17</sup>

Despite initial concerns about Bangladesh's election process, the US has come to understand the unique political contexts that led to the elections and the scarcity of viable alternatives that would align with the US's broader interests of stability and prosperity in the region.<sup>18</sup> The receptiveness of Russia, China, Japan, and India to Bangladesh's 2024 election outcomes as well as their commitment of continuity also influenced the US to pragmatically reframe its positions to sustain partnership with the Bangladeshi government. It is assumed that both these countries will work together to improve workers' rights and safety, grow the business relations between them, increase resilience against the impacts of climate change, extend defence cooperation, and strengthen security in the Indo-Pacific.

- **The European Union**

The EU is Bangladesh's largest trading partner, accounting for about 45 percent of its merchandise exports.<sup>19</sup> It is also a crucial development partner, offering Bangladesh 10 percent of its total Official Development Assistance over the five-year period of 2018-2022.<sup>20</sup> The EU has also been an important source of net foreign direct investment inflows, with close to US\$3.5 billion during the



same period.<sup>21</sup> In 2022, Bangladesh and the EU initiated dialogues to extend cooperation in the areas of maritime security and safety in the Indian Ocean region. However, two major challenges exist that can jeopardise EU-Bangladesh relations.

First, Bangladesh's access to the GSP+ regime would require the country to fulfil certain conditions of labour rights, human rights, and good governance, which are regularly monitored by the EU. Second, national standards need to be in place in Bangladesh to ensure compliance with global environmental standards. As a vocal representative of climate-vulnerable countries, Bangladesh must lead the formulation of support plans and effectively implement mitigation and adaptation action plans. At the 2024 Munich Security Conference, PM Hasina urged developed countries to unlock more resources for climate-vulnerable nations;<sup>22</sup> the onus falls largely on the EU countries.

- **Japan**

The Bangladesh-Japan relationship graduated from a 'Comprehensive Partnership' in 2014 to a 'Strategic Partnership' in 2023.<sup>23</sup> In the same year, these two nations pledged to exchange vessels and aircraft and engage in training programmes and organise joint defence exercises.<sup>24</sup> These developments in defence cooperation are aimed at promoting peace in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan is also the largest export destination for

Bangladesh in Asia, though the trade balance is tilted towards the former. The two countries are now working to formulate an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) to facilitate trade and investment in the future.<sup>25</sup> Apart from ready-made garments (RMG), Bangladesh aims to export pharmaceuticals, leather, jute products, processed foods, skilled human resources, and IT products to Japanese markets.<sup>26</sup> As a proponent of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, Japan has a keen interest in exploring cooperation in the Blue Economy through technology transfer, consultations, partnerships in deep-sea fishing, and exploration of energy and other marine resources.

- **Russia**

PM Hasina's January 2013 visit to Moscow had a significant impact on Bangladesh-Russia relations. The two states have extended their cooperation in a wide range of sectors, including the construction of the Rooppur nuclear power plant and collaborations in agriculture, energy, law, education, trade, power, and mineral resources. The Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation is currently working with Bangladesh to build a two-unit nuclear power plant with a total generation capacity of 2400-megawatt electricity in Rooppur.<sup>27</sup> Bangladesh has also demonstrated its interest in defence cooperation with Russia by procuring Russian-made military equipment for its army and air force since 1999.<sup>28</sup>

However, the US-EU embargoes on Russia due to the Ukraine-Russia conflict may interrupt the completion of the nuclear power plant project. Bangladesh will thus need to find alternatives to ensure continued support for Russian trade supplies.<sup>29</sup> Bangladesh has already stated its position regarding Russia's intervention in Ukraine in the United Nations. Bangladesh voted favourably in the EU-sponsored UN resolution of October 2022 to support Ukraine's territorial integrity in compliance with the UN's principle of non-intervention. However, a month later, Bangladesh, along with India, China, Pakistan, and 70 other countries, abstained from voting in a US-backed resolution condemning Russia.<sup>30</sup> This decision demonstrates Bangladesh's pragmatism in its tripartite relations with its Western allies, Russia, and its neighbourhood.

- **China**

Bangladesh and China have enjoyed a diplomatic relationship since the mid-1970s and cooperate in several areas, including trade, infrastructure development, and defence. China has provided concessional loans to Bangladesh for various development projects, and Dhaka owes 6 percent of its total foreign debt to Beijing.<sup>31</sup> China's Belt and Road Initiative offers multimodal opportunities for infrastructural development in Bangladesh, including transportation, energy, and telecommunications projects. China and

Bangladesh have been jointly working on the Dhaka-Chittagong Expressway, the Karnaphuli Tunnel, and other infrastructural initiatives.<sup>32</sup>

Although Bangladesh is diversifying its defence sources, China remains a major supplier of military equipment, including aircraft, naval vessels, and small arms.<sup>33</sup> However, Dhaka needs to be wary of the Chinese "debt trap" and thus avoid any unfavourable terms that may result in an unsustainable debt burden.<sup>34</sup> Only 6.8 percent of Bangladesh's external debts in 2020 were from China.<sup>35</sup> Bangladesh's significance as a central littoral state of the Bay of Bengal and its proximity to the South China Sea necessitates robust Dhaka-Beijing relations in order to ensure stability and sustainable growth in the Indo-Pacific.

- **India**

Bangladesh-India relations have evolved within complex regional geopolitics to institutionalise their status as 'natural allies',<sup>36</sup> with experts stating that the two countries are currently experiencing a golden chapter in their ties.<sup>37</sup> Both countries have proposed extending negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement towards signing a Free Trade Agreement.<sup>38</sup> They have also committed to guaranteeing mutual security through cross-border assistance in

countering various non-traditional security threats. India and Bangladesh have expanded connectivity, security, and defence cooperation, with an emphasis on cross-border trade and the shared concerns of countering extremism and threats in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>39</sup> India needs to ensure that it prohibits the killings of Bangladeshi civilians at its borders and build confidence between security agencies to address pressing transnational threats. India and Bangladesh will also benefit from collaboratively dealing with climate change and ensuring the just use of transboundary rivers.

#### ● Regional Forums

The energy sector in Bangladesh has attracted the attention of India, China, and other major powers. This interest incorporates Bangladesh in the transregional energy security infrastructure. However, this collaboration in the energy sector may potentially expand, considering the prospective uses of renewable energy, solar energy, and nuclear energy. Furthermore, Bangladesh's collaboration with regional and multilateral institutions exhibits its pragmatic policy of appreciation towards multilateral development processes. Its evolving relations with the Bay of

Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are aimed at contributing to land, water, and maritime connectivity and regional power sectors.<sup>40</sup>

Regional (e.g., Myanmar's Rohingya issues and India-China competitiveness) and global (e.g., the Ukraine-Russia war and Middle-Eastern crisis) adversarial conditions and socio-economic development will prove to be the litmus tests for the pragmatic applications of Bangladesh's foreign policies. Dhaka has refrained from taking advantage of contentious relations between regional and global powers and has called for greater peace and stability. By maintaining such continuity, Bangladesh can exercise its foreign policy autonomy in a way that it can stimulate the required changes to uphold its national interests and continue balancing between major powers based on the collective interests of growth, security, and development.

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## 5

# Dhaka's Defence Demands: Deterring Threats and Diversifying Partnerships

Kallol Bhattacharjee

**T**he history of Bangladesh has been shaped largely by the role of the armed forces in domestic politics. During the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, military officials of the East Bengal Regiment of the Pakistan Army were targeted by West Pakistani forces, which prompted the exodus of Bengali-speaking officers from Pakistani forces into guerrilla formations that constituted the *Mukti Bahini* movement.<sup>a,1</sup> These guerrilla groups remained active after 1971, engaging in quasi-military functions.

The Bangladesh Army entered domestic politics with the August 1975 coup that resulted in the assassination of then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family by Captain Bazlul Huda and Major S.H.M.B Noor Chowdhury.<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh subsequently came under martial law, with military rule at its peak under Major

General Ziaur Rahman, then Chief of Staff of the Bangladesh Army<sup>3</sup> and a hallowed figure of the 1971 war. Army rule returned to Bangladesh in 1982, when General Hossein Mohammed Ershad—the only leader designated as a “dictator” in the history of Bangladeshi politics—came to power following a bloodless coup. However, Ershad’s overthrow in 1990 following a democratic uprising led by Sheikh Hasina (leader of the Awami League) and Khaleda Zia (leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party) and the country’s consequent return to democracy<sup>4</sup> marked a new beginning for Bangladeshi defence forces.<sup>5</sup>

A politicised military that attempts or succeeds in usurping political power often signals a weakening democracy. Consequently, after Sheikh Hasina won the 1997 Bangladesh elections, she made it her priority to separate her government

a The Mukti Bahini, or Bangladesh Forces, was the guerrilla movement that helped liberate Bangladesh in 1971.

from the military. In February 2024, Sheikh Hasina returned to power for a fourth consecutive term. Since 1997, under her leadership, military coups in Bangladesh have reduced substantially. The government during this period has focused on strengthening diplomatic and commercial engagements with global and regional partners, undergirded by the principle, “Friendship to all, malice towards none”. This has allowed Bangladesh to build strategic relations with India, China, Russia, and other powers,<sup>6</sup> in multiple sectors including defence. Bangladesh has made steady progress towards defence modernisation, initiating defence cooperation with France in 2021,<sup>7</sup> signing a deal with Russia for the supply of two Mi-171A2 multipurpose heavy helicopters in 2021,<sup>8</sup> and deepening its ties with India with the 5<sup>th</sup> bilateral annual defence dialogue of 2023.<sup>9</sup> Bangladesh is also currently one of the leading contributors of troops to United Nations peacekeeping initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

However, the country’s defence sector is facing challenges, including the apparent inability of the Bangladesh Army’s deterrence capabilities to prevent the ongoing violence at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border from having an impact on Bangladeshi citizens, as well as Dhaka’s growing dissatisfaction with the quality of Chinese arms supplies.<sup>11</sup> The Hasina government needs to

address these challenges to maintain stability and ensure that foreign investments continue to flow into Bangladesh, especially with the country trying to graduate to upper-middle-income status by 2031.<sup>12</sup>

### **Breaking Out of History**

Bangladesh has long been ensnared in the trauma of its partitions—first from British India, then from West Pakistan. This, as well as the geopolitical reality of sharing a 4,096.7-kilometre-long land boundary with India,<sup>13</sup> has shaped the economic and security priorities of Bangladesh. However, more contemporary events like the Rohingya crisis—where the defence posture and preparedness of the Bangladesh Army proved inadequate in preventing the effects of the crisis in Bangladesh—and the violence in the Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT), where Buddhist Chakma rebels have been active, have shown that Bangladesh’s contemporary security considerations go beyond maintaining stable ties with India.

Since the Myanmar Army’s 1978 military operation *Naga Min* (King Dragon) to oust illegal immigrants from Myanmar and the government’s denial of citizenship rights to the Rohingya community of Rakhine State in 1982, there has

been a trickle of forced migrants of the Rohingya community into Bangladesh. Border crossings increased after the 1991 military operation Pyi Thaya<sup>14</sup> and peaked in August 2017, following the Myanmar Army's attacks on Rohingya villages.<sup>15</sup> In the heavy monsoon rains, the Rohingyas entered forests and hills in southern Chattogram to cross the Myanmar border.<sup>16</sup>

Under the Hasina regime, the displaced communities have found refuge in the Cox's Bazar district. However, intensifying clashes between the *Tatmadaw* (the Myanmar military) and the Rohingyas and other ethnic groups along the 271-kilometre-long Bangladesh-Myanmar border pose a security concern for Dhaka.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Arakan Army and Unconventional Challenges to Bangladesh's Security**

Bangladesh and Myanmar have had a relatively peaceful relationship, barring Naypyidaw's patrolling of parts of the Bay of Bengal near Bangladesh's St. Martin's Island for energy exploration,<sup>18</sup> which created temporary tensions culminating in a naval confrontation near the island in 2008. However, the security implications of the current Rohingya crisis for Bangladesh extend beyond the challenges posed by illegal migration. Along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, PM Hasina faces the more immediate risk of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) such as the Arakan

Army (AA) and the Chin National Army (CNA).<sup>19</sup> Of the two, the AA, an armed Buddhist national movement, is of greater concern to Bangladesh due to its rapid expansion of control in the Rakhine region next to Chattogram. The *Tatmadaw* has retaliated with artillery bombardments, often leading to civilian casualties. On some occasions, stray shelling by the military have landed on Bangladesh territory.<sup>20</sup> In February 2024, at least two people were killed after mortar shells fired from Myanmar landed in Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup>

The AA and CNA have posed setbacks to Myanmar's military junta. The AA, which is rapidly gaining control of the Myanmar coastline near Chattogram, may emerge as a threatening non-state actor.<sup>22</sup> The emergence of non-state actors within Myanmar as new players in the South-Southeast Asian framework will be fraught with risks. However, in this case, the primary challenge stems from the fact that Bangladesh has maintained a studied silence about the EAOs' activities near its borders and is keeping a close watch for emerging links between the EAOs and the Buddhist community in the CHT. The Chakmas of the CHT have a presence on both sides of the border, and social networks between the groups can help establish a sanctuary for the AA if relations between Dhaka and the Rakhine rebels dissipate.<sup>23</sup>

## The China Problem and the Search for Alternatives

Another challenge for Bangladesh is the growing presence of China in the country's defence sector, which is marred by Dhaka's dissatisfaction with the quality of Chinese arms supplies, including China's K-8W aircraft;<sup>24</sup> two frigates purchased by Dhaka experienced snags with the operation of various control systems even while being transported.<sup>25</sup> Dhaka's issues with Chinese defence supplies also extend to software, as the Chinese company ZTE supplied it with unlicensed or pirated software copies, making it vulnerable to the possibility of exposing sensitive state matters.<sup>26</sup> Despite these issues, China remains the largest supplier of military hardware to Bangladesh, comprising at least a 31.1 percent share of the arms market in Bangladesh.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, Sheikh Hasina has pursued a multifarious defence procurement strategy, reaching out to Russia, the United States, and other arms-producing countries, in addition to China. The existing problems with Myanmar may necessitate a fresh approach from Dhaka in the defence sector.

Therefore, PM Hasina in her new term needs to prioritise developing a defence capability through more collaborative partnerships to increase the country's potential for deterring conflicts in neighbouring states from disturbing the peace along its borders. According to the Global Fire Power Index, which ranks countries by military strength, Myanmar ranks 35<sup>th</sup>—higher than Bangladesh at 37<sup>th</sup>.<sup>28</sup>

However, forging defence collaborations carries geopolitical implications, which will test Bangladesh's diplomacy. According to reports, since Dhaka unveiled its 'Forces Goal 2030' in 2009,<sup>29</sup> it has initiated discussions to procure combat equipment such as fixed-wing drones, light tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) with 23 countries, including China, Serbia, Türkiye, and Singapore. The Rohingya crisis has resurrected the Bangladesh-Türkiye military relationship, with Dhaka acquiring Bayraktar drones from Türkiye in 2022.<sup>30</sup> Türkiye was also at the forefront of assisting displaced Rohingya populations in the refugee settlements near Cox's Bazar. Turkish humanitarian assistance also garnered attention when Emine Erdoğan, President Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan's wife, visited Bangladesh soon after the crisis began in 2017.<sup>31</sup> In 2022, Türkiye's envoy to Bangladesh Mustafa Tufan confirmed that the Bangladesh Armed Forces had an agreement with Baykar Technology to procure advanced drones.<sup>32</sup> For India, Türkiye's expanding presence in Bangladesh's defence sector is a potential red flag due to its previous altercations with Türkiye over the Kashmir issue.<sup>33</sup>

Despite concerns about the growing presence of Türkiye and China in the Bangladesh defence market, India is making a steady pitch into the sector, notably through Lines of Credit, such as that worth US\$500 million aimed at helping Dhaka purchase military hardware.<sup>34</sup> Among the defence suppliers that are active in Bangladesh, India may find it easier to collaborate with France and Russia to supply Dhaka with the hardware that it would need to deter Naypyidaw. The “third countries” statement in the Horizon 2047 agreement—which was signed in July 2023 to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the India-France strategic partnership—is aimed at benefiting countries that are friendly to both India and France.<sup>35</sup> In 2021, PM Hasina was hosted by President Emmanuel Macron on her visit to Paris.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, in September 2023, she hosted Macron in Dhaka on a day-long visit following the G20 summit in New Delhi.<sup>37</sup>

The challenge before PM Hasina is twofold. Dhaka has to be cautious of setbacks to the Myanmar military, mainly from the AA, which can create increased security concerns for Dhaka in the CHT. At the same time, Bangladesh's ability to pose serious military deterrence to Myanmar is being overshadowed by geopolitical competition between India, Türkiye, Russia, China, and France, which are the main military hardware suppliers to Bangladesh. It remains to be seen whether PM Hasina can negotiate with India, her major ally in South Asia, to diplomatically strengthen Bangladesh's military ties with suppliers that may have differences with New Delhi. It will also be necessary for the prime minister to improve the Bangladesh Army's security posture along the Myanmar border in order to ensure deterrence among the *Tatmadaw* as well as to keep the minority Buddhist constituents happy and prevent rebel groups in Rakhine from making inroads into the CHT.<sup>38</sup>

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## 6

# The Many Facets of Human (In)security in Bangladesh

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

**T**he definition of ‘human security’ as proposed by the United Nations Development Programme (1994)<sup>1,a</sup> emphasises people’s security in general and sustainable human development in particular.<sup>2</sup> The report highlighted four fundamental characteristics of human security: it is a universal concern; it has interdependent components that result in transnational threats; it requires early intervention; and it is people-centric, i.e., concerned with how people “live and breathe”.<sup>3</sup> The report also identified seven areas of human security: economic security, food security, health security,

environment security, personal security, community security, and political security.

Climate change is one of the greatest contemporary threats to world peace and human security and has resulted in a shift in the understanding of security in the early-21<sup>st</sup> century. Climate change has been viewed as a “threat multiplier”,<sup>4</sup> aggravating existing security risks by posing direct and indirect threats to human, national, and international security. In this context, Bangladesh is considered to be a climate hotspot<sup>5</sup> due to its unique geography, high population, poor infrastructure, high inequality, inefficient governance systems, and heavy reliance on agriculture.

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a “For too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states. For too long, security had been equated with the threats to a country’s borders. For too long, nations have sought arms to protect their security...Forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who sought security in their lives. For many of them, security symbolised protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, crime, social conflict, political repression and environmental hazards...Human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons—it is a concern with human life and dignity.” See UNDP, Human Development Report 1994, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994.

This essay explores the relationship between climate change and human security in Bangladesh as well as priorities for the newly re-elected Sheikh Hasina government to address climate concerns.

### Situating Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a low-income,<sup>b,6</sup> low-lying country with a land area of 147,570 sq. km. characterised by a network of over 230 waterways<sup>7</sup> and 169.8 million people (as of 2022).<sup>8</sup> The country is amongst the most disaster-prone nations globally, and its geographical location makes it highly susceptible to the effects of global warming and climate change.<sup>9</sup> Bangladesh shares borders with India in the west, north, and east and with Myanmar in the south-east, with the Bay of Bengal demarcating its maritime boundary in the south. Climate change has contributed to the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as cyclones, floods, heat waves, and extreme rains in the country, which have had cascading effects on human security and various sectors of

society,<sup>10</sup> with the poor being disproportionately affected due to multiple systemic failures.<sup>c,11</sup>

Nearly 80 percent of Bangladesh comprises floodplains—areas that are prone to flooding during the monsoon seasons (June to mid-October).<sup>12</sup> The deltaic region has an intricate network of rivers, including tributaries of the Ganges, (Padma in Bangladesh) Brahmaputra (Jamuna in Bangladesh), and Meghna, constantly creating active floodplains in the coastal region of Bangladesh. The coastal belt is also a highly disaster-prone area,<sup>13</sup> experiencing sea-level rise, greater vulnerability to floods, cyclones and storm surges, riverbank erosions, and erratic rainfall patterns that lead to rising human insecurities due to factors such as loss of property and mass displacements.

According to a 2008 study by Saferworld,<sup>14</sup> human security can only be reinforced when human lives are safeguarded from pervasive

b The country is on-track to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Countries list in 2026.

c Estimated poverty rate in the country reduced from 13.47 in 2016 to 10.44 in 2022 (using the international poverty line of US\$2.15).

critical threats in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment. The report also states that the idea of human security in Bangladesh has been shaped by two components: ‘freedom from want’ (economic security, food security, health security, and environmental security); and ‘freedom from fear’ (personal security, security from substance abuse, tenure security, and political security).<sup>15</sup> Climate change, however, has affected both these components and poses acute challenges to Bangladesh.

### **Climate-Induced Physical Vulnerabilities in Bangladesh**

- **Erratic weather and sea-level rise**

Bangladesh experiences heavy rainfall throughout the year, with moderately high temperatures and high humidity.<sup>16</sup> However, there have been variations in average annual temperatures, which have affected overall weather and rainfall patterns and directly impacted sea-level rise.<sup>17</sup> A study conducted in the Khulna and Satkhira districts of southern Bangladesh revealed that the average temperature has increased over the past five years, which has reduced annual rainfall.<sup>d,18</sup>

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has projected that with every 1-metre rise in sea level, 21 percent of the land in Bangladesh will be lost to the sea.<sup>19</sup> Sea-level rise is closely related to thermal expansion, rising sea surface temperatures, and ocean heat content. The impacts of sea-level rise are compounded by land subsidence, which leads to livelihood crises resulting from the loss of agricultural land, expanding waterways, and increased soil salinity as a result of floods.<sup>20</sup> The degradation of land leads to increased individual and community risks, including poverty, food deprivation, health insecurities, increased crime rates and unemployment, and consequent displacement.<sup>21</sup>

- **Flooding and riverbank erosion**

Climate change has led to more frequent flooding as well as increased riverbank erosion.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, floodplains have expanded and there has been an increase in vulnerabilities such as defective embankments.<sup>23</sup> According to the International Emergency Disasters Database, over a period of 15 years (2008-2023), 22 causal riverine floods, flash floods, and unspecified general floods were recorded that resulted in a total of 1,116 deaths (see Table 1).<sup>24</sup>

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d In Khulna, the temperature has increased by 0.0050 C/year while in Satkhira it has increased by 0.0060C.

**Table 1: Natural Disasters in Bangladesh, 2008-2023**

Type of Disaster	Number of Events	People Killed (approx.)	People Affected (approx.)
Floods (riverine, flash, unspecified, and general)	22	1,116	43,809,062
Tropical cyclones	17	481	19,925,834
Storms (general)	4	138	134,820
Severe weather	3	69	63,785
Lightning and thunderstorm	8	206	60,300
Drought	1	No. of deaths	No. of affected
Earthquakes	2	9	270

Source: E-DAT, International Emergency Disasters Database<sup>25</sup>

● **Coastal Vulnerabilities: Storms, Cyclones, and Tidal Surges**

Coastal Bangladesh is home to over 43.8 million people,<sup>26</sup> most of whom are low-income. This population, which mainly comprises agricultural labourers with no land and little resources, are increasingly susceptible to cyclones and tropical storm surges.

The integrated coastal zone of Bangladesh consists of 19 districts<sup>e,27</sup> with the coastal region constituting about 20 percent of total land area and over 30 percent of cultivable land in the country.<sup>28</sup> The region has highly diverse ecosystems, including beaches, coral reefs, dunes, and wetlands, as well as the Sundarbans, which are the world’s largest single tract of mangroves.<sup>29</sup>

e These districts are Jessore, Narail, Gopalganj, Shariatpur, Chandpur, Satkhira, Khulna, Bagerhat, Pirozpur, Jhalakati, Barguna, Barisal, Patuakhali, Bhola, Lakshmipur, Noakhali, Feni, Chattogram, and Cox’s Bazar.

## Gendered Impacts

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2022 report, women constitute 50.43 percent of Bangladesh's population.<sup>30</sup> Natural disasters and the impact of climate change severely impact vulnerable sections of society, including women and children, through loss of property, emotional damage, and gender-based violence.<sup>31,32</sup>

The socio-economic impacts of climate change result in widespread insecurities. For instance, sea-level rise causes increased soil salinity, which affects the availability of drinking water. During the summer season, this poses a challenge for women, who are typically responsible for collecting drinking water for their families. The inability to comply with their family's needs results in increased risk of domestic violence. The study in Khulna and Satkhira districts found that 33.21 percent of women face the risk of abandonment, while 23.40 percent of women respondents reported having experienced domestic violence.<sup>33,34</sup> Across vulnerable regions in Bangladesh,<sup>35</sup> women are more likely to lose life and property during natural disasters as they have limited mobility and lack rights to property.<sup>36</sup> Children are similarly affected by climate change; in a 2022 report, Bangladesh was 15<sup>th</sup> among 163 countries ranked according to children's exposure to climate-induced disasters and environmental degradation.<sup>37</sup>


## Need for Climate-Resilient Interventions

Climate-induced factors have affected the socio-economic scenario and human security in Bangladesh, with a disproportionate impact on vulnerable sections of society. Additionally, in Bangladesh, where migration is often forced rather than voluntary because of risks to human rights and environmental security, there is a clear correlation between migration and environmental change; by 2050, almost 13 million people in the country could become internal climate migrants.<sup>38</sup>

Despite notable progress in lowering the death toll from natural disasters, Bangladesh faces increasing climate risks.<sup>39</sup> On average, tropical cyclones cost Bangladesh US\$1 billion annually. During episodes of severe flooding, the GDP of the country falls by as much as 9 percent.<sup>40</sup> Without urgent action that encompasses adaptation and resilience measures, the nation's growth prospects may be jeopardised. The Hasina government therefore needs to mobilise financial, logistical, and technical support to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

The government must undertake climate-resilient interventions aimed at the poor, women, and vulnerable communities. Community-led mechanisms can serve as practical and sustainable means of addressing social and human security concerns. Community-led ‘non-structural initiatives’, such as awareness campaigns, as well as heightening preparedness and response measures at the household and community levels and developing community adaptation plans, can bolster community resilience. Such non-structural interventions should also take into account community-based indigenous knowledge. Capacity building and disaster preparedness need to be emphasised through the creation of climate-resilient jobs and health education.<sup>41</sup>

The government also needs to strengthen and integrate the efforts of ministries, divisions, departments, directorates, and agencies to ensure

effective disaster risk management and create a disaster-resilient nation. The updated Standing Orders on Disaster document outlines the specific responsibilities and duties of various agencies to this end.<sup>42</sup> Bangladesh has also been committed to implementing a gender- and socially inclusive disaster risk management framework at the local and national levels, in alignment with regional and international frameworks such as the Yokohama Strategy, the Hyogo Framework of Action,<sup>f</sup> and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.<sup>g,43</sup> It is also important to build synergies between the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement,<sup>h</sup> Bangladesh’s own National Five-Year Plan, and the Delta Plan 2100.<sup>i</sup> 

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- f The key principles of this strategy are twofold: risk assessment for the adoption of adequate and successful disaster reduction policies and measures; and reducing the need for disaster relief by strengthening disaster prevention and preparedness.
- g The Sendai Framework highlights four priorities: understanding disaster risk, strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk, investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience, and enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” for recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction.
- h The *Paris Agreement* is a legally binding international *treaty on climate change* that was adopted by 196 Parties at the UN *Climate Change Conference* (COP21).
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## 6. The Many Facets of Human (In)security in Bangladesh

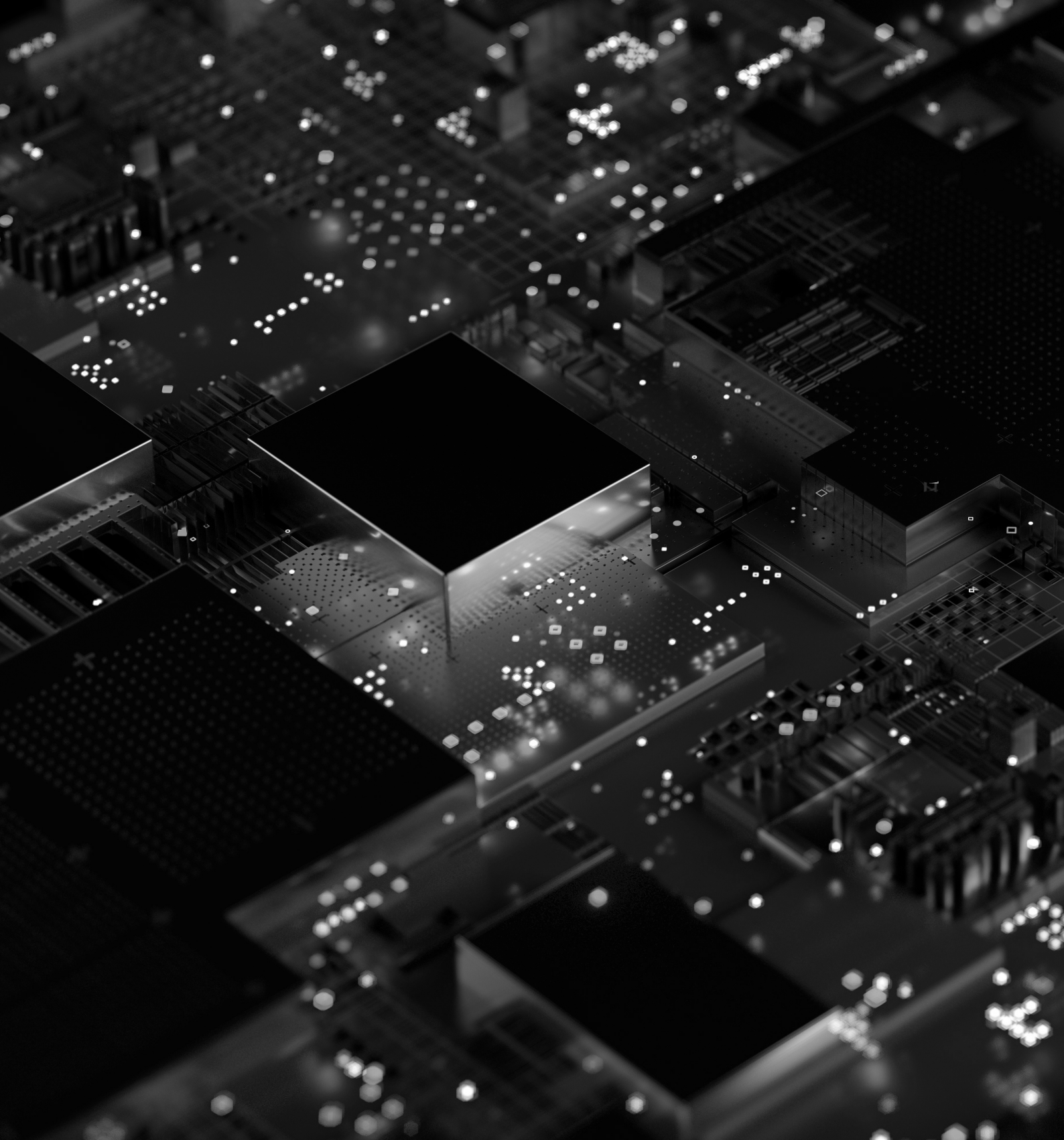
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