

Bangladés: cuando China llama a la puerta trasera de la India

Resumen:

Las recientes elecciones en Bangladés dieron un cuarto mandato a la primera ministra Sheikh Hasina, en el poder por la Liga Awami desde 1996, salvo el intervalo de 2001-2008. Pronto las grandes potencias se apresuraron a felicitarla, a la par que soslayaban las sospechas de irregularidades denunciadas por una oposición que boicoteó los comicios. Destacaron en especial India y China, ambos gigantes en una feroz rivalidad por atraerse a Bangladés mediante ayudas directas, proyectos de infraestructuras y alianzas de seguridad. Bangladés se conforma así como un país clave para la proyección china e india tanto en la región como en el Sudeste Asiático, donde Myanmar sí supone una amenaza de inestabilidad para el país. La política exterior de Bangladés se basa en un tradicional no alineamiento, lo cual le lleva también a mantener excelentes relaciones con otros actores como Japón, Rusia o Estados Unidos, que a su vez considera al país de la bahía de Bengala un socio determinante en su propia estrategia para el Indo-Pacífico.

Palabras clave:

Bangladés, India, China, Japón, Estados Unidos, Myanmar, Indo-Pacífico, Hasina

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Hasina, a Prime Minister in need of legitimacy

Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, was the winner in January's elections, which at 76 years old means she is now in her fourth consecutive term at the helm of the country. It was not an easy road, with many voices inside and outside the country branding Hasina as authoritarian and denouncing fraud in the elections. Now that these are over, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister is pushing for an international policy that supports her own legitimacy, which is still very much contested domestically¹.

Since late 2023, clashes between activists of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and members of the Government's Awami League (AL) have intensified and were barely suppressed by the police. In addition, the arrests of thousands of people linked to the BNP have multiplied, in some cases on charges going back years, to which the BNP responded by calling for a boycott of the elections. For its part, from the start of the election campaign in December, the AL encouraged defections from the BNP, offering positions and candidacies to its main rivals, the clearest case being that of Shahjahan Omar, the formerly imprisoned BNP Vice-President and soon after AL candidate for the Jhalokati constituency².

Election Day on 7th January ended without serious incidents but voter turnout was only 42 per cent. The Election Commission declared the AL the winner by an absolute majority, retaining 75 per cent of the seats at stake and thus revalidating Hasina's fourth term in office. Both India and China were quick to congratulate her, as were, albeit later, the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union. In the case of the United States and the United Kingdom it was also pointed out that the elections were not entirely free and fair³. An immediate international tour by Hasina, in particular to attend the Munich Security Conference on 16th-18th February, has helped reassert a more stable position as Prime Minister. There, she made a speech focused on the fight against climate change, as Bangladesh is one of the countries most affected by it, and she defended Ukraine's position in the current war with Russia, perhaps

¹ ELLIS PETERSEN, Hannah & AZIZUR RAHMAN, Shaikh: Bangladesh opposition reels under crackdown as thousands arrested. *The Guardian*, 22nd January 2024. Available at [‘They beat me with sticks’: Bangladesh opposition reels under crackdown as thousands arrested | Bangladesh | The Guardian](#) (accessed on 04/03/2024).

² TAREQUE SAKIL, Salman: Rise of Rafiqul Islam Jamal: BNP's replacement for Shahjahan Omar in Jhalakathi. *Dhaka Tribune* (23rd February 2024). Available at [Rise of Rafiqul Islam Jamal: BNP's replacement for Shahjahan Omar in Jhalakathi \(dhakatribune.com\)](#) (accessed on 04/03/2024).

³ ALAM, Julhas: The US and UK say Bangladesh's elections extending Hasina's rule were not credible. *The Independent* (9th January 2024). Available at [The US and UK say Bangladesh's elections extending Hasina's rule were not credible | The Independent](#) (accessed on 04/03/2024).

as a nod of complicity to Western positions far removed from Bangladesh's traditional non-alignment. There was even a bilateral meeting between Hasina and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which did not prevent Russia from congratulating the Prime Minister on her election victory⁴.

Both India and China, to which Hasina last travelled in 2019, have also been keen to offer an official visit. The Chinese invitation came after the Bangladeshi Transport Minister, Obaidul Quader, declared his gratitude to India for supporting the election process when the opposition BNP boycotted it. The last meeting between Indian Prime Minister Modi and Hasina took place in September 2023 in the framework of the G20 Summit in New Delhi, where security in the region and cooperation between the two countries were the main topics⁵.

With historical ties, Bangladesh, a huge country dwarfed only by the vastness of its neighbour, was part of India until 1947, where Hindu culture and religion merge with Muslim culture and religion, the adherents of the latter nevertheless make up 84 per cent of the population. It has a crucial position as a bridge between India and Southeast Asia, but where the influence of neighbouring Myanmar and more distant China has also been significant for centuries⁶. Today, Bangladesh is being wooed by the connectivity and infrastructure-building proposals of the two Asian giants, China and India, as it seeks to find its own position in the politically sensitive Indo-Pacific from the Bay of Bengal.

Bangladesh and its Indo-Pacific strategy

In April 2023, the country also released its own Indo-Pacific Strategy, called "Outlook", setting out its vision for the future of the Indo-Pacific according to another document, "Vision 2041", a national strategic plan to develop the country economically through industrialisation and where Bangladesh's geographical position as a littoral state on the Bay of Bengal is key to achieving

⁴ SHARMA, Pranay: Hasina meets Zelensky as Bangladesh and the West mend fences. In *Nikkei Asia* (17th February 2024). Available at [Hasina meets Zelensky as Bangladesh and the West mend fences - Nikkei Asia](#) (accessed on 04/03/2024).

⁵ "China Invites Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina For Official Visit To Beijing". *NDTV World* (29th January 2024). Available at [China Invites Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina For Official Visit To Beijing \(ndtv.com\)](#) (accessed on 03/04/2023).

⁶ KAPLAN, Robert D.: *Monzon, a journey through the future of the Indian Ocean*, El hombre del Tres, 2012, pp. 193-218.

this goal⁷. The "Outlook" therefore advocates stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific as a crucial factor in realising its "Vision 2041" within the framework of the region's importance for international trade, promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific, enhancing climate action and having technology as a major cornerstone of the projects.

This genuine strategy is based on the guiding principles of traditional Bangladeshi politics. First the foreign policy premise of the considered father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Hasina's father, non-alignment synthesised in the sentence: "Friendship towards all, malice towards none". Subsequently, the "Outlook" cite non-interference in internal affairs, the peaceful settlement of disputes between States, as well as respect for International law around the principles set out in the United Nations Charter and, with regard to maritime routes, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)⁸.

The "Outlook" also prioritizes Bangladesh achieving economic prosperity through connectivity of goods, services and people. In contrast to other documents outlining the strategies of Indo-Pacific countries such as Japan, South Korea or Australia, the "Outlook" do not talk about specific third countries, but emphasises the need for security within a policy of non-alignment very similar to that expressed by India in its multiple initiatives or by other countries in the region, for example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)⁹.

Thus, non-interference in internal affairs as a fundamental principle not only means that Bangladesh rejects any attempt to overly influence its internal politics, but also refuses to participate in those of other States. The definition of security in the Bangladeshi "Outlook" refers to overall global and human well-being¹⁰.

This Bangladeshi concept of security in the Indo-Pacific is based on non-proliferation and peacekeeping, but the country faces a starker reality. Not so long ago, jihadism was a serious problem, and today the war in neighbouring Myanmar is reaching worrying proportions.

⁷ "Vision 2041 for developed and prosperous Bangladesh". Bangladesh National Portal (updated 9th December 2023). Available at [2023-09-12-09-29-18417c72f118bdb5393796c662aad03e.pdf \(portal.gov.bd\)](https://portal.gov.bd/2023-09-12-09-29-18417c72f118bdb5393796c662aad03e.pdf) (accessed on 03/04/2024).

⁸ "Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh". Ministry of Foreign Affairs (24th April 2023). Available at: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs- \(mofa.gov.bd\)](https://mofa.gov.bd/) (accessed on 03/04/2024).

⁹ FERNÁNDEZ APARICIO, Javier: "India, autonomy and imperative in its security strategy". In *National Security Strategies: Great power competition*. Research Paper 02/2023, CESEDEN, IEEE, pp. 91-112. Available at [DIEEEINV02_2023_EstrategiasdeSeguridad.pdf](https://www.iese.es/diieeeinv02_2023_EstrategiasdeSeguridad.pdf) (accessed on 04/03/2024).

¹⁰ BOSE, Sohini: Continuity and Change in Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook: Deliberating Post-Election Scenarios. *Observer Research Foundation* (4th January 2024). Available at [Continuity and Change in Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook: Deliberating Post-Election Scenarios \(orfonline.org\)](https://orfonline.org/Continuity_and_Change_in_Bangladesh's_Indo-Pacific_Outlook:_Deliberating_Post-Election_Scenarios) (accessed on 04/03/2024).

Members of the Burmese border guards illegally cross the border, fleeing fighting against forces opposed to the military junta. South-eastern Bangladesh is also under attack from heavy fighting between the *Tatmadaw*, the Myanmar Armed Forces, and the insurgent Arakan Army, whose members also cross the border from Burma's bordering provinces in between fighting, creating a serious threat to the security of Bangladesh, including the death of Bangladeshi citizens and extensive damage to property. It is estimated that more than 3,000 Bangladeshis have fled across the border to the interior of the country¹¹.

With regard to Myanmar, a complex situation already existed, as the massive expulsions of ethnic Rohingya into Bangladeshi territory mean that there are now more than 1.3 million displaced people in Bangladesh crammed into huge refugee camps¹².

India's projection

India's presence in Bangladesh, with whom it shares more than 4,000 kilometres of border - the fifth longest in the world - is highly perceptible. The capital itself, Dhaka, the former head of the East Bengal region, has a distinctly Indian urban structure and characteristics, although the Bangladeshi population is of a secular, Muslim majority¹³. India's assistance to the 1971 independence rebellion in what was then East Pakistan was decisive for its victory in the subsequent bloody war of liberation against Pakistan. This would give rise to the present-day Bangladesh, meaning "Country in Bengal", which is also reminiscent of the country's former membership of India, to which it owes its modern birth.

Despite some border disputes since the 1970s, in 2014, with Narendra Modi in power, India accepted an international arbitration award setting territorial and maritime boundaries with Bangladesh. India thus showed its interest in consolidating excellent relations with its eastern neighbour, within the framework of respect for international norms, by comparing it to China's South Sea policy and conflicts with China's immediate neighbours¹⁴. The *Act East Policy*

¹¹ RAHMAN, Himel: Crisis at the Bangladesh-Myanmar Border: A Looming Regional Challenge. *The Diplomat* (6th February 2024). Available at [Crisis at the Bangladesh-Myanmar Border: A Looming Regional Challenge - The Diplomat](#) (accessed on 04/03/2024).

¹² "Rohingya emergency". *UNHCR-UN Refugee Agency*. Available at [Rohingya emergency | UNHCR](#) (accessed on 03/04/2024).

¹³ MIGUEL CALABIA, Emilio de: Dhaka-Totem. *Bukubuku ABC Blogs* (8th October 2021). Available at [Dhaka-Totem \(abc.es\)](#) (accessed on 05/03/2024).

¹⁴ BURKE, Naomi: Arbitral Tribunal Delimits Maritime Boundary Between Bangladesh and India in the Bay of Bengal. *American Society of International Law* (22nd September 2014). Available at [Annex VII Arbitral Tribunal Delimits Maritime Boundary Between Bangladesh and India in the Bay of Bengal | ASIL](#) (accessed on 05/03/2024).

promoted by the Modi government also in 2014, was based on India's projection into Southeast Asia via Bangladesh, by geographical imperative the only plausible route for India, in fact, Bangladesh has often been called "Blockaded India", which is a key nuance in the Indo-Bangladeshi relationship. In 2015, Modi visited Bangladesh on one of his first foreign trips, a visit returned by Hasina the same year¹⁵.

There is another feature to India's interest in Bangladesh beyond being a bridge of communication. It is the long-term vision of this shared interest that differs from the lack of interest and attention of the past. For India, Bangladesh is no longer a minor issue and in the words of India's current Foreign Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, this is the more complete reflection of India's new policy in its rise to global power and the maturation from subsistence economic thinking to a broader, more ambitious and long-term strategic policy, all amidst the rise of China in the region and broader geopolitical turmoil¹⁶.

India is also developing its *Neighborhood first* approach where Bangladesh is the most interesting country for India to engage in strong trade and political relations. Bangladesh is assertive towards Indian initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) or the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Initiative (BBIN), although there are still unresolved disputes between the two countries over the use of the waters of rivers that originate in or flow through Indian territory but eventually flow into Bangladesh¹⁷.

Currently, both countries are in negotiations for an economic partnership agreement and there is already one in place for the use of the rupee in Bangladesh to further boost its trade with India, beyond its own foreign exchange reserves, which in March 2023 reached their lowest level since 2016. Connectivity is the driving force behind this bilateral partnership with other projects ranging from railway lines, such as the *Maitree Express* Kolkata-Daca, connecting the Bangladeshi ports of Chittagong and Mongla with Kolkata itself. Meanwhile, India provides Bangladesh with free transit through its territory for trade with Nepal and Bhutan¹⁸.

¹⁵ Indian projects in Bangladesh from the *Act East Policy* updated on: Projects under the 'act east policy'. *Ministry of Ports, Maritime Transport and Roads* (29th March 2022). Available at [Press Information Bureau \(pib.gov.in\)](https://pib.gov.in) (accessed on 05/03/2024).

¹⁶ JAISHANKAR, Subrahmanyam: *The India Way. Strategies for an uncertain world*. Harper Collins, 2020, pp. 192-214.

¹⁷ ARYAL, S.K. & BHARTI, S.S.: Evolution of 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' Since Independence. *Society* 60, 224-232 (2023). Available at [Evolution of 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' Since Independence | Society \(springer.com\)](https://www.springer.com) (accessed on 05/03/2024).

¹⁸ BOSE, Sohini (op. cit).

In the defence sector, there is also a long-standing collaboration between India and Bangladesh, in particular with projects to modernise Bangladeshi equipment. Since 2018, there has been an annual Indo-Bangladeshi defence dialogue where contracts are ratified, existing commitments are renewed and increasingly large and sophisticated joint military exercises are planned. Indeed, in October 2023, as part of the eleventh *Sampriti* Joint Exercises, various ground, artillery, engineering and other units of the Armed Forces of both countries participated¹⁹.

In recent years, however, India has had a rival vying for Bangladesh's initiatives and projects, perhaps because of its own slowness in completing its own. China is also interested in building connectivity infrastructure, such as the Padma River Bridge, which has become a pillar of Bangladesh's economic growth. By October 2023, China was working on the construction of dozens of bridges and energy projects, with more than six hundred Chinese companies investing in the country²⁰. The danger for India is that, given the strong China-Pakistan Alliance that threatens its north-western borders, including its exit to the Arabian Sea, a possible China-Bangladesh Alliance would eventually encircle India from the south-east as well.

China and its projects

Bangladesh is an attractive node for the Belt and Road Initiative project as an outlet for China to the South Asia and its maritime routes, in this case from the Bay of Bengal, and is investing in and developing infrastructure and transport throughout the country. This has made China Bangladesh's largest trading partner since 2006, when it overtook India, while the country is also shaping itself as a cheap production platform for the Chinese domestic market, while offering a showcase for competitively priced Chinese products with projection across South Asia²¹.

¹⁹ "Sampriti-XI: Joint military exercise between India & Bangladesh held successfully in Meghalaya". *India News Network* (17th October 2023). Available at [Sampriti-XI: Joint military exercise between India & Bangladesh held successfully in Meghalaya \(indianewsnetwork.com\)](https://www.indianewsnetwork.com) (accessed 07/03/2023).

²⁰ KUN, Liu & HUIYING, Zhou: China-made bridge opens in Bangladesh. *China Daily* (28th June 2022). Available at [China-made bridge opens in Bangladesh - Chinadaily.com.cn](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn) (accessed on 05/03/2024).

²¹ LAILUFAR, Yasmin: Understanding Bangladesh-China relations: Bangladesh's rising geopolitical agency and China's regional and global ambitions. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* (3rd January 2024). Available at [Full article: Understanding Bangladesh-China relations: Bangladesh's rising geopolitical agency and China's regional and global ambitions \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com) (accessed on 07/03/2024).

In recent times, China continues to demonstrate its interest in courting friendship with Bangladesh, sometimes at India's expense, as was the case during the urgent supply of vaccines to the country in the second wave of the COVID pandemic when the incidence of the disease was on the rise in Bangladesh, as those purchased from India had not been delivered on time²². Another example is the Xi Jinping Government's swift congratulations to Hasina on her January election victory, including an invitation to the Prime Minister to travel to Beijing to meet with the Chinese President²³.

In the defence market, since 2018 Bangladesh has also become a net buyer of arms from China, ahead of even its traditional suppliers, India and the United States in the first place. In fact, Bangladesh is currently China's second largest export customer in a country that imported, 1.6 per cent of the arms traded globally between 2013 and 2017 and where in the period 2018-2022 China was its main supplier with 74 per cent of these imports²⁴.

The bilateral security relationship goes beyond this supply. A mutual cooperation agreement was signed in 2002 and some of the infrastructures planned with Chinese capital and works also affect the military field. A fully Chinese-built submarine base for the Bangladesh Navy opened in 2023 in Pekua, a coastal city in Cox's Bazaar province. It is the largest submarine port in South Asia and was named, quite symbolically for the current Chinese-Bangladeshi relationship, *BNS Sheikh Hasina*²⁵.

This relationship with China is viewed with concern by India's giant neighbour, but also by the US and its allies. In April 2021, during a visit to the country, the then Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe called for greater military cooperation from Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, against the powers creating alliances in the region, a clear allusion to QUAD. China also supported Bangladesh when the US excluded it from the Democracy Summit in December of that year as a warning to Hasina over respect for human rights in the country. Soon after,

²² HOLLINGSWORTH, Julia: The world's biggest vaccine maker is stalling on exports. That's a problem for the planet's most vulnerable. *CNN* (25th May 2021). Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/25/asia/covax-india-serum-institute-intl-hnk-dst/index.html> (accessed on 07/03/2024).

²³ "China renews PM's invitation to visit Beijing: Hasan". *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha* (28th January 2024). Available in [China renews PM's invitation to visit Beijing: Hasan | News Flash \(bssnews.net\)](#) (accessed on 07/03/2024).

²⁴ "Bangladesh ranks 25th among the top arms importing countries: SIPRI". *New Age Bangladesh* (13th March 2023). Available at [Bangladesh 25th among top arms importing nations: SIPRI \(newagebd.net\)](#) (accessed on 07/03/2024).

²⁵ "Bangladesh's first submarine base starts operation Monday". *Dhaka Tribune* (20th March 2023). Available at [Bangladesh's first submarine base starts operation Monday \(dhakatribune.com\)](#) (accessed on 07/03/2024).

President Xi Jinping publicly reiterated China's support for her Government and urged it to resist any US pressure²⁶.

Does it mean that Bangladesh is a strong Chinese ally in the region? No, in recent times Hasina herself advocates cooperation but not firm alliances, as she is also wary of possible debts with Beijing, stressing that it is unlikely that Bangladesh could fall into a debt trap as has happened with other countries, in particular neighbouring Sri Lanka. Hasina has demonstrated great diplomatic skill in recognising and accepting Chinese investments, but always reaffirming Bangladeshi sovereignty²⁷.

Other actors seeking cooperation

In this international race to cooperate with Bangladesh, there are other players besides China and India. The West is attentive to Bangladesh's position on the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the International Monetary Fund approved USD4.7 billion in financial assistance for Bangladesh in 2023 to mitigate the risks associated with climate change²⁸. For its part, Bangladesh is a key counterparty for the United States in several bilateral and multilateral forums, notably the US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue, the US-Bangladesh Security Dialogue and the ASEAN Regional Forum, while providing large amounts of military aid every year, not only equipment but also training for the Bangladeshi Armed Forces²⁹.

In recent times, Hasina's government seems to be showing greater alignment with US foreign policy, following some statements from Washington showing concern over the Chinese presence and the human rights situation. Thus Bangladesh, which initially abstained in the March 2022 UN vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a year later reversed its position and, in April 2023, signed a joint statement with Japan, another Indo-Pacific partner

²⁶ HASSAN, Mubashar: What is Driving China-Bangladesh Bonhomie? *The Diplomat* (18th October 2023). Available at [What is Driving China-Bangladesh Bonhomie? - The Diplomat](#) (accessed on 07/03/2024).

²⁷ ""We decide our foreign policy": Bangladesh reacts to Chinese warning over joining Quad". *The Times of India*, (11th May 2021). Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/we-decide-our-foreign-policy-bangladesh-reacts-to-chinese-warning-over-joining-quad/articleshow/82548632.cms> (accessed on 07/03/2024).

²⁸ GEORGIEVA, Kristalina: Bangladesh and its Partners are Launching the Bangladesh Climate and Development Platform to Leverage Adaptation and Mitigation Investments. *International Monetary Fund* (3rd December 2023). Available at [Bangladesh and its Partners are Launching the Bangladesh Climate and Development Platform to Leverage Adaptation and Mitigation Investments \(imf.org\)](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

²⁹ "U.S. Security Cooperation with Bangladesh". *US Department of State* (1st September 2023). Available at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-bangladesh/> (accessed on 11/03/2024).

for Bangladesh, denouncing Russia's violation of International law³⁰. This is not to say that there is an estrangement from Russia, as Hasina acknowledges the then Soviet Union's assistance in the 1971 war of Independence to the Awami League side of her father, Sheikh Mujibur, who is considered the founder of the Bangladeshi homeland. Mujibur's dictum that Bangladesh's foreign policy of non-alignment should prevail: "Friendship with all, malice with none" is still the guideline of the former³¹, which justifies why the Russian-Bangladeshi relationship under Hasina's government has been maintained, if not increased³².

Japan is another such country interested in Bangladesh and a major investor in the development of connectivity infrastructure and industrial zones. During Hasina's visit to Tokyo in April 2023, a security partnership was also established between the two countries, including technology transfer³³. Soon after, Australia also established a defence office at its embassy in Dhaka to strengthen defence cooperation between the two countries. Japan's economic and security importance to Bangladesh is symbolised by the construction of the major deep-water port of Matarbari, a project initially awarded to China, but rectified and given to Japan after the US and India expressed their dissatisfaction³⁴.

Conclusions

For the past two decades, India and China have had their eyes on Bangladesh as a key country for their infrastructure and transport projects connecting the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia. In recent times, global geostrategic interest in the Indo-Pacific framework has redoubled the country's importance internationally, as it is a coveted ally due to its location in the northern Bay of Bengal, close to the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and thus to the sea

³⁰ REZA CHOWDHURY, Kamran: Bangladesh shifts position on Ukraine war, says it's 'violation of international law'. *Benar News* (27th April 2023). Available at [Bangladesh shifts position on Ukraine war, says it's 'violation of international law' — BenarNews](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

³¹ "'Friendship to all, malice to none': Bangabandhu's historic quote incorporated into UN resolution". *Bdnews24* (7th December 2022). Available at ['Friendship to all, malice towards none': Bangabandhu's historic quote incorporated in UN resolution | The Business Standard \(tbsnews.net\)](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

³² SHAZZAD, Hussain: "Friendship Towards All: Explaining Bangladesh's Abstention From the UN Resolution Over Ukraine. *Australian Institute of International Affairs* (25th March 2022). Available at ["Friendship Towards All": Explaining Bangladesh's Abstention From the UN Resolution Over Ukraine — Australian Institute of International Affairs - Australian Institute of International Affairs](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

³³ HASSAN, Mubashar: Japan Deepens Defense Ties With Bangladesh. *The Diplomat* (3rd October 2023). Available at [Japan Deepens Defense Ties With Bangladesh – The Diplomat](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

³⁴ SAMAD, Saleem: Japan to tie landlocked Northeast India with Bangladesh. *Pressenza International Press* (6th March 2023). Available at [Japan to tie landlocked Northeast India with Bangladesh \(pressenza.com\)](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

lanes and their bottlenecks where vital resources are connected and transited to or from the Strait of Malacca. There are also significant gas reserves, some of them unexplored in the Bay, which further increases the attention on the country³⁵.

For China, its presence in Bangladesh would mean access to the Indian Ocean and encircling India, as it already has access further west through its alliance with Pakistan. The consolidation of Bangladesh's own cooperation, trade and infrastructure-building projects is therefore also vital for the other Asian giant, India, as it enables its entry into Asian markets and makes a threatening Chinese presence on its eastern flank impossible. This mutual interest in attracting Bangladesh, and the country's current position on the international stage, has gained momentum considering that just a few years ago Bangladesh was engaged in an open war against jihadist terrorism³⁶ and the civil confrontation between the two heads of the main Bangladeshi political parties, Hasina and Jaleda Zia, under house arrest since 2018³⁷. For the moment, Hasina has managed to stabilise the country, as Zia's son Tarique Rahman, the de facto leader of an almost dismantled opposition, has been living in London since 2008 and is barely known in Bangladeshi political and foreign diplomatic circles, while the military establishment has shown its support for the Prime Minister's Government. Cultivating now an image of a strong leader, she is receptive to the proposals of the major powers.

Bangladesh is becoming crucial in shaping the economic priorities and security architectures of the various Indo-Pacific countries. Therefore, beyond its external position as a country, other issues that threaten the region are of concern, such as the latent danger of terrorism, the humanitarian emergency posed by the more than one million Rohingyas living in Bangladeshi refugee camps, or organised crime, as Bangladesh is considered an essential transit country for drug smuggling and one of the most important cannabis-producing centres in South Asia. In short, courted by India and China, competitors of each other, but also by the West, Bangladesh's international role is growing in importance within today's conflictive geopolitical framework. The key to this position will also be stability and, above all, succession planning

³⁵ HASSAN, Mubashar. et al: Present status of Bangladesh gas fields and future development: A review. *Journal of Natural Gas Geoscience*, 4, No. 6, 2019, pp. 347-354. Available at [Present status of Bangladesh gas fields and future development: A review - ScienceDirect](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

³⁶ IGUALADA TORTOSA, Carlos: *Bangladesh: jihadism's gateway to Southeast Asia*. IEEE Opinion Paper 96/2018 (20th September 2018). Available at [Bangladesh: jihadism's gateway to Southeast Asia \(ieee.es\)](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

³⁷ "Khaleda Zia's jail term suspension extended again by 6 months". *The Business Standard* (18th September 2023). Available at [Khaleda Zia's jail term suspension extended again by 6 months | The Business Standard \(tbsnews.net\)](#) (accessed on 11/03/2024).

within the ruling Awami League, due to the advanced age of Hasina, now the central figure in the Bangladeshi political structure. With the opposition accusing her of authoritarianism, demonstrating in major cities and denouncing increasing repression in international forums, the search for a possible replacement for the Prime Minister could trigger internal divisions and political manoeuvring that could unbalance the country. Meanwhile, two powerful regional neighbours with the status of global powers, India and China, are knocking ever more forcefully and insistently on the Bangladeshi door to deepen cooperation and partnership to the exclusion of the loser.

Javier Fernández Aparicio
IEEE Analyst
[@jafeap](#)