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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Foundations of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy Interactions

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Abstract

The two major foreign policy aspirations of Bangladesh are security and preservation of sovereignty, and the quest for resources for development. Both these objectives combined with the fact that Bangladesh being nearly geographically 'India-locked' suggests its method of external behaviour. That is, in Bangladesh's interest to enmesh herself among a web of extra-regional linkages, that would heighten global stakes within, and also reduce the power-gap with pre-eminent regional protagonists. This high level of international interactions is based on twelve pillars that this essay identifies. It analyses the contribution to behaviour, which has 'West-leaning' predilections, by the values espoused by her vibrant civil society and her burgeoning and powerful middle class. The penchant for 'multilateralism' is met with caution and circumspection in global politics, implying avoidance of 'flashy' policies, together with the adoption, generally, of a 'low-profile' on 'high-risk' issues, and 'high-profile' on 'low-risk' issues.

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He was the (Foreign Advisor) Foreign Minister of Bangladesh from 2007-2009. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views reflected in this paper are those of the author and not of the institute.

Introduction

The ancient Greeks used to insist, with a modicum of logic, prior to undertaking any intellectual discourse, one must define one's terms with as much precision as possible. In this essay, the key term is 'foreign policy interactions'. By this, it is meant the motivations behind the external behaviour-pattern, as well as the sum-total of relationships resulting there from, flowing from a conscious decision to advance the country's (in this case Bangladesh) perceived national self-interest. At the same time, one must be conscious of the actions of unofficial actors as well. This is particularly true in the case of Bangladesh, a country with a vibrant civil society that is active from both home and abroad.

Methodology

Contemporary literature on foreign policy analyses tends to be 'process-oriented' (mostly with respect to modernised and industrial states) or 'function-oriented' (as with states further down in the pecking-order of development). The former concentrates on detailed examination, in developed countries, of foreign policy processes with emphasis on such institutions as bureaucracies, political parties and pressure-groups, and the influence they exert on policy outcomes.² With the latter, the argument has been that in developing countries the institutions, still working on rudimentary levels, deserve less focus than the actual functions of foreign policy or the purposes they are applied to. In other words, their foreign policies are seen as a 'function of functions'.³ But this dichotomy cannot be carried too far. Today many countries fall within a grey area between the two categories and, therefore, would merit an eclectic approach, combining both the 'process' and 'function'.⁴ Bangladesh would fall within this less defined group.

Therefore, this study will follow an eclectic approach, one of 'mixed-models'. The methodology will be analytical. It will rely on the proposition that policy rests on multiple determinants including geographical location, historical tradition, natural resources, and economic and social needs. To these could be added ideological beliefs, religious and/or nationalistic values, and elite-behaviour and perceptions. These factors cannot be placed in an

² For instance, G. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston, Little Brown, 1971); M. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1974); William Wallace, *Foreign Policy and the Political Process* (London, Macmillan, 1971).

³ Some notable proponents of this view are – F.B. Weinstein, 'The Uses of Foreign Policy in Indonesia: An Approach to the Analysis of Foreign Policy in Less Developed Countries', *World Politics*, Vol.XXIV, No.3 (April 1972), pp.356-381; B. Korany, 'Foreign Policy Models and their Empirical Relevance to Third World Actors: A Critique and an Alternative', *International Social Science Journal*, Vol.26, No.1 (1974), pp. 70-94.

⁴ For instance, a study of Pakistan's policies, including in the sphere of foreign affairs, would be incomplete without a focus on the army, or India without the influence of pluralist forces. See S.P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2004), and S.D. Muni, *India's Foreign Policy: The Democratic Dimension* (New Delhi, Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd., 2009)

exact taxonomic order. The preponderance of one over the other depends on who the policymakers are at that point in time. Bangladeshi politics is often a balance between ‘Muslimness’ and ‘Bengaliness’.⁵ Of the two major political parties that have dominated Bangladeshi governance, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) represented mainly the former stream and the Awami League (AL), the latter. Almost as a corollary, relations are normally better with India under the latter than under the former. However, the recent watch of the long-term caretaker government saw a nuanced warming to Indo-Bangladesh relations.⁶ Perhaps a caveat is warranted at this stage. The preceding paragraphs do not imply that there exists a well thought-out and carefully formulated pro-active ‘policy’, for that would convey more than what is actually there. Also, to speak of ‘policy goals’ would appear to suggest a precision that is probably absent. A more appropriate term would be what Arnold Wolfers had once called the “aspirations” of foreign policy’.⁷

Foreign Policy Aspirations

In the realm of foreign policy, then, Bangladesh could be said to be having two broad aspirations – first, the search for its security and preservation of sovereignty, and second, the quest for resources for its development and economic welfare. The first required the space for the maintenance of sufficient manoeuvrability in policy-making, particularly as it was a weaker neighbour bordering a far more powerful state, India.⁸ As Professor Hedley Bull had asserted, rightly or wrongly, ‘the deepest fears of the smaller units in the global system are their larger neighbours.’⁹ Bangladesh always appeared to have the felt-need to live in ‘concord with’ but ‘distinct from’ their powerful neighbour. The ‘concord’ was necessary largely due to Bangladesh’s geography – largely ‘India-locked’ – and the ‘distinction’ was essential because Bangladesh’s own identity, as separate from the Indian communities surrounding it, could only be defined by those terms. This implied the need to build a web of extra-regional linkages. The second aspiration, the quest for resources, entailed aid, trade, remittances from her expatriates and foreign investments. It also meant having to involve herself with a wide range of countries. Both aspirations, therefore, required Bangladesh to seek a high level of international interactions.

⁵ See, Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury, ‘Prehistory of Bangladeshi Nationalism and a “Theory” of Tripartite Balance’, *Asian Affairs*, Vol.IV, No. IV (December 1982), pp.407-433.

⁶ This is detailed in Sreeradha Datta, *Caretaking Democracy: Political Process in Bangladesh 2006-2008* (New Delhi: Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, 2009), pp.85-110.

⁷ A. Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p.71.

⁸ ‘Power’ in such context has been defined by the French political philosopher Raymond Aron, as ‘the capacity of a political unit to impose its will on other units.’ A. Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (trans.) Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p.71.

⁹ H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in Global Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p.310.

Weaker Neighbour Syndrome

Of the options that a weaker neighbour might adopt on a regional matrix, one is what the Swedish analyst, Erling Bjol has described as ‘pilot-fish behaviour’, whereby a fish tends to tuck closer to the shark (or a larger fish) in order to avoid being eaten.¹⁰ This thesis followed from his study of Finland’s relations with the then Soviet Union. A second option is for the smaller state to make herself as difficult as possible for any potential adversary to overcome her, a policy that Prime Minister Tage Erlander espoused for Sweden.¹¹ A third option would be what Myanmar (Burma) in Southeast Asia has often chosen, from time to time, that is, ‘opting-out’ of the international system altogether.¹² Bangladesh’s preferred policy has been more in consonance with the second option, with greater emphasis on political deterrence by creating an array of international linkages that would heighten global stakes and interests, and reduce the power-gap with her neighbours.

International and Multilateral Linkages

Bangladesh’s interactions with other actors in the international arena have led her to relations with principally four categories of states. These have been major ‘development partners’ (aid donors) such as the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and Japan; regional countries like India and Pakistan; Middle Eastern Muslim states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); and China – all important as an ‘all-weather friend’. Additional actors being four multilateral political organisations – the United Nations (UN) System, the Commonwealth of Nations, the Organization of Islamic Conference, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The last four consist of trade and financial institutions, that is, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Bretton Woods Institutions, the Asian Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank. These may be said to be the twelve pillars that sustain the totality of the country’s foreign policy system.

A special mention must be made of the fact that Bangladesh has always stressed multilateralism. The UN is a significant element in her external relations. Bangladesh sees the UN as an insurer of security and sovereignty, as a forum to relate to 191 other countries it cannot bilaterally for want of resources, and as a source of moral and material support. Indeed that the author, as the Bangladesh Ambassador and Permanent Representative to that body sought to play a key role in UN reforms as a ‘facilitator’ in 2005. Amry Vandenbosch

¹⁰ Erling Bjol, ‘The Small States in International Politics’, in August Schou and Arne Olav (eds.), *Small States in International Relations* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1971), p.33.

¹¹ Erlander was Sweden’s long-term Prime Minister during most of the Cold War period, from 1946 to 1969, when Sweden followed a ‘neutral’ foreign policy between the West and the Soviet Union, while retaining a strong military capability.

¹² Even Burma, though it would have wished to opt out, felt the need at those times to ‘adjust’ and ‘adapt’ to a powerful neighbour like China. See, Ralph Pettman, *Small Power Politics and International Relations in South East Asia* (Sydney: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976), p.58.

has called the UN a 'boon' for states like Bangladesh since it enables them to play a part in world politics out of all proportion to their economic and military strengths.¹³ Bangladesh's high level of engagement with the UN is also reflected in her role as being consistently one of the highest contributors to peace-keeping operations. Apart from keeping her armed forces, an important element her policy-making engaged, contented, and well-resourced, it also makes for an orderly world, in line with the interests of weaker states.¹⁴

The powerful and burgeoning middle class in Bangladesh also contributes to the high-level of external interactions. It is represented in growing numbers in the civil society, the trade and business sector, the professionals and the intelligentsia. It sees itself as part of a horizontal international elite with a wider role to play in the affairs of the world than is dictated by the objective 'power' of their country. It comprises what may be said to be the new *bhadralok* of Bangladesh, akin to the earlier generation of Calcuttans of the same ilk.¹⁵ This crucial segment of the community deals mainly with Europe and the US, and to a certain extent with the Middle East (a major destination of its expatriate workforce, both as labours and professionals), parts of the world with which it has economic, political and intellectual linkages, leading the government in those directions. The media tends to focus itself in line with public interests. In recent times there has been some attention accorded, unlike some other South Asian countries, to a 'Look East' policy (in addition to China, which has always been a major partner) designed to secure investments from Korea and Japan and secure markets for labour in Malaysia and Singapore. But this has not significantly reduced the preponderant west-ward orientation of Bangladesh.

Caution and Circumspection

A natural corollary of these characteristics is caution and circumspection. This is derived from the realisation that Bangladesh and Bangladeshis stand to gain from according maximal satisfaction to the international community, most certainly to its key players. This makes for the avoidance of flashy external behaviour. The policymakers generally see Bangladesh's interests as better served by usually acting as a member of a wider international grouping, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)

¹³ A. Vandenbosch, 'The Small States in International Politics and Organization', *The Journal of Politics*, Vol.26 (1964), p.312.

¹⁴ As many as six and a half decades ago, the fact that weaker states seek greater international order was made by the well-known British political writer, Martin Wight. See, M. Wight, *Power Politics* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1946, Reprinted 1949).

¹⁵ The Bengali term *bhadralok*, meaning 'gentlefolk', denoted a 'Weberian status group' in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Calcutta. They were often criticized for being collaborators of the British Raj. According to J.H. Broomfield, 'they were distinguishable by many aspects of their behaviour, their deportment, their speech and their dress, their style of housing, their eating habits, occupations, their associations, and quite as frequently by their cultural values and their sense of propriety'. See, J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp.5-6.

or the Least Developed Countries (LDCs are states with structural impediments to development, which Bangladesh has served as chair for many years), rather than individually. It helps avoid affronting any major state actor most of whom generally accept such behaviour-pattern as some kind of international 'trade union activity'. At the same time, it satisfied the country's craving from acting from a 'high moral ground', as is evidenced in frequent public statement of leaders in support of global 'principled position'. There is a penchant for playing by the international 'club rules', reflected in the commitment to disarmament and non-proliferation, and to counter-terrorism. As a consequence there has generally been a lower profile on 'high-risk' issues and higher profile on 'low-risk' issues.

Conclusion

This examination has attempted to identify and discern the foundations on which Bangladesh's foreign policy system is based. It is a case study dealing with a single state actor, Bangladesh. Nevertheless, this exercise may also help provide the key to understanding of the general problems and the endeavours to surmount them, of a burgeoning country, which in contrast is a weaker state, locked into a perennial relationship with a far more larger and powerful neighbour by the 'situation of geography'. It has sought to draw some extrapolations on how such a weaker neighbour seeks to manage not just relations with the preeminent regional state-actor, but also those with the rest of the world, in a way, so to derive there-from the best possible benefits and advantages.

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