

Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: A Dream in Progress

Dr. A K Abdul Momen

The birth of Bangladesh was sanitized by blood and tears. Three million dead. Two hundred thousand raped. All at a time when many major powers were looking away from the carnage. Fifty three years have passed since and what some pundits once referred to as a basket case with no hope of survival evolved into a “development miracle” and a “land of opportunity” under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the able daughter of the assassinated Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Thanks to, first, strong agricultural sector production - both extension and distribution and marketing; second, rapid expansion of RMG-led production and export; and third, impressive remittance that pulled the economy even when the global economy was facing recessions and meltdown. It is not only the three direct impetus, rather robust structural reforms – expanding and reconfiguring public sector investments into the formation of infrastructure assets; a freer and more transparent flow of remittances from a thriving expatriate community; diversification of exports – to higher-value brands and integration of essentially middleware design and software components, have contributed to Bangladesh’s journey in becoming an epic saga of determined and charismatic leadership. The Economy of the country has been growing at more than 6% a year for the last four decades and had it not been stifled by the sudden onslaught of the COVID19 paradox, it would have been lifted to an 8% paradigm starting 2020.

Foreign policy, reflecting domestic objectives, has emerged prominently amidst the post-COVID-19 crisis, as countries navigate unique challenges. Bangladesh's foreign policy, based on "Friendship to all, malice to none" as coined by the nation's founder, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is anchored in its constitution's Article 25, emphasizing national sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, and support for oppressed populations globally. This ethos drove Bangladesh's early diplomatic efforts, securing global recognition and UN membership by 1974. Presently, under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the focus remains on peaceful international dispute resolution, mirroring the consistent foreign policy over nearly five decades.

Bangabandhu envisioned Bangladesh as the ‘Switzerland of the East’ in the sense that Bangladesh would act as the “safe space” or the “refuge” in the deeply divided globe. Bangabandhu believed that without peace and stability, no country can develop or prosper and therefore he wanted Bangladesh to be an ‘Island of Peace’. Therefore, Bangabandhu agreed to join the OIC Summit held in Lahore in February 1974 at the request of the high-power delegation led by Kuwait and Algeria - provided that Pakistan accepts the sovereignty of Bangladesh. His address at the UNGA in 1974 called for the sharing of technology and resources on a global scale, so that the human race could begin to enjoy at least the minimal conditions of a decent life- which is the central focus of Bangladesh’s foreign Policy (as an extension of its own domestic priorities). Till now Bangladesh’s foreign policy centers on the sharing of resources in a symbiotic and synergistic manner to create a better future for all of humanity avoiding confrontations and provocations. Despite the position of neutralities, Bangladesh extends its great heart to ease the sufferings of the persecuted people across the world. Our unwavering support to the cause of Palestine and peace in the middle east is part of its effort to stand by the side of the oppressed. Bangabandhu supported the end of apartheid

in South Africa and the end of the Vietnam War to secure both the decency and dignity of human lives all over the world. Likewise, Bangladesh has sheltered 1.1 million Rohingyas from Myanmar despite its own constraints of resources. It is committed to engaging all possible diplomatic tools to raise the awareness of human conscience - for not only guaranteeing the safe and sustainable return of the Rohingya people to their motherland but also to ensure justice and accountability – so that the atrocities which they suffered, just like those suffered by the Bengalis in 1971, never happen again, anywhere.

A Brief Overview of Current Status

Global admiration for Bangladesh's development strides, including poverty reduction and women empowerment, places it above regional neighbors, propelling towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals. Bilaterally, mutual respect and constructive engagement characterize Bangladesh-India relations, even amidst challenges like Teesta river water-sharing. Similarly, Bangladesh maintains strong ties with other regional and global partners, extending support during crises. Regionally, Bangladesh has been active in various alliances and initiatives like SAARC, BIMSTEC, CVF, the D-8, and IORA, showcasing its commitment to multilateral diplomacy. In combating COVID-19, governmental policies balanced lives and livelihoods, showcasing resilience by achieving a 6.1% growth rate in the last fiscal year despite global economic disruptions.

As a forthcoming developing country, Bangladesh eyes both opportunities and challenges, notably in trade preferences. It's proactively addressing climate change, allocating substantial funds for adaptation and mitigation while chairing forums like the Climate Vulnerable Forum. Migration remains a focal point, with efforts to ensure safe and dignified employment for Bangladeshis abroad. The Rohingya crisis, although a formidable challenge, continues to see Bangladesh advocating for safe repatriation, yet the recent military coup in Myanmar complicates matters. Employing soft power, Bangladesh highlights its cultural heritage, secular identity, culture of peace, and sustainable products on the global stage. Investment-friendly policies, economic zones, and high-tech parks beckon foreign investments, while efforts for export diversification are underway.

Digital advancements, propelled by a robust IT professional pool, have fortified Bangladesh's digital infrastructure, benefiting education and other sectors during the pandemic. In development, significant projects like the self-funded Padma Bridge symbolize Bangladesh's monumental progress over 50 years, testament to the nation's resilient and entrepreneurial spirit.

Bangladesh's Importance in Geopolitics: Geo-economics, Geo-strategy, Geo-ideology

Bangladesh, the thriving nation on the eastern banks of the Indian subcontinent, stands as a key player in the global geopolitical realm. Rooted in a rich history and the indomitable spirit of its people, Bangladesh has emerged as a significant nation in terms of geo-economics, geo-strategy, and geo-ideology. Bangladesh navigates the intricate landscape of international relations, understanding Bangladesh's unique position in these domains is of paramount importance.

Geo-economics: A Hub of Connectivity and Trade

Bangladesh's economic prowess is hard to overlook. Located between the burgeoning markets of India and Southeast Asia, it is positioned as a connector, bridging the East with the

West. The nation's geo-economic significance is underpinned by its strategic location, which is instrumental for regional trade and connectivity projects like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor. Such projects promise to transform the regional trade dynamics and place Bangladesh at the epicenter of Asian economic growth. Furthermore, with a burgeoning garment industry that contributes massively to global supply chains, Bangladesh commands a pivotal role in international trade. The nation's ports, especially the Port of Chittagong, play a vital role in connecting the hinterlands of India, Bhutan, and Nepal to the broader world, underlining Bangladesh's geo-economic significance.

Geo-strategy: The Balance Between Major Powers

Geographically, Bangladesh sits at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, making it a strategic pivot in the larger Indo-Pacific theater. With the increasing interest of major powers like China, the U.S., and India, Bangladesh's geopolitical weight has grown exponentially. China views Bangladesh as an integral part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to consolidate its influence in the Bay of Bengal region. On the other hand, India sees Bangladesh as a crucial ally, not only for regional stability but also as a counterbalance to China's growing influence. The U.S., under its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, views Bangladesh as a potential partner in ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. As these major powers vie for influence, Bangladesh must astutely navigate its strategic partnerships to ensure its national interests are preserved and enhanced. What is important for us is to see that we keep our constitutional prerogative of friendship to all and malice to none at the core of our own view of the strategies which overlap on and across us.

Geo-ideology: A Beacon of Secularism and Democracy

Bangladesh stands as a testament to the idea that secularism and democracy can thrive in a predominantly Muslim-majority nation. Born out of a struggle for language and cultural identity, Bangladesh's founding principles resonate with ideals of secularism, democracy, and pluralism. In a region where radical ideologies sometimes threaten to take root, Bangladesh offers a counter-narrative. By championing the principles of democracy, inclusivity and acceptance, Bangladesh sends a strong message to neighboring countries about the viability and desirability of democratic governance. As extremist ideologies challenge the fabric of many societies, Bangladesh's commitment to secularism, justice and democracy can serve as a model for nations grappling with similar challenges.

Conclusion

As we chart the nation's course in the world, recognizing Bangladesh's unique position in geo-economics, geo-strategy, and geo-ideology is crucial. By harnessing its economic potential, tactfully navigating strategic partnerships, and upholding its foundational principles, Bangladesh can not only safeguard its national interests but also shape the future geopolitical landscape of the region. AI sunrise is on the horizon. There are already two more veritable strategic spaces which have opened up – informatics and space. Our locational triangulations and our creative minds make us potential players in both domains. Foreign Policy must take into account the emergent spaces too. We have already commenced with our #ZeroDigitalDivide campaign through the e-Quality centre and we are planning on creating integrated approaches towards ensuring economic and creative connectivity both for our individuals and our enterprises and also the global supply solutions which could optimize themselves with a connection through our people and our technical stacks – underwritten by an ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurship.

In the years to come, Bangladesh's role in global geopolitics is poised to grow, propelled by its economic strides, strategic location, and unwavering commitment to democratic ideals. It is imperative that Bangladesh leverages these strengths, ensuring a prosperous and stable future for its people and cementing its position as a pivotal actor in the global geopolitical arena.

#

PID Feature