

Bangladesh Must Think Before It Acts: Some Reflections



The theme of the essay is conceived after almost two weeks of the forming of the interim government in the post-5 August “second victory” in Bangladesh. The title is inspired by the strategic script of Robert Strausz-Hupé, a brilliant geostrategic thinker and writer, former U.S. ambassador and the founder of the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) and its journal ORBIS. The newly chosen advisors under the leadership of Professor Dr Yunus, the Chief Advisor of the popular government, started to work zealously to meet the people’s expectations as the latter trusted them with so high a responsibility. One of the most critical questions that can flash in the minds of conscious citizens, academics and students of knowledge: whether the incumbent policy makers are making or taking the right decisions. That they are thinking strategically before ordering actions for change!

To make a correct decision, anyone in the apex body of an organization, and the strategic leaders are more so must first have their homework done. Given the time vis-à-vis the daily work schedule, it's almost impossible for them to do the essential homework all by themselves. Here comes the necessity to be assisted by trained and experienced individuals from diverse disciplines and expertise to delve into proper net assessment or even threat assessment on the subjects, or against the state versus the opportunities available. This was rightly penned by Robert Strausz-Hupé: “To meet the threat and to seize

opportunities,” he wrote in the first issue of ORBIS in April 1957, “requires that the best trained and experienced minds be brought to bear on the key international issues on which the nation’s long-range future hinges.” This emphasis on diverse expertise in decision-making instills confidence in the government’s approach.

Another crucial aspect that needs to be addressed is the current geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic situation of Bangladesh. On top of them is the flash flood, which is currently devastating the entire eastern region from north to south. The strategic thinking skills in understanding these challenges are vital for formulating an appropriate strategy to deal with them. The Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS) mentions that strategy is “about getting something done and is, or at least should be, related to policy. Understanding this relationship is critical to making a better strategy. While both strategy and policy are often conflated, they are not the same.”

Professor Sven Biscop, who teaches the grand strategy of the EU and the other great powers, suggests that: “... strategy concerns the vital ends that a state has to achieve in order to assure the survival of its chosen way of life, for which if necessary, it will mobilize all instruments (the ways) and resources (the means) at its disposal.” Like many other world-renowned institutions, National Defence College (NDC) Bangladesh also focuses on ends, ways and means in its approach to enable the participating students—the course members, as they are called in NDC, to reflect in understanding strategy. This strategic approach reassures us that the government is well-prepared to address these challenges of the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world we live in.

What is then a policy for us laymen to understand? One of the famous definitions stipulates policy as follows: “Policy is a statement of intent, or a commitment to act.” Thus, Policymaking can shape what a government or organization wishes to do. It Also provides the makers of strategy—the top tiers with the goals or ‘ends’ to which they must assign ‘ways’ and allocate ‘means’. Therefore, policy is intricately linked to strategy. Besides, when given, executive directives will likely encompass more than just setting a policy objective. At times, the executive directives will indicate the broad parameters and contain direction on constraints and approaches developed as part of the policy and strategy-making process, taking advice from “trained and experienced minds” and stakeholders. Subsequently, the action plans are realized.

The author, like most of the citizens, is keeping his fingers crossed about the gradual professional return of institutions to their productive functioning under the auspices of the wise captains. However, the readers may accept this article as “a penny for your thoughts!” Though one can be knowledgeable from the knowledge of the others, but one cannot be wise from the wisdom of the teammates! The process of painting a ‘grand strategy’ is an exhaustive undertaking as the ‘artists’ must think before the ‘painting’ begins, for the national interest is a “pretty slippery term,” as was believed by P.H. Liotta, an American Professor of Humanities and Executive Director of the Pell Center for International Relations.

For Bangladesh to think before it acts, the people at the helm must consider the elements

of national power available, such as diplomatic, informational, military and economic. These elements may be explored in details on how an effective strategy can be used to achieve policy goals. Here, the policymakers must also identify certain principles significant to their application. Only then can they consider whether the “hard”, “soft”, or “smart” line of approach is suitable for describing selected national power.

As it has always been endorsed, strategy is naturally challenging to formulate. There is never a ‘one size fits all’ formula. Policymakers must consider the “basics” to formulate an effective strategy for their respective realm. In so doing, they should start by considering the purpose of a grand strategy and proposing some attainable goals to identify the characteristics of a good strategy. There should be a couple of “tests” to examine whether the adopted strategy is good or bad for the national interests. The ingredients of the “test” could be ‘acceptability’, ‘suitability’, ‘feasibility’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘adaptability’ of the weaved strategy.

Grand strategy is considered as crucial to small states as the great powers. It may not be written down and described as such by the state concerned. It is said that currently, no state appears formally to claim that it has a ‘grand strategy’, and it would be wise to plan the ‘grand strategy’ with a coup d’oeil—a strategic glance with a historical perspective, particularly concerning prolonged, recurring or existential conflicts from within and without that threaten national interests.

Understanding the grand strategy will lead to the practical business of making a strategy—referred to as the “strategy framework”—that composes ends, ways, and means. Before the final development of the aspired strategy, essentially highlight the importance of understanding the strategic environment to know when the selected strategy will reach its culmination, i.e. when it starts to fail. Analytical tools like SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) and PESTLE (Politics/Policy, Economy, Society, Technology, Law, and Environment) are convenient for determining the preferred strategic design. Considering all the above factors, at this stage, think through translating the adopted strategy into action(s) to achieve policy and strategy goals and results.

In articulating a smart strategy, consider the qualities, capabilities and behaviors that are the expected qualities of the most effective strategic leaders. To examine the responsibility of a strategic leader to act morally and legally. The guiding advice of Henry Kissinger can be recalled here: “...it is the responsibility of a statesman to resolve dilemmas, not to contemplate them.” Courage, Capability, Confidence, Morality, Ethics, Justice, etc., are some of the qualities needed to inform decision-making and/or to strengthen the value of assessment all through strategy design and application.

Furthermore, strategic leaders spend over 90% of their time dealing with routine events. There is a strategic adage: Routine is defeat! As they are dragged to such routine chores they are bogged down to contemplate, to think strategically before making decisions to act! Time management thus gets upset, relegating important tasks or becoming oblivious to them altogether.

In an interview with the Graduate School of Stanford Business, the former prime minister

of the UK, Tony Blair, was asked: what is your advice to leaders regarding focus and strategy? He replied that when an analysis is made about any president, one can find that only about 5% of their time is given to priorities. As the opposition leader, he visited President Bill Clinton in the White House in 1996. President Clinton gave him great advice: I really want to talk to you on a vital subject. I'm going to talk to you about scheduling. Tony Blair interprets this advice as finding the time to think strategically: Where am I going? What am I trying to do? He emphasized that one at the helm of the affairs must always create space to think strategically.

The U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower Matrix is a task and, thus, time management tool that helps strategic leadership prioritize daily tasks by urgency and importance. When used, the tool can divide tasks into four boxes based on the tasks that need to be addressed first, the tasks scheduled for later, the tasks that will be delegated, and the tasks that will not be done, i.e., the tasks that will be deleted. Below is the Eisenhower Matrix, which provides tips for task prioritization.

Weaving a desirable strategy requires much contemplation. It involves numerous discussions with and contributions from practitioners, academics, strategists, and strategic thinkers. It should also draw several texts, books, and scholars' ideas. Most importantly, it must refer to religious scriptures such as the holy Qur'an. The founding fathers of the United States of America and the subsequent presidents to date do not hesitate to refer to the Bible in their speeches and daily activities. They believe, as has been written by Lawrence Freedman in his famous book, "Strategy: A History," that 'strategy' originates in the Bible!

The Qur'an is an oft-ignored yet handy 'grand strategic guidance.' The Qur'an is the "rope of Allah"; whoever grabs onto it will be saved, and whoever loosens his grip will be destroyed. The Qur'an is also the "spirit He revealed." The Qur'an is also "the light," It is full of 'signs' such as 'lives', 'events' and 'stories' to benefit humankind in the ephemeral and eternal world. It inspires believers and unbelievers alike to Tafakkur—to meditate over the creation of Allah and take lessons from it; Tadabbur—deep reflection on how we can maintain a focused and deep connection with the Qur'an; and Tawakkul—having complete trust or reliance in Allah for all affairs, Allah Almighty is capable, sufficient, and knowing so we should rely on him alone. To make Bangladesh indeed a 'just' and 'prosperous' nation, lest we forget the ominous words of the second caliph, Umar Ibn al Khattab, the just ruler of half of the known world of his time: "We were lowly and weak, then Allah made us mighty with Islam. So when we seek mightiness anywhere other than Islam, Allah humiliates us and brings us low."

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