

BANGLADESH RESULTS: A new era of Bay of Bengal contest begins

It would be a mistake to think of the election results in Bangladesh as business as usual in a volatile country. Something fundamental is changing in the Bay of Bengal politics.

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Tarique Rahman, chairman of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), casts his vote at a polling centre in Dhaka on Thursday. BNP Media Cell/ANI

The return of the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) to power in Dhaka with Jamaat-e-Islami as the principal opposition will likely make the Bay of Bengal a sharper arena of India-China-US contestation, while simultaneously creating a more fragile security environment along India's land and maritime frontiers. The Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami's consolidation along constituencies abutting West Bengal, Assam and the Siliguri corridor ("chicken's neck") adds an explicitly ideological and networked Islamist layer to the existing geopolitical competition, with direct implications for India's internal security and maritime posture.

A MORE FLUID TRIANGLE

Under Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League, Bangladesh practised a constrained balancing act: deep economic and military ties with China, politically tight alignment with India on security, and a tense, conditional relationship with the United States over democracy and human rights. China became Dhaka's principal defence supplier and a major infrastructure partner, while Hasina still left some space for India in critical projects such as Teesta water management and tried to firewall Islamist forces like Jamaat from formal politics.

This configuration began to unravel with Hasina's ouster in 2024 and the subsequent interim government, which leaned more visibly towards Beijing in defence and infrastructure, including a new defence agreement and drone related facilities, and in giving China a greater role in key projects and ports. That shift set the stage for the 2026 election in which BNP's landslide win, and Jamaat's strong performance in border belts mark not just a domestic reordering but are wiring of how the Bay of Bengal theatre is linked to global rivalries.

HEDGING BETWEEN CHINA AND THE U.S.

BNP's leadership under Tarique Rahman has signalled a desire to reset relations with the West, particularly the United States, after years in which Washington's democracy and human rights criticisms targeted the Awami League. US actors have treated BNP as a more acceptable vehicle for competitive politics and have quietly supported opposition forces as part of a broader effort to counter China's expanding footprint in the Bay of Bengal.

At the same time, Beijing has carefully cultivated relationships with all major Bangladeshi parties—including BNP and Jamaat—precisely to avoid dependence on any single regime. China already supplied over 70% of Bangladesh's arms between 2019 and 2023 and has used this to deepen military, infrastructure and political ties that pre-date BNP's rise and will likely continue after it.

BNP is therefore structurally incentivised to hedge: maintain and even expand Chinese capital and military supply lines, while opening up political and economic space for US and Western engagement that was constricted under Hasina.

This hedging will play out concretely in three Bay of Bengal domains:

1. Ports and naval access: China backed investments in Mongla, Payra and related infrastructure, including prior moves to modernise Mongla port, have already given Beijing an important logistics foothold in the Bay. US and Quad initiatives on "Ports for the Future" and naval cooperation seek to pull Dhaka into an Indo-Pacific architecture that dilutes Chinese leverage and offers alternative development finance and security partnerships. BNP will likely bargain between these offers rather than clearly choosing one camp.
2. Maritime security and exercises: A BNP government needing Western economic support and diplomatic legitimacy can be expected to deepen selective naval cooperation with the US and its partners, joint exercises, domain awareness, coast guard training, without significantly cutting Chinese defence procurements, especially in cheaper naval platforms and coastal ISR systems.
3. Rules for the Blue Economy: As Bay of Bengal fisheries, seabed resources and shipping lanes grow more contested, Dhaka under BNP will try to monetise its exclusive economic zone through competing offers from Chinese and Western companies, while leveraging great power rivalry to extract better terms. The risk for India is that regulatory and surveillance arrangements in this zone will be co-designed by actors whose strategic aims may not align with Indian security concerns.

JAMAAT'S RISE AND CHINA-U.S. LINKS TO BANGLADESHI ACTORS

The new configuration is not a simple BNP vs China or BNP vs US binary; it is a layered field where both Beijing and Washington have cultivated ties not just with BNP but with other actors, including Jamaat. Chinese diplomacy since 2024 has involved targeted outreach to the entire opposition spectrum, with high level contacts to BNP and Jamaat and an emphasis on continuity of strategic projects irrespective of who forms the government.

Beijing's core interests in Bangladesh are a direct access to the Bay of Bengal as an escape hatch from the Malacca chokepoint, securing logistics for energy and trade, including overland and riverine connectivity that can eventually link Yunnan to the Bay, and a durable defence relationship that anchors Chinese platforms, maintenance, and training inside the Bangladeshi armed forces and coast guard.

These objectives are compatible with a BNP led order so long as Dhaka does not openly host US bases or decisively bandwagon with the Indo-Pacific security architecture. Jamaat's rise as principal opposition is, from Beijing's perspective, less a problem of ideological affinity and more an opportunity to diversify political bets and to cultivate influence with a party that has strong grassroots networks in rural and border areas.

For the United States, the priorities are different. It wants to prevent Bangladesh from becoming a quasi-client state for China on the Bay of Bengal littoral, secure preferential access and influence over port and logistics projects that would serve Indo-Pacific naval mobility and supply chains, and encourage a political order that is at least formally pluralistic and less repressive than the late Hasina regime, even if that means tolerating a calibrated Islamist presence.

Washington's willingness to work with BNP, despite BNP's alliance history with Jamaat, shows a readiness to accept more conservative or Islamist actors at the margins so long as the core executive remains open to US strategic and economic agendas. However, Jamaat as principal opposition, with new legitimacy and parliamentary strength, complicates this calculation, because its domestic agenda and transnational ideological links could over time push policy in directions less congenial to US security priorities, particularly on counter terrorism and regional jihadist networks.

JAMAAT ALONG THE 'CHICKEN'S NECK'

One of the most striking outcomes of the 2026 election is Jamaat-e-Islami's performance in border districts adjoining India, especially those facing West Bengal, Assam and the strategically vital Siliguri corridor. Jamaat candidates reportedly swept all four parliamentary constituencies in Satkhira district, won three of four in Kushtia, and expanded their footprint in parts of Rangpur and adjoining belts, creating a contiguous arc of Islamist political control opposite key Indian states and the "chicken's neck".

Jamaat's strength in these regions is not merely electoral but rooted in dense networks of mosques, madrasas and associated welfare and patronage structures

in largely rural and peri border communities. Indian assessments already warn that such networks can over time reshape local social norms, marginalise minorities, and create sympathetic ecosystems for cross border mobilisation—whether for migration, political agitation or militant logistics.

For India, the implications are threefold:

1. **Hard security and militancy:** Border belt constituencies under Jamaat influence could become staging grounds or safe spaces for anti-India extremist groups, drawing on older histories of cooperation between Bangladeshi Islamists and Pakistan linked networks. Even without direct state sponsorship, the ideological climate and informal patronage structures could facilitate recruitment, shelter, and logistical support for actors targeting Assam, West Bengal, or the Siliguri corridor.
2. **Soft infiltration and demography:** Jamaat's control over social and religious institutions may accelerate pressure on local minorities in these districts, further fuelling irregular migration into India and increasing communal tension on the Indian side of the border. Over time, this changes the social composition and political mood in Indian border districts, complicating counter radicalisation and policing.
3. **Strategic vulnerability of the corridor:** Any sustained Islamist consolidation immediately opposite the Siliguri corridor heightens Indian concern about multi vector threats in its narrow land bridge to the Northeast, not just from China via the north but from ideologically hostile networks to the south and east. Even if Jamaat remains formally within parliamentary politics, the possibility of its cadres or affiliates being leveraged by external powers in a crisis, whether Pakistan's intelligence services or, in more complex scenarios, China's grey zone operators, cannot be discounted.

CHANGING GEOMETRY OF BAY OF BENGAL CONTESTATION

Taken together, BNP's return, Jamaat's rise and intensified China-US competition reshapes the Bay of Bengal's strategic geometry in ways that directly affect India's options.

For China, a Bangladesh led by BNP but with strong Islamist opposition is still a promising platform to embed itself deeper into maritime infrastructure (Mongla, Payra and possibly new facilities) and dual use assets such as submarine bases or drone plants, develop infrastructure and security footprints near sensitive Indian choke points, including previous proposals for Chinese linked airfields and projects in districts close to the "chicken's neck", and present itself as a non-judgmental partner willing to work with whoever holds power, including Islamist influenced coalitions, thus securing continuity of access. Beijing has already moved fast, signing a defence agreement in early 2026 to build a drone factory near the Indian border and discussing the sale of JF-17 Thunder fighter jets.

For the United States, the same configuration is a test of whether Indo-Pacific strategy can work through a complex, partly Islamist democracy rather than through a tightly controlled secular regime. Washington will push for stronger naval and coast guard cooperation in the Bay, intelligence fusion, and more

regularised presence of US and partner navies in Bangladeshi ports. Governance and rights conditionalities that keep BNP accountable while trying to limit Jamaat's influence over core state institutions, especially the security sector.

For India, the new landscape is simultaneously constraining and opportunity laden. New Delhi loses the comfort of a dominant, India leaning Awami League but gains an environment where both China and the US are competing intensely for access and influence in Dhaka. India can leverage its geographic contiguity, energy ties, and shared river systems to remain indispensable, but it must now do so while managing ideological discomfort with an empowered Jamaat and insecurity about Chinese and possibly Western military presence on its immediate maritime and land periphery.

In the Bay of Bengal itself, this is likely to produce a more crowded, multi-layered theatre where Chinese naval and coast guard visits, logistics access, and undersea surveillance (linked to its existing submarine support to Bangladesh) expand in both scale and sophistication, and US and partner navies increase joint activities and capacity building with Bangladesh, using democracy and development narratives to justify a larger footprint. India must invest more in its own eastern seaboard infrastructure, Andaman & Nicobar command, and trilateral or minilateral frameworks that include Bangladesh where possible, while developing contingency plans for scenarios in which Dhaka tilts more decisively towards Beijing or becomes more permissive to Islamist transnational networks.

Imagine a future crisis in which Sino-Indian tensions in the Himalayas coincide with unrest in India's Northeast and activation of Islamist networks in Bangladeshi districts facing the Siliguri corridor, under a Dhaka government constrained by a powerful Jamaat opposition and Chinese economic leverage. The mere plausibility of such a scenario will shape Indian defence planning, maritime posture in the Bay of Bengal, and its diplomacy towards both BNP and Jamaat, making the 2026 realignment in Dhaka a pivotal moment in the evolution of Bay of Bengal geopolitics.

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