

## **Bangladesh Foreign Policy: Realities & Challenges**

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Foreign policy is not created in a vacuum. It is grounded on a country's strengths and weaknesses. Besides, size, geographical location and resources influence directions of foreign policy. All these attributes are to be assessed objectively and dispassionately in determining the policy.

Furthermore foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. In other words, objectives of domestic policy are to be pursued robustly through foreign policy. Domestic and foreign policies are two sides of the same coin. It cannot be separated.

One particular fact is to be noted in this context what Lord Palmerston has said that no country is an eternal enemy or a permanent friend. What is permanent is national interest and it is to be pursued vigorously.

*Realities of South Asian region:*

First, Bangladesh is located in South Asia. The region is war-torn one since 1947. Peace and stability have eluded the region.

Bangladesh is sandwiched between two rising Asia's giants—India and China. India is the hugging neighbour and China is only 100 miles across the Himalayas. Furthermore Bangladesh stands as a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia.

Second, India and China have uneasy political relationship as they face contested borders. The unsettled boundary often erupts as an irritation to their bilateral relations.

Third, India and Pakistan have rivalry and the Kashmir dispute has exacerbated the bitterness of their relations.

Fourth, India assesses its security position in the light of China's strength, while Pakistan defines its security concerns against India. This means that security is not confined to regional states.

Fifth, shared security perception is the glue that binds regional countries, such as ASEAN or the European Union. In South Asia, there exists no shared or common perception of security among the countries. Some states even perceive security threat arising from the within the region.

Sixth, the South Asian region is asymmetrical because India's physical size is more than that of all countries in the region. Moreover, India's geographical position puts it in the centre of South Asia. India shares borders with almost all the countries of the region and no other country shares border with another. This provides India a great geo-political significance.

Seventh, India's long-standing policy of bilateralism to resolve disputes within South Asian states and insistence on non-involvement of a third party or the UN is not conducive to peaceful settlement of outstanding bilateral disputes. The policy may suit India but not other states.

*Challenges within South Asia:*

Against the peculiarities of South Asian region, the challenge is how to maintain a delicate balance of relations between China and India. If Bangladesh is perceived tilting to one, it may give misgivings on the other. Bangladesh cannot afford of having an imbalance of bilateral relations with two Asian giants as Bangladesh needs both of them.

Another diplomatic challenge is how to take great advantage of the geo-political situation of Bangladesh, regionally and globally. To attain the objectives, one significant factor appears to be the inter-connectivity with both the giants. Interconnectivity includes cooperation in resource endowments of the region. Bangladesh will flourish most when connected to the region, China and the rest of the world.

Accordingly there is a strong view that an integrated multimodal transport operation is imperative within the region. Transit and transshipment within the region ought to be considered for gaining benefits. Advantage would not be realized unless physical infrastructure is addressed by Bangladesh comprehensively in an era of globalization where international borders are no more real than the equator and sovereignty of a country is getting diminished.

Energy-security is another challenge for meeting the developmental needs of Bangladesh. India is coal-rich, Nepal is rich in hydro-power and Bangladesh is gas-rich. Cooperation in having a common regional energy grid is called for. It is reported that Nepal alone through its hydro-power can generate 80,000 MW.

Degradation of environment poses a security risk for Bangladesh because there is an interdependent relationship between internal security and economy. The devastation caused by Sidr on Bangladesh is an instance in which growing concern for occurrence of such natural disasters might happen in future years due to global climate change.

Another challenge is how to manage, develop and utilize the water resources of the region for the benefit of people. In future scarcity of fresh water will be acute in the region and development of water resources is to off-set the deleterious effects within the region.

A serious consideration is to be given as to whether Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Indian northeastern states could be grouped into an integrated economic unit for bigger market access for Bangladeshi goods, for availability of mineral resources from northeastern states for production of cement and setting up of joint enterprises with India using gas resources of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh faces the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal. Indian Ocean is gradually being militarised by many littoral states. The peacetime functions of the navy of many coastal countries have changed considerably. It is not confined to defence of territories. The navies patrol the distant waters to keep safe the sea lanes for transportation of oil from the Middle East to Far East and promotion of trade. Bangladesh needs to monitor and consider how to play a role in the area of security of the Indian Ocean.

#### *Global Scenario & Bangladesh:*

The global political dynamics is characterized by, among others, the following issues:

- (a) Ineffectiveness of the Security Council of the UN because of differences of opinion among big five veto-wielding permanent members, such as between Russia and China on the one hand and the US and the West on the other.
- (b) Growing gravity of threats rooted in non-state actors
- (c) Iran-US confrontation on nuclear proliferation
- (d) Israel-Palestinian conflict
- (e) Iraqi war and its ramifications in the region including Shi'ia and Sunni sectarianism in the Middle East
- (f) Rise of Islamic militants & absence of agreed definition of terrorism
- (g) Civil wars in Africa.
- (h) US containment policy of China through its allies
- (i) Militarization of Japan
- (j) Sales of arms to conflict or potential conflict zones by big powers
- (k) Expanded role of the NATO beyond the confines of Europe
- (l) Formation of Shanghai Cooperation Council with Central Asian States
- (m) Growing power of Venezuela-Iran-China axis

Besides the above, Globalisation, human rights, gender inequality, infectious diseases, transnational organised crime and climate change are added to political ones in the current global issues of significance.

#### *Non-Polar World:*

Some US writers hold the view that the power of the US has peaked and with the rise of Europe and Asia it becomes clear that America's unipolar moment is not long for this world.

While the US is clearly too strong to stay on the sidelines of world affairs, it is too weak to implement an agenda without wide international support. That is why the US had to negotiate with North Korea and seems to be powerless to stop Iran's nuclear programme.

Some say that the world order is in transition because there is no power at the moment including the US that can force an issue to its wishes and satisfaction.

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.

The current fluidity in the balance of power carries a serious threat of instability and conflict as well as concerns over how to build an effective international response to abuses of power.

*Some of the challenges for Bangladesh in multi-lateral fora:*

Bangladesh's role in peacekeeping operation under the umbrella of the UN provides a good standing to Bangladesh in the UN.

Bangladesh's strength lies in not taking extreme views on any global or regional issue. Bangladesh is capable of persuading like-minded countries to see a particular point of view on a given issue and may achieve success in multilateral foras.

Given the above positive factors, how Bangladesh can project itself as a moderate and tolerant multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual democratic country?

\*How does Bangladesh build physical and human capital so that Bangladesh can face a dynamic world of change?

\* How does Bangladesh operate in a complicated world where other nations will not always be with us?

\*How Bangladesh can mobilize opinion within the UN to mitigate the devastating effects of disasters due climate change in future?

\*How can Bangladesh receive support and assistance to adapt to the effects of global warming including building seawalls to guard against rising seas, under the road map of the recent Bali UN Conference on Climate Change?

\*How Bangladesh can get duty-free or concessional access to market of industrialized countries?

\*How can Bangladesh, a labour-sending country, encourage industrialized countries to accept temporary mobility of labour from developing countries as part of the globalization?

\*How can Bangladesh mobilize opinion within the international community to provide protection to the rights of migrant workers including those of undocumented workers in the receiving countries in accordance with the 1990 International Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families?

\*How can Bangladesh prevent organized crime such as, trafficking in women and children and drug related crimes?

*Conclusion:*

The above paragraphs are indicative of some of the realities and challenges to Bangladesh foreign policy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a nation, we begin to ask, debate and answer these questions.

Bangladesh foreign policy, in my view, stands largely on two pillars: security, development. A foreign policy is successful if it is proactive and result oriented. It must not respond only to situations but plans ahead of strategy so that no situation surprises the country within the region or globally.