

The Impact Of Bangladesh`S Foreign Policy On India`s Regional Strategy

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Abstract

This piece of work examines Geopolitical importance of South Asian region and also aimed to analyze the Indian ambition in South Asia and the Struggle for survival among three nuclear giants India China and Pakistan. As such it tries to reveal the circumstances leading to the formation of Bangladesh and the political dynamics between two nations. It tries to give a brief of Bangladesh foreign policy principles and its recent strategic shifting. And also exposing the contradiction between India`s projected image of diplomacy as a cooperative regional leader and its increasing assertive and interventionist foreign policy to achieve dominance in South Asia. Hence this article shows the need for India to maintain cordial relations with the smaller neighboring states to protect its strategic and economic interests to maintain the stable leadership role in South Asia and Global South.

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I. Introduction

The People`s Republic of Bangladesh is a country in South Asia as this region was defined in geographical, ethnic and cultural terms, this region contains a quarter, (25%) of the world`s population. The state of Bangladesh shares land border with India (the seventh largest country by area and the most populous country since 2023) to the North West and East, the Myanmar to the South East and the country has a cost line along the Bay of Bengal to its south. Dacca is the capital and Chittagong is the second largest and the busiest port city of Bangladesh.

Historically the first great indigenous empire to cover this territory was the Mouryan Empire (320-180 BC). Following its decline the area was a tributary state of Gupta Empire (319-540 AD). After that the Harsha and Pala dynasty ruled this region until the Muslim conquests and the Bengal was then incorporated in to Delhi Sultanate (AD 1206-1526). The Mughal Empire conquered Bengal in 1576, and following the decline of Mughal Empire in 1700`s, the region became semi independent state under the Nawabs of Bengal, after came the British rule over Bengal and the entire Sub continent. With the Indian Independence act of British parliament in 1947, the British India was divided as the Union of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. Pakistan consist the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh (the East Pakistan). The western and the eastern wings of the newly formed Pakistan were geographically separated by a distance of 1000 miles, which became the root cause of economic inequality between these two areas.

The Formation of Bangladesh and Political dynamics

In 1954 legislative election of Pakistan the Awami League under Sheik Mujibur Rahman (more secular version of Muslim League) became victorious in East Pakistan. When Pakistan adopted a new constitution, and which introduced in 1962 it replaced the Parliamentary system with Presidential model known as "Basic Democracy". But at the same time in 1962, Dhaka (E.Pakistan) became seat of the national assembly of Pakistan based on Bengali nationalism. In 1970 elections the Bengali nationalist Awami League won 167 out of 169 E. Pakistani seats in the national assembly. Awami League claimed the right to form a government and develop a separate new constitution for E.Pakistan but was strongly opposed by Pakistan Government. To curb the Bengali nationalist movement in E.Pakistan, in March 1971 the Pakistani army under Yahya Khan followed a military operation known as "Operation Search Light" to eliminate all Bengali opposition within one month.

The policy of "Ethnic Cleansing" with systematic purges enraged Bengalis who declared independence from W. Pakistan that culminated in to Bangladeshi liberation war. In which "Mukti Bahini" guerillas (Mukti Fauj) also known as Bangladeshi forces, fought to remove Pakistani forces from E.Pakistan. However the conflict moved in another direction in Bengali`s favor when Pakistan attacked the air bases and radar installations of Indian Air Force at the north western part of India on the evening of 3rd December 1971, which

resulted India's direct military intervention, the Indo- Pakistani war of 1971 which led to the culmination of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation.

After independence Sheik Mujibur Rahman led the country until his assassination in 1975, the power was then transferred to Zia Ur Rahman the military leader who also assassinated by a faction of Bangladesh army in 1981. And after that Hussein Muhammad Ershad served as the president and dictator until he was overthrown by mass uprising in 1990. Followed this there came democratic movement in 1991, for the next three decades Begum Khalida Zia of Bangladesh Nationalist party and Sheik Hasina of Awami League were ruled the country. Hasina was overthrown from power by the student led mass uprising (a pro democracy mass uprising against discrimination) in August 2024. And an Interim government is formed by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, the chief advisor of Bangladesh.

Foreign Policy and India Factor

The geographical strategic position and the socio economic considerations shaped Bangladesh's foreign policy. The first is the keen desire to safeguard the independence and second is based on its economic weakness and the third is the policy of peace and security. In the early stages Bangladesh's foreign policy was based on anti-imperialism, Non-alignment, close relationship with India at International level and secularism. Now it is reshaping to address contemporary global dynamics. As its aims to promote national interest and security, to keep her ideology alive and its scope includes the diplomatic and international relations with its membership in United Nations, NAM and SAARC etc.

As such the four basic principles incorporated within the Bangladesh foreign policy are:

- 1 Friendship to all and malice towards none.
- 2 Respect to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of other states.
- 3 Non intervention in the domestic matters of other states.
- 4 World peace.

Bangladesh started its foreign policy works with India because Bangladesh needs India too. The first thing that ties Bangladesh to India is its immutable geography as it is an India locked country. India helped Bangladesh during the liberation war, and India is the first country to grant recognition to Bangladesh on sixth December 1971. Political economic and cultural relations developed cordially between both countries when the treaty of friendship and cooperation for 25 years signed in March 1972, has been the most important event from political angle. Through these treaty both countries expressed their commitments not to interfere in the internal matters and also the provisions to increase overall economic, scientific, technical, trade and transportation and communication, and also having clauses to solve the bilateral disputes through dialogue. And both the countries signed two other economic agreements and three agreements related to loan also in 1974.

But from 1976 – 1995 Bangladesh India relations have passed through various ups and downs. Because it adopted the foreign policies contrary to Mujib's policies, and an anti Indian stance was obvious.. Even though both the countries come closer through the summits of SAARC but the closeness did not turn in to friendship which presented during the period of Mujib. A new beginning of Bangladesh India relations may be considered in 1996 with the coming of Sheik Hasina's (the daughter of Mujibur Rahman and the leader of Awami League) government in power in Bangladesh, due to the changed world order and arising importance of regional cooperation. The improved relations also got an institutional base when India developed the "Gujral Principle" to improve the relations with neighbors. The formation of the regional group BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand) in June 1997 to increase the economic cooperation. But the visit of Sheik Hasina to India in 2010 is an important one, with the agreement signed in 2010 both countries agreed that they will not allow the territories of each others to foreign terrorist activities, as it is also stressed to call the early meeting of joint river commission and also to seek solution to unsolved issues as per the sense of 1974 land border agreement. . Besides these India granted Rs 4500 crore to Bangladesh as a grant in aid.

To ensure the smooth relationship in future five issues which are to be resolved permanently are, the distribution of river waters, the dispute on enclaves, problem of Chakma refugees, the problem of smuggling, and the problem of illegal citizens. The only solved water dispute between two countries is the Teesta river water sharing. The exchange of enclaves could be solved only after a long period in 2015. Bangladesh depends heavily on India for its supply of food items, and its industry depends for the supply of raw materials from India. As throughout the period of Premiership of Sheik Hasina between 2009 -2024, India and Bangladesh enjoyed the best time in their bilateral relationship.

The sheltering of Sheik Hasina after her resignation also boosted Bangladesh people's anger against India. The present movement for a new Bangladesh harbors strong anti-India and anti-Hindu sentiments that resulting violence against the Hindu minority there, as this is viewed as a major setback for Indian diplomacy. The student led protest which overthrown Sheik Hasina from power in 2024, it is alleged that her rule is more authoritarian, corrupt and this protest is to a more democratic and more economically equal Bangladesh, and

labeled it as the second revolution. The present political changes, as the Yunus interim government states that in 1971 Bangladesh emerged as a new nation with the help of India, and in 2024 it can emerge as a new Bangladesh, and again it will need India`s help.

Strategic Shifting From India`s Influence

Bangladesh`s ties with Pakistan and China witnessed significant improvements. The tension in Bangladesh India relations has been continued to escalate in December 2024 when Bangladesh finally requested to extradite Sheik Hasina to Bangladesh but India did not favor this request. Politically Bangladesh has exhibited a clear trend of de-Indianisation and terminated several agreements signed during Hasina`s administration. And also followed a policy of delaying of India led regional initiatives and attempted to reduce depending on India. India`s implementation of the National register of citizens, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the stringent border migration policies have provoked significant dissatisfaction in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh pursuing independent and multi polar foreign policy which is contrasting with India`s leadership ambitions in the region. While India seek to reinforce its dominance in South Asia through its “Neighborhood first” policy Bangladesh counters this by strengthening economic and military ties with China to safeguard its strategic autonomy. The improved relations with Pakistan and China stems from some key considerations, so this aims to stabilize its external environment for smooth domestic reforms and elections, and to offset the economic losses caused by recent protests and also to respond the geopolitical dynamics in South Asia. This diversified policy of Bangladesh offers China, Pakistan and India an opportunity to reassess the regional order in South Asia and to reshape the geopolitical landscape. As such the effectiveness of Bangladesh`s foreign policy shifting will largely depends on its outcomes of the pending elections in future.

India`s Hegemonic Aspirations and Strategic Missteps

The Bangladesh`s separation from Pakistan in 1971 is often reflected as a strait forward struggle for independence. But the seeds of conflict in East Pakistan were not sown solely by local grievances; rather they were externally manipulated and which was supported by this region`s geographical separation from West Pakistan. India`s military aids to Bengali rebels and the significant role played in the formation of Mukti Bahini converted the political conflicts in to guerilla war. The war ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh; but it was India`s strategic intervention that led the balance of power in favor of Bengali nationalists, as India`s geopolitical interest was fruitful at that time. Though the victory in Bangladesh independence war was with the glorious and valiant fight of the Bangladeshi forces supported by the people of Bangladesh, but India fully usurped the victory as its own and since then India has been claiming that it was India`s victory over Pakistan.

Sheik Mujibur Rahman the first President of Bangladesh was criticized for authoritarian governance, economic mismanagement, corruption and human rights abuses India threw its full support to Mujib. The end of Mujib`s rule in 1975 marked a shift in Bangladesh`s political landscape. But India`s interests were reflected with Hasina`s assumption on power in 1996 also has been seen as a part of India`s ongoing strategy to maintain Bangladesh as a client state. But the present interim government openly declared that they will certainly free the country to bring freedom, democracy and development. As the rejection of Hasina`s government has perceived as a push back of Indian hegemony and as a broader repudiation of India`s strategy to dominate Bangladesh`s political sphere.

As the largest country by its population and size, India wants to play a dominant role in the whole region and considers itself as great power. As such the Indian policy of Non-Alignment based on the panchaseel core principle of Peaceful Co Existence (the term refers to non interference in the domestic matters of the neighbors). The Indian efforts to achieve the objectives of the new world order, in which all the new states would develop together was to be the purpose of Indian foreign policy.

In 1972 India imposed on the subsequent Government of Bangladesh a 25 year India Bangladesh treaty in the name of friendship, cooperation and peace and to maintain strong bilateral relations. When Mujib entered in to the treaty there was considerable opposition from both military and people. But the replay to the opposition parties was severe repression backed by India. As and when Hasina`s Awami League came into power, has been signed large number of treaties, memorandums with India without informing the parliament and the people.

The recent crisis in Bangladesh exposed the limits of India`s regional power. Despite New Delhi`s strong support for Sheik Hasina, all efforts were failed and she was ultimately forced to step down. This episode underscores a key limitation of India`s regional strategy. As India has to uphold the sovereignty of all states in this region to move South Asia towards to a more stable and secured future. There is no doubt that both Pakistan and China will see the political change in Bangladesh as an opportunity to challenge India`s interests in Indian ocean region

Nehruvian Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) was the corner stone of India`s cold war identity .So there was a strategic shift from Non-Alignment leaves India`s position in an increasingly polarized world

unclear. Indian Prime minister Modi`s personalized summit level diplomacy once effected as key strength has also faced limitations. India`s expanded engagements towards the east and its emphasis on “Neighbor- hood first” policy has been perceived as a muscularity that alienates the neighbors. The smaller neighboring states desiring a strategic autonomy in their relationships in South Asia.

And the rise of China as a powerful player in this region with their “Belt and road initiative”, and the financial capabilities and commitments in this region has made smaller states adept at leveraging their relationships with both India and China to pursue their interests. This geopolitical shifting of relations in South Asia revels that if India does not take proper initiative measures there will be a good chance that will lock India with an unfriendly South Asia. So India should pose as reliable and constructive partner for its neighbors rather than a hegemonic power.

The present Indian Government since 2014 treated the whole of South Asia as united India or “Akhand Bharat” (undivided India). India`s strong influence is crucial for India`s global power ambition as the leader of Global South as India finds itself at cross roads in South Asia. The existing key challenge which India is facing in South Asian region is its territorial disputes; such as the long standing conflict over Kashmir between India and Pakistan, this even created a blocking of regional economic integration under SAARC also. India`s journey to regional leadership to be full of strategic missteps, and a perpetual inability to gain the confidence of its neighbors in South Asia.

II. Conclusion

In the existing geopolitical situation India is working in a competitive mood, for survival as the leader in South Asia. The Sovereignty and internal dynamics of its neighbors such as the political changes in Bangladesh and its strategic policy shifting reveled that India`s aggressive and proactive regional policies has suffered severe setback and proved the failure of entire Indian approach towards its smaller neighbors. Hence the relationship between India and Bangladesh as two key players in this region have a strategic impact on India`s stable position in South Asia. As to maintain a warm relationship with other smaller neighboring nations India`s main challenge lies in maintaining cordial relations between the ruling elites and the broader populations of the neighboring countries.

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