

Bangladesh's Policy Dynamics in the context of Reshuffling Geopolitical Alliances

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Bangladesh is no longer a stranger to venturing through complex geopolitical settings. The country emerged as a sovereign state in South Asia during the height of the Cold War. Since then, the country has always found itself in the middle of geopolitical rivalries, whether it be at the regional or international level. However, the trajectory of Bangladesh has been remarkable as she succeeded in emerging as a future 'Asian Tiger' from the wrath of a war-ravaged economy. Once dubbed a 'bottomless basket'; Bangladesh is frequently referred to as a 'South Asian Miracle'; In this regard, the nation is indebted to the pragmatic vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who laid the foundation for the guiding postulate of our foreign policy - 'Friendship to All, Malice towards None'; It was the making or foundational period of Bangladesh's foreign policy when its priorities were securing aid and recognition as a sovereign state in the international system. It was followed by an unmaking period when the foreign policy priorities were re-evaluated due to the changes in the political regime. Since the second decade of the 21st century, Bangladesh has pursued a dynamic foreign policy based on the guiding dictum. It can be labelled as the 'remaking' period where the country has been reshaping its policies based on the foundational directive.

Along with the emerging economic power, the geographical significance of Bangladesh has grown manifold. Bangladesh is geographically positioned as the linkage between South Asia and Southeast Asia. In maritime space, the Bay of Bengal is often labelled as its 'third neighbour'; which features a strategically important maritime route. Apart from trade and commerce, the Bay of Bengal features a huge mass of unexplored renewable energy resources, which has fuelled competition under the umbrella of major infrastructural development and investment plans of the regional and global powers. Therefore, Bangladesh has innate relevance to any regional integration and interconnectivity initiative. Although South Asia has a poor track record of regional cooperation, Bangladesh is uniquely poised to play an essential role in fostering



economic connectivity. Consequently, Bangladesh's foreign policy practices have the intrinsic capacity to facilitate regional integration and allow all neighbouring regions to prosper together. Robust regional connectivity and politico-economic cooperative framework serve Bangladesh's national interests. Henceforth, economic diplomacy has been the cornerstone of Bangladesh's success in its developmental trajectory. As long as the underlying objective of a bilateral or multilateral engagement is purely an economic one, Bangladesh finds it aligned with its policy-level philosophy of 'development without enmity'.

States must formulate their foreign policies according to the changing global geopolitical dynamics. The global political landscape has undergone numerous ground breaking changes since the inception of the time of cementing the idea of the nation-state through the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Therefore, reshuffling geopolitical alliances have been a defining feature of the international system. Forming alliances is one of the main strategies for the states to balance the relative power gap vis-a-vis other states. Due to the geopolitical significance of the Indo-Pacific region, Bangladesh is geographically positioned to draw the attention of different politico-

economic and security constellations. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) are the much-discussed Chinese- infrastructural connectivity initiatives. In contrast, US interests in this region are formulated under the auspices of its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). This interest is mainly focused on security aspects of the region, and gets revised at regular intervals due to the changes in administration. Japan also shares a similar vision under its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)' initiative. In addition, Japan launched an infrastructural connectivity initiative called 'The Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B)' in 2014. There are also different economic platforms, trade blocs and banks initiated by different regional and global powers – Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Indo Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), Asian Infrastructure Investment bank (AIIB), and Asian Development Bank (ADB). Apart from these traditional forms of alliances and blocs, we are also experiencing newer trends in alliance formation. The rise of minilateralism on security and economic issues has been an important aspect of contemporary geopolitical dynamics. The advent of BRICS and AUKUS and a reinvigorated QUAD are notable examples in this regard. And we are seeing the development of several minilateral platforms like I2U2 (India, Israel, USA, UAE) and Partners in the Blue Pacific (USA, UK, Australia, Japan, New Zealand). Minilateral groupings usually consist of three to six member-states and are known for the advantage of taking a uniform decision within a very short span of time. However, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, there will be more reshuffling in major powers' policy priorities in the region. The US has facilitated Israel's proactive role in the security domain of the Middle East. Therefore, it is expected that the Indo-pacific region will experience a renewed locus of strategic priority.

Bangladesh has so far been an exemplary case of handling complex geopolitical dynamics. However, we will continue to face difficult challenges in the coming days. In some cases, Bangladesh has been extremely cautious in handling geopolitical relations with the major powers, the practice of which is conceptually defined as 'strategic hedging: In other cases, Bangladesh pursued proactive diplomatic activities in different sectors- humanitarian diplomacy, climate diplomacy, vaccine diplomacy, peace diplomacy etc. Overall, Bangladesh prioritises multilateralism, development imperatives and securing investments for infrastructural and energy sectors. These priorities might be hampered by maintaining neutrality for an extended period in the context of a global crisis. In this case, Bangladesh should focus on mending the domestic anomalies in the economic sector and adopting a stable foreign policy with some degree of flexibility. In addition to these, Bangladesh is also facing some specific ones:

> The Rohingya crisis has now become a prolonged crisis that urgently needs to be resolved. Bangladesh is facing problems at the domestic, regional and international levels in this regard. At the domestic level, the crisis has turned into a credible risk for national stability and security due to emerging trends of crimes in the refugee camps. Despite friendly bilateral relations with its regional partners, Bangladesh is still pursuing the required regional support to resolve the crisis. At the international level, the major powers are still delinquent in playing their parts in resolving the crisis. The US has recently recognised the atrocities of

Myanmar authorities as genocidal activities committed against the Rohingya community. However, the global community has more to do to ensure the safe repatriation of the Rohingya people to their home country.

> Bangladesh needs to diversify the labour markets for its migrant workers, Remittances sent by them have been one of the central pillars of the national economy. Due to global crises, the labour market variables might change anytime, and Bangladesh needs to be prepared for that. And the competent authority should focus more on supplying more skilled human resources and promoting safe migration.

> The world is experiencing a series of crises such as the global pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict etc. The usual course of global trade and economy is being affected, and consequently, the price of essentials has gone up, and the world is on the verge of severe food and energy crisis. Amidst these global crises, maintaining sustained economic growth will be a major challenge for Bangladesh in the coming days. It will be a test case for Bangladesh to maintain its success in reducing poverty, inequality and inflation rates in the changing global context.

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