

The Long Awaited Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh: What Lies Ahead?



The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) formally announced its Indo-Pacific Outlook prior to the Honourable Prime Minister's recent high-profile visit to Japan, the US, and the UK. As a country of the Indo-pacific region, articulating a strategy or a doctrine on external engagement was long overdue. The region has become a hotspot for geostrategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic competition. The global and regional powers' interests have been revolving around this region. Therefore, Bangladesh has been at the centre of a geopolitical struggle among these powers, and the absence of the country's stated interests provided the scope for misinterpretation. Bangladesh has so far been maintaining a flexible stance reflecting its foreign policy dictum 'Friendship to all, malice toward none'. Economic diplomacy lies at the heart of Bangladesh's external engagement priorities, and the country is expected to maintain a certain level of flexibility in exploring the available options. The latest Indo-Pacific Outlook formalizes this policy and therefore does not denote a comprehensive strategy for external engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. It has been deliberately articulated as an outlook to preserve the sanctity of Bangladesh's foreign policy in venturing through a complex geopolitical situation.

Articulation and publication of foreign policy principles are common trends in international politics, and many countries subscribe to this tradition. They are often labelled as White Paper, Blue Paper, or Green Paper. The idea behind the articulation and publication of these

documents is to clarify the foreign policy principles on specific issues. These help the external partners understand the country's position on specific matters and ease foreign investment as they work as positive catalysts to increase investors' confidence in investing in the country. So, policy papers on specific issues like counterterrorism policies, security policies, or foreign policy elevate a country's profile in the international arena. The political economy plays an important role here, as the absence of comprehensive policy on specific matters leads to mistrust among international partners.

The articulation and announcement of the Indo-Pacific Outlook is a timely initiative. The Outlook denotes four guiding principles and fifteen objectives aligned mainly with its foundational foreign policy principles. The Outlook has not been announced out of the blue; rather, its articulation has taken considerable time. As mentioned earlier, it was announced prior to the key visit of the Honourable Prime Minister across Asia, Europe, and North America. Therefore, both the articulation and timing of the announcement have been carefully planned. Bangladesh has officially clarified its position through this announcement. Firstly, Bangladesh will not enter into an alliance or a bloc for which hostility with other countries will grow. It is one of the guiding postulates for Bangladesh's development trajectory, as it welcomes any external engagement for the economic progress of the country. But any compromise on sovereignty and national security through a military alliance is unacceptable. Hence, Bangladesh has been cautious in venturing through the options of bilateral and multilateral engagements in the Indo-Pacific region so that any military implications can be detected. Secondly, Bangladesh has also demonstrated its preference for not getting involved in the internal affairs of any country through bilateral or multilateral forums. It also expects external partners to respect its authority over domestic matters.

The articulation of any policy or strategy paper is not the final thing in policy formulation procedures. The policy implementation phase is more important and more challenging to accomplish. The maritime domain is particularly different from the traditional course of the policy implementation strategy. Cooperation with neighbouring and regional countries is vital for any sector but indispensable for the maritime domain. The implementation success of any domestic policy in the maritime domain also depends on cooperation with the neighbouring littorals. For example, Bangladesh is currently enforcing a 65-day ban on marine fishing till July 23. This national-level policy is designed to protect marine fisheries, aquaculture and ensures fisheries' safe spawning. It is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) - 14, which denotes the sustainable use of marine resources. However, this attempt to protect the marine fisheries resources may not be successful due to the absence of synergized ban among the neighbouring littorals. Due to the vastness of the maritime domain, it is difficult to ensure unlawful activities in the whole area under the national jurisdiction. So, due to the absence of

regional synergy in this matter, a policy designed to conserve marine fisheries resources may not accomplish the desired goal.

Strategies of the Indo-Pacific littorals are designed mainly to cater to geopolitical problems.

However, these geopolitical tussles can affect the coastal community, and states often fail to predict these adverse impacts as they are preoccupied with safeguarding national interests, which mostly denote securitized implications. Bangladesh can be an exemplary case here by pursuing a human-centric Indo-Pacific Strategy in this region. Bangladesh has always prioritised the economic development of the country to uplift its population out of poverty. Bangladesh has achieved exemplary success in various aspects of human development and is scheduled to graduate out of the category of Least Developed Country (LDC) in 2026. Intensive external interests in the Indo-Pacific region are an opportunity for Bangladesh to develop the economic condition of its coastal people spread across 19 districts. Massive developmental initiatives have been taken in some of these districts to improve maritime connectivity. These projects have significant geostrategic implications and have been subject to intense competition among external partners to finance them. But, we need to upscale our efforts to improve the livelihood conditions of the people living in these areas. And linking this aspect with Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook will be an innovative approach to prosper in the midst of intense geopolitical tussles among the major powers.

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