

FRIEND AND NEIGHBOUR: ON INDIA-BANGLADESH VIRTUAL SUMMIT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bangladesh

The virtual summit between [Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina](#), where they discussed issues ranging from the violent border incidents to the COVID-19 fight, demonstrates their desire to reboot India-Bangladesh ties that have faced challenges in recent months. Mr. [Modi called Bangladesh a “major pillar” in India’s neighbourhood first policy](#), while Ms. Hasina invited him to visit Bangladesh in March for the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of its independence. It is a key opportunity for India, which had played a major role in [Bangladesh’s liberation in 1971](#), to revive the bonhomie and address the issues adversely affecting the partnership. Despite the friendship remaining solid, the border has been sensitive — at least 25 Bangladeshis were killed in the first six months of this year along the border by Indian forces, according to a rights watchdog. The Teesta water dispute remains unresolved. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the proposed National Register of Citizens, which Ms. Hasina called “unnecessary”, have created a negative impression about India. Above all, China is making deep inroads into Bangladesh by ramping up infrastructure investments and expanding economic cooperation. So, it is imperative for India to bolster ties with this all-weather friend, and there may not be a better time to do so than when Bangladesh is to celebrate the golden jubilee of its independence.

Ms. Hasina has done relatively well in steering Bangladesh through crises. Under the Awami League government, Bangladesh, India’s largest trading partner in South Asia, has expanded its economy and improved social welfare. Despite the Awami League’s tight grip over the administration, Ms. Hasina has continued to face challenges from Islamist factions. War crimes and corruption trials have weakened the traditional opposition — the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its ally, the pro-Pakistan Jamaat-e-Islami. But another Islamist group, Hifazat-e-Islam, made headlines recently when it organised mass protests against French President Emmanuel Macron and opposed the Hasina government’s plan to build a statue of the country’s founding father, Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman, in Dhaka’s suburbs. The Hifazat has claimed that installing statues is prohibited in Islam and that they would be pulled down, but the government seems determined to go ahead with its plan. In a speech marking Victory Day (December 16), Ms. Hasina said she would not allow the country to be divided on religious lines, in an indirect reference to Hifazat. India should support her fight against the radical elements. India should also not allow the ideological inclinations of the ruling party to spoil the historic relationship between the two countries. New Delhi should take a broader view of the changing scenario and growing competition in South Asia, and reach out to Dhaka with an open mind.

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