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Six Months Since Sheikh Hasina's Ouster: India-Bangladesh Relations in Transition

Bangladesh, one of India's closest neighbors, has undergone significant political changes over the past six months following the removal of Sheikh Hasina from power. As the country grapples with new leadership and political uncertainty, its relationship with India is also witnessing a shift. While economic and strategic ties remain strong, concerns about security, regional stability, and communal tensions are emerging as key challenges.

Political Shifts in Bangladesh

- Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the Awami League and the longest-serving Prime Minister of Bangladesh, was removed from power six months ago.
- The ouster came amid allegations of authoritarianism, suppression of opposition parties, and electoral malpractice.
- Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel laureate and social entrepreneur, assumed leadership, promising democratic reforms and economic stability.
- However, the new government has struggled to consolidate power, facing opposition from pro-Hasina factions and the Islamist hardline group Jamaat-e-Islami.
- One of the key concerns for India is the new regime's demand for Hasina's extradition, which puts New Delhi in a diplomatic dilemma.

Implications for India

Security Concerns and Border Issues

- Instability in Bangladesh could lead to an increase in illegal migration into India, particularly in states like Assam and West Bengal.
- Cross-border smuggling and human trafficking may rise due to weakened law enforcement in Bangladesh.
- Radical Islamist groups, including those with past links to terrorism, could exploit the political uncertainty, posing security risks for India.



Rising Communal Tensions

- Attacks on the Hindu minority in Bangladesh have reportedly increased since Hasina's departure, raising concerns about religious extremism.
- Given the cultural and familial ties between Hindus in Bangladesh and India, particularly in West Bengal, communal tensions in one country often impact the other.
- The violence in Manipur, where tensions between Meiteis and Kukis have deepened, is another area where the Bangladesh situation could indirectly influence India's Northeast.

Historical and Cultural Bonds

- India played a pivotal role in Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971, supporting the Mukti Bahini and ensuring the country's independence from Pakistan.
- The Bengali cultural and linguistic heritage is deeply intertwined between the people of Bangladesh and those in West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura.
- The Indo-Bangladesh border is porous, with strong people-to-people connections, leading to both economic and social exchanges.
- Despite political changes, the shared history and deep cultural ties have always acted as a stabilizing factor in bilateral relations.

Economic and Strategic Cooperation

Trade and Connectivity

- Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia, with annual bilateral trade exceeding \$18 billion.
- India exports key commodities such as petroleum, textiles, machinery, and raw materials, while Bangladesh supplies garments, leather goods, and food products.
- Infrastructure projects, including rail and road connectivity through the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) framework, enhance regional integration.

Energy and Water Sharing Agreements

- India and Bangladesh share multiple rivers, including the Ganga, Teesta, and Brahmaputra, making water-sharing agreements crucial.
- The 1996 Ganga Water Treaty remains a major milestone, though the Teesta River water-sharing deal remains unresolved.
- Energy cooperation is strong, with India exporting electricity to Bangladesh and collaborating on renewable energy projects.



The Path Forward

Diplomatic Engagement

- India must continue diplomatic engagement with the new Bangladeshi leadership while maintaining neutrality in the country's internal affairs.
- High-level discussions should focus on ensuring that security cooperation remains intact, preventing extremist groups from gaining ground.
- Regional forums like SAARC and BIMSTEC can be leveraged to promote stability and development in South Asia.

Addressing Minority Concerns

- New Delhi must use diplomatic channels to raise concerns over violence against Hindus and ensure their protection.
- India can work with international human rights organizations to press for minority rights in Bangladesh.

Balancing Strategic Interests

- While India supports democratic values, it must also ensure that Bangladesh does not shift towards China or other regional players for economic and military support.
- Infrastructure and trade agreements should be strengthened to maintain strong bilateral economic relations.

Conclusion

India and Bangladesh have long shared a relationship shaped by history, geography, and economic interdependence. While the political transition in Bangladesh presents new challenges, India's approach must be one of cautious engagement, prioritizing stability, security, and economic cooperation. The spirit of 1971 remains the cornerstone of India's diplomatic approach, ensuring that the two nations continue to work together for mutual progress and regional peace.

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