

## **16<sup>th</sup> December Victory Day: Bangladesh Marching Forward**

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On the great occasion of the Victory Day, we remember the supreme sacrifices of the freedom of fighters—men and women—of Bangladesh and salute them. But for their valiant fight, Pakistani army would not have surrendered in Dhaka on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1971. It is a great day for joy and reflection.

On this day it is appropriate to assess how Bangladesh people have conducted themselves during these years and what direction the foreign policy would follow to make a mark in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which has been described rightly as “Asian Century”

There are many negatives things one may write about Bangladesh but on this occasion let us be positive of ourselves and examine whether the people of Bangladesh is on the right track.

Bangladesh People:

Bangladesh is now 41 years old but it is an ancient land with centuries of history and culture. The size of the land territory is small but its population is large. Bangladesh, population-wise, is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world.

It is a country whose people sacrificed their lives for the honour and preservation of their mother tongue (Bangla), and led the recognition to the preservation of mother-languages of other people through UNESCO. It is a country whose people fought bravely amongst all odds to create politically independent Bangladesh in 1971 and it is a country whose people welcomes all the six seasons of the year with music and dance, reflecting vibrant cultural traditions.

It is a country which introduced the concept of micro-credit to the world through the Grameen Bank. It is a country which houses the largest NGO in the world (Brac) and many of the programmes of the Grameen Bank and Brac are being replicated across the world. Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus has started popularizing his concept of social business to remove poverty through establishing Social Business Centres in many universities overseas.

Bangladesh is a democratic country and three pillars of the Bangladesh’s progress---(a) government, (b) private sector and (c) civil society including media--- work hand in hand.

Although governance is an issue which needs to be improved within government machinery, the other two pillars, such as private sector and the civil society including media are vibrant and active.

Bangladesh painters, musicians, dancers and singers are well known across the world and the number of cultural functions held in a day in the capital and district towns is a surprise to many locals and foreigners. This cultural tradition and heritage we can be proud about.

Through the synthesis of challenges and opportunities Bangladesh has been a dynamic nation against all odds—natural and man-made. The people are hard-working, resilient, imaginative, innovative and adaptable to new situations.

Women in the country are found in all sectors of professions and careers from judges to parliamentarians, to police and military officers to doctors and lawyers. The Prime minister and the Leader of the opposition in parliament are women and so also are Agriculture Minister, Foreign Minister and Post & Telecommunications Minister, among others.

The villages have been transformed with availability of mobile phones, cable TV and electricity. Roads are accessible for all weather period from Teknaaf to Tetulia. Women have come out in large numbers to work in the garment factory, women take loan from micro credit organizations and run their small business, in rural areas and are now elected in the rural bodies. Women empowerment has brought creativity, innovation and self-confidence among them.

The hardworking farmers have given the nation bumper crops for several years and Bangladesh now grows about 35 million tons of rice. Boro-Aman and Aus (in 1971 it was only 10.59 million). The NGOs have been providing some of the basic facilities such as primary education, adult education, primary health care in rural areas side by side with the government.

All the above narratives demonstrate that Bangladesh is a land whose people tend to turn challenges into opportunities. It proved totally wrong Henry Kissinger's description of Bangladesh in 1974 as "bottomless basket" through creativity, ingenuity and resourcefulness of its people. For the two decades Bangladesh has registered between 5% and 7% steady growth, despite slowdown in global economy in some years..

### ***Foreign Policy:***

Bangladesh can march forward with people-oriented policy and imaginative foreign policy. As regards foreign policy, the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as, globalization and interdependence of states, have inevitably impacted on choices and role for Bangladesh. It seems that the range of choice available will depend on Bangladesh's ability to improve the performance and resilience of economy and on the policy makers' capacity to take advantage of interdependence rather than constrained by it.

Foreign policy is an umbrella term and covers the entire gamut of foreign relations in such areas as, security concerns, trade, manpower export, foreign direct investment, foreign aid, monetary management, cultural matters, curbing terrorism, humanitarian, and environmental issues.

Foreign policy-making is a combination of unchanging realities and evolutionary developments in response to certain demands and pressures. It should be seen in organic terms as something which varies in shape and consistency and which has a remarkable tendency to adapt to its surroundings and remain alive.

Foreign policy should not be perceived as 'foreign' to people because what people can sell or buy or what price people pay for their food at a given time is affected by global trade policy. Global trade policy is an important component of foreign policy which is being formulated in the World Trade Organisation.

Bangladesh became a member of the Security Council, the most important 15-member organ of the UN, in 1978, only after four years of its admission to the UN, defeating Japa. . It can

credit to memberships to executive bodies to about 21 international organisations including in the executive committees of WHO, UNHCR, Human Rights Council and ILO.

Lord Palmerston's dictum is correct when he has said that there are no eternal friends or permanent enemies. What is eternal is national interest and those are to be pursued vigorously. National interest is not static but is variable. It may change with the change of settings, themes and arenas.

Although national interests are variable, certain minimal notion of national interest exists. Besides preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, food security, water security, economic security, energy security, environmental preservation and internal peace and cohesion are the important elements of national interest.

### ***Strategic location of Bangladesh & Opportunities:***

Bangladesh is strategically located in a region which has assumed importance for India, China and US. Bangladesh shares borders with India and Myanmar and is a near neighbour to China, Nepal and Bhutan. It is a Muslim-majority country which is surrounded by non-Muslim majority countries and it is unique because all other Muslim-majority countries share border with another Muslim-majority country.

Bangladesh's access to the open sea through the Bay of Bengal is strategically and commercial important. All exports and imports are carried by ships through the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean and the sea lanes are to be protected and naval powers of India, US, China, regularly monitor the security of the Indian Ocean.

Bangladesh is known for its constructive role in the region and globally. First, more than any other in South Asia Bangladesh has a record of settling bilateral disputes peacefully. With India Bangladesh has signed the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty and with Myanmar Bangladesh has been able to resolve the maritime dispute through ITLOS Tribunal.

Second, Bangladesh contribution to the UN peacekeeping missions is admired for the professional competence of Bangladesh personnel and the UN Secretary General has recognized it many times. Currently Bangladesh has more than 10,000 UN peacekeeping personnel including women in 13 countries and tops the list.

Third Bangladesh is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of Islamic Conference, Commonwealth of Nations and the UN, Within the region, Bangladesh is a member of South Asian Association For Regional Cooperation ( SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) , D-8 Countries, Asean Regional Forum (ARF) and the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR- ARC). This provides Bangladesh an opportunity to collaborate with other nations in a way that can promote progress, peace and security of the region.

It is wrong to suggest that Bangladesh has to choose between India and China. Bangladesh can do both and the trick lies in how Bangladesh manages that.

Enhancing relationship with India, Myanmar and China gives Bangladesh many advantages. It can be argued that greater engagement with China would augment Bangladesh's relations with India. The region's leadership recognizes that Bangladesh has something to offer

economically and that Bangladesh may be able to help in the complex strategic evolution taking place in the region.

The US expects Bangladesh to have deepening links in trade and investment within the countries of the region-- India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and China. On the other hand, prospect of being at odds with India or China or Myanmar could not be an option for Bangladesh. .

Bangladesh needs to have friendly relations with all countries, in particular with the US, India and China. To make Bangladesh a hub of economic activities, interconnectivity within the region is necessary. For example transit or transshipment to India through Bangladesh is to be provided together with Bangladesh's transit access to Nepal and Bhutan by India. Bangladesh and China agree in connecting Chittagong to Kunming (Yunnan province) through Myanmar.

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Enhancing relationship with India, Myanmar and China gives Bangladesh many advantages. The region's leadership recognizes that Bangladesh has something to offer economically and that Bangladesh may be able to help in the complex strategic evolution taking place in the region.

The current political and security environment is very fluid. While the US is clearly too strong to stay on the sidelines of world affairs, it is too weak to implement its own agenda without wide international support. That is why the US has to make alliance with other nation, in particular with Brazil, Turkey and India and Indonesia. The US is determined to have a footprint in the resurgent Myanmar, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century is "Asian Century" because of rising China, India and Indonesia, besides economic powers of Japan, and South Korea, the US has shifted its priority to Asia Pacific region and 60% of its naval assets are being deployed in the region.

An awkward truth is that the world is neither dominated by a unipolar power nor multipolar powers. Currently we live in a non-polar world and the balance of power is going through an evolution period. Bangladesh has to recognize this reality and adjust the direction of foreign policy accordingly.

