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Bangladesh's Hedging Foreign Relations: The Dilemmas of a Weak State

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Abstract. The principle of non-alignment has been a cornerstone of Bangladesh's foreign policy since its inception, holding significant relevance within both regional and global political contexts. But over time, local and external factors have caused the nation to stray from its founding ideals.

The author attempts to explore Bangladesh's foreign relations choices, examining its historical context and response to major power dynamics in the region. The paper seeks to unravel how Bangladesh has been a mecca of hegemonic power. By reviewing literature on geopolitics, Bangladesh's foreign relations, and hegemonic powers, as well as in-depth expert interviews and scrutiny of media reports, articles, and dialogue, this study delves into the key powers' dilemmas towards Bangladesh amidst its domestic upheaval.

Three key explanatory variables emerge: first, its strategic geographic location and geopolitical significance – the interests of major powers; second, its economic potential and security dynamics; and finally, its domestic “winners take all” politics and the involvement of external powers.

This study emphasizes that Bangladesh's autonomy is fundamentally dependent on the goodwill of its political elites and highlights that failures in managing hedging relationships with each dominant power could lead to falling into the trap of geopolitics – financial crises and security risks.

Keywords: Bangladesh, dilemmas, foreign relations, hedging, major powers, weak state

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INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes interconnected, geopolitical issues are increasingly complex, and bilateral as well as multilateral relations among states are being tightened. We see huge shifting trends and dynamics in regional and international contexts, especially in the region of South Asia [25], and therefore, Bangladesh faces a challenging era! Its inception amidst the Cold War era has drawn greater attention from the major powers towards the country [22]. From a number of perspectives, the foreign policy approaches of Bangladesh have always been under numerous pressures [4]. As Bangladesh is situated in the heart of South and South-East Asia, several regional powers – India and China – and international ones – the US and Russia – have admitted the country's strategic significance [5; 8; 13], resulting in making it the centre of their playground.

It has been observed that Bangladesh's foreign policy has experienced a dramatic shift from diplomatic recognition and economic diplomacy to a balancing approach (hedging) towards the region and the world, considering its geographical location, its economic prospects, geopolitics, and regional political dynamics [3]. The major powers' roles in the last few years in Bangladesh's internal and external affairs, particularly in politics and economy, has displayed their heightened interest in the country, where their own benefits remain paramount. The recent 12th election of Bangladesh in January 2024 has raised ample queries about whether the country can maintain its hedging international relations with each major power or has already fallen into a trap of geopolitics.

Through an extensive review of recent academic literature, newspaper articles, in-depth interviews, and fieldwork, this paper delves into the major powers' dilemmas towards Bangladesh, resulting in the possibility of deviating from its hedging foreign relations. As an argument, this study first addresses Bangladesh's foreign policy principles and approaches, and then it explores the country's strategic significance to major powers by illustrating its geographical and growing complex geopolitical realities, its economic potential to dominant powers, and its democratic backwardness – major sources of external power to influence Bangladeshi affairs.

BANGLADESH FOREIGN RELATIONS AND MAJOR POWERS

Bangladesh's foreign policy: basic principles and doctrine

The basis of Bangladesh's foreign policy theoretically lays down in articles 25(1) and (2), 63 and 145A of its Constitution.

Article 25(1): "The state shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes, and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter, and on the basis of those principles shall:

- (a) Strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament;
- (b) Uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; and
- (c) Support oppressed people throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism".

Article 25(2): "The state shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity".

Article 63: "War shall not be declared and republic shall not participate in any war except the assent of parliament".

Article 145A: "All treaties with foreign countries shall be submitted to the President, who shall cause them to be laid before Parliament unless the President considers it to be against national interest so to do".

Conceptually, the principles contained in Article 25(1) of Bangladesh's constitution are considered the foundation of the country's foreign policy approach, which conforms in essence to the UN Charter and is quite similar to many small and big nations.

After its independence in 1971, the first president of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in a conference in London, declared: "We want friendship with all and malice towards none". After that, it (Mujib's speech) has been an undeclared and non-written constitutional doctrine up to date in the context of the foreign policy of Bangladesh. Similarly, in the United Nations on September 17, 1974, the foreign minister, Dr. Kamal Hossain, reiterated that the newly independent Bangladesh was interested in following a non-aligned foreign policy for the betterment of the country. Since then, each successive government of Bangladesh has professed unequivocally the same doctrine and theme, making non-alignment the very foundation of its international relations.

Although theoretically and rhetorically every government stated their neutral position in making external relations, in practice, each regime somehow made themselves closer to India (and Russia) or the USA (and its allies). Therefore, Bangladesh diverts itself repeatedly from its 'non-alignment' foreign policy approach.

Geopolitically, "friendship to all and malice towards none" and "non-alignment" approaches to which Bangladesh is steadfast still remain the cornerstone of its foreign policy [26]. During and immediately after the Cold War period, the interests of global superpowers in Bangladesh, both militarily and economically, were not considered as important as they are today. This is because of the very complex situation in recent years in terms of the power shift from the West to the East and other issues, such as trade and security.

Bangladesh non-alignment foreign policy and its objectives

An analysis of Bangladesh's non-alignment foreign policy generally highlights certain objectives that have governed its regional and extra-regional conducts since gaining independence. Up to date, Bangladesh has experienced changes in government, including military and democratically elected regimes, leading to periods of instability, violence, and foreign influences both covertly and overtly [1]. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's foreign policy has maintained consistent features over the years.

The first consistent feature of Bangladesh's foreign policy is to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, a fundamental requirement for all nations regardless of their size, strength, or resources. Despite being small in size, weak in military power, and reliant on foreign aid, loans and investments, Bangladesh's foreign policy considerations are primarily regional, placing it in the category of a small power in international rankings.

Therefore, a substantial focus of Bangladesh's foreign policy is centred on fundamental goals, including upholding national sovereignty and equality, and abstaining from involvement in the internal matters of other countries. Bangladesh has a history of not threatening the sovereignty of any nation, despite experiencing minor border clashes with India and Myanmar, where Bangladesh's border guards have responded to violence initiated by others. Although there have been no major incidents at the Indian border in recent years, the border with Myanmar is facing significant threats due to the forced migration of Rohingya people from Rakhine province to Bangladesh [27]. This has led to a special focus on safeguarding its borders for territorial integrity.

The influx of Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh has posed a substantial burden and security threat to the country. Despite concerted efforts to address these challenges through diplomatic channels and engagement with the *International Criminal Court* (ICC), Bangladesh continues to face obstacles in repatriating the Rohingya population due to the reluctance of regional and global powers to effectively resolve the issue [21].

Another key foreign policy objective of Bangladesh is to seek regional stability and good neighbourly relations with each neighbouring state. South Asia has long been marred by significant disparities, inequalities, conflicts, and limited political and economic cooperation, compounded by weak regional institutions [15].

Given Bangladesh's strategic geographical location, it is imperative for the region to maintain stability and foster robust regional cooperation. Failure to do so could leave the country vulnerable to various security threats. Notably, long standing water sharing disputes and incidents of cross-border violence have remained crucial issues in the relationship between Bangladesh and India.

Moreover, international politics in South Asia plays vital roles for years in shaping regional political dynamics in South Asia that underscores the critical need for global peace and stability to advance the interests of the region, particularly in ensuring the security of smaller and less powerful states like Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's foreign policy is geared towards advancing global stability and peace, taking into account its strategic position in the region and on the global stage. This is particularly evident due to its access to the Bay of Bengal, which hosts two crucial ports essential for both regional and international trade and commerce [14].

In recent years, it has become apparent that key powers are vying to strengthen their ties with Dhaka. The country's economy is closely intertwined with both regional powers like India and China, as well as global powers such as the US and the EU. Consequently, Bangladesh has no choice but to actively promote regional and global peace and stability in order to safeguard its economic and security interests.

According to a *Statista* report for 2024, Bangladesh (155.38 mln), being the third largest Muslim-populated country (after Indonesia – 241.52 mln) and Pakistan – 225.52 mln), is committed to cultivating strong relationships with other Islamic nations. This stands as a fundamental foreign policy objective for Dhaka, rooted in shared history and a dedication to common cultural and religious values.

The country holds a prominent position within the *Organisation of Islamic Cooperation* (OIC), the second largest intergovernmental organisation after the UN, comprising 57 member nations. Strengthening ties with Muslim nations is vital for Bangladesh due to its substantial surplus of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labour forces. Many Middle Eastern and other Muslim countries require inexpensive labour for their industrial sectors and household activities.

To address their labour shortages, Bangladesh has entered into various contracts with individual companies and governments, resulting in a significant number of workers heading to these countries annually. The contributions of migrant workers in bolstering both the micro and macro economy of Bangladesh are substantial, with a significant portion of foreign reserves being generated from the remittances sent by these workers.

Bangladesh, like many developing nations, is keen on establishing a New International Economic Order and seeks closer cooperation with all industrialised countries, including developing ones [24]. While an increasing number of industrialised countries have been expressing active interest in participating in various investment projects across the country, Dhaka sees the potential for initiating a new international economic order where all nations can work together for the global economic well-being. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is seen as an emerging new international economic order, and Bangladesh is positioning itself to cooperate with other states to facilitate international trade and commerce. Similarly, Bangladesh is also engaging with other regional financial associations, such as BIMSTEC and the Bangladesh–India–Nepal corridor. The primary objective of these associations is to connect the region and the world in order to enhance economic cooperation among each other.

Transitions and phases of Bangladesh foreign policy

Bangladesh's foreign policy has undergone a series of transitions and phases since its emergence as an independent state.

The initial phase, often described as the “diplomacy of recognition,” saw Bangladesh grappling with the challenge of obtaining recognition and establishing relations with nations that had supported Pakistan during the liberation war, including the United States and various Muslim countries.

Additionally, Bangladesh's emergence during the Cold War era complicated its recognition by international bodies due to the polarised world dynamics. During the liberation war, Bangladesh received support from India, the former Soviet Union, and some East European countries, while the US, China, and many Arab countries were in favour of Pakistan.

However, as a new country with limited resources and a struggling economy, Bangladesh had to adjust its position and foreign policy, forging close relations with Western and Arab countries despite their initial opposition to Bangladesh's independence. Furthermore, Bangladesh initiated small-scale trade relationships with China, which encouraged business elites and intellectuals to build connections with respected bodies in those countries, including the United States.

Ultimately, Bangladesh gained recognition from the US in 1972, which facilitated support from many other countries worldwide. Pakistan's recognition came before the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference in Lahore, Pakistan in 1974. With recognition from Pakistan and key Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh successfully passed its first phase of foreign policy.

The second phase of Bangladesh foreign policy commenced immediately after Pakistan's recognition known as “Economic diplomacy”.

As a nation devastated by war, Bangladesh required substantial foreign aid to rebuild its infrastructure and foster economic development. Given this need, Dhaka had to seek financial support from Western countries, particularly the US. After a change in government in 1975, the new administration prioritised economic diplomacy with the West, leading to strengthening bilateral relationships and increased exports of garment products to Western markets. The forces of globalisation, open market economies, and the search for new markets for Bangladeshi products further aligned the country with Western economies and businesses. Consequently, Bangladesh sought to reduce its economic dependency on India and the Soviet Union, as it was perceived that they did not provide the expected level of financial support. However, regional giant India and global power Russia were not happy with this shift, as they were concerned that Bangladesh might become financially and security-wise dependent on the US and its allies.

The third and current phase of Bangladesh's foreign policy is featured as “hedging diplomacy”, reflecting its focus on maintaining a balanced approach to regional and global superpowers in order to safeguard its national sovereignty, territorial integrity, regional cooperation, stability, international trade, access to global markets, and inflow of foreign aid and investment.

While challenging, Dhaka has been somewhat successful in conveying to these powers that, as a smaller and weaker state locked by India, it does not seek to engage in regional or global conflicts. Instead, Bangladesh prioritises regional integration and economic cooperation, particularly with extra-regional countries, notably Western nations. The country's economic ties with Asian countries, aside from a few such as India, China, and Japan, remain minimal, with concerns over significant trade deficits with China and India in recent years.

Additionally, Bangladesh's bilateral trade with Russia has seen significant growth in recent years, with Moscow involved in various projects within the country, including the construction of a \$13.34 bln nuclear power plant in Rooppur, Pabna district, largely funded by the Russian government. Bangladesh boasts a vibrant export sector dominated by ready-made garments, which account for over 80% of the country's total exports. According to *BACI* and *Bangladesh Export-Import Data 2022*, in the last 26 years, Bangladesh's exports to Russia have grown at an annualised rate of 15.6%, from \$29.3 mln in 1995 to \$1.27 bln in 2021, while imports from Moscow increased from \$43.1 mln to \$1.72 bln.

Moreover, Moscow has opened a new skilled manpower market for Bangladesh as a new development, and the first batch left for Russia to work in the shipbuilding and construction industries in June 2023 [12]. While labour market issues have been a top priority for discussion among officials of both countries, a significant number of businessmen have recently visited Moscow and other major Russian cities to explore greater market access between the friendly nations.

However, Bangladesh's refusal to allow a Russian ship bearing parts for the nuclear power plant, which was scheduled to dock at the port of Mongla on December 24, 2022 [9], and subsequently Dhaka's announcement of banning 69 additional Russian commercial vessels from entering Bangladesh, prompted by objections and sanctions from the United States in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, led to a temporary chill in relations between Bangladesh and Russia [17].

BANGLADESH: IN MAJOR POWERS' DILEMMAS

Bangladesh's strategic significance and major powers

Before delving into the major powers' dilemmas towards Bangladesh, it is important to understand why and how the country has become significant to hegemonic powers, and how these powers work to advance their own interests. Additionally, it is crucial to examine how Bangladesh is on the verge of being ensnared in a geopolitical trap in the region by deviating from its hedging foreign relations stance.

The increasing significance of Bangladesh to major powers can be attributed to several principal reasons, including power competition in the Bay of Bengal region, connectivity, security, and trade and commerce. During the Cold War era, Bangladesh's importance to bipolar powers was not as significant as it is today.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States used to view South Asia through the lens of India and Pakistan, according to Towhid Hossain, a former foreign secretary of Bangladesh and former Bangladesh ambassador to the United States, Humayun Kabir. However, the Biden administration has chosen to disentangle India from its relations with the five other South Asian countries in order to deepen US relationships with them, as stated by Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, US deputy assistant secretary of state overseeing South and Central Asia [18]. This signifies that the US will now view Bangladesh through its own perspective rather than through India's.

The US has broader interests in the South Asia region, aiming to ensure a secure trade route in the sea. The Biden administration has sought to strengthen its relationship with Bangladesh, partly to reduce the country's dependence on Chinese economic support [16]. Furthermore, the US considers the country's geographical location, maritime access, economic prospects, and core democratic values strategically important for enhancing its influence in the South Asia region. Moreover, the economic relationship between the two countries, people-to-people contact, and remittances from the US necessitate maintaining a robust relationship.

Prior to Washington's decision not to view the region through New Delhi's lens, India had greater dominance over the region (and still does). As Bangladesh is surrounded by India on every side except the Bay of Bengal, and India's northern part is separated from the mainland by only a few kilometres due to being locked by Bangladesh, the regional giant believes that Bangladesh should fall under its own umbrella. Consequently, India's economic and security interests in Bangladesh are much greater than those of other powers, and New Delhi does not want to diminish its influence in the country.

On the other hand, China needs to secure its trade routes throughout the world through the region and strengthen its hegemony in the region [2]. To achieve this, it aims to undermine India and the USA's dominance in the region – a goal that it has already largely accomplished. China has come to the region with a master plan called “connectivity investment” through the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), with most Asian states being members of this comprehensive project, including all small states (except Bhutan) in South Asia – the intersection point of the project where the continental “Belt” meets the maritime “Road”, connecting three continents, Europe, Africa, and Asia through land and the Indian Ocean.

China's increasing influence in the South Asia region poses a challenge to the security architecture dominated by India, as it utilises easy cash and attractive investment opportunities to sway smaller nations towards China. Moreover, China has adopted tailored approaches for individual countries in South Asia, with Bangladesh being a focal point in Chinese regional foreign policies, including the major initiative of the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) [6].

In contrast, Russia, which directly supported and contributed to Bangladesh's liberation war, has not held as strong a position as other powers, although in recent years Moscow has managed to establish a moderate bilateral relationship with Dhaka through various projects, such as the Ruppur Nuclear Power Plant. Besides, Moscow is one of the suppliers of military weapons and equipment to Bangladesh.

As a result, each power is striving to increase its influence in the country and its affairs. One of the most straightforward methods has been to exert influence on domestic politics through various means, and the shortcomings of political elites have paved the way for external powers to become involved in the country's affairs.

Political turbulence and foreign powers

Bangladesh's inability to address its internal issues, particularly the political crisis, has provided foreign powers with an opportunity to exploit the situation for their own gain. Over the past decade and a half, Bangladeshi politics has experienced a significant transformation, witnessing the erosion of democracy and a weakening of social cohesion. The involvement of foreign powers in Bangladesh's parliamentary election stems from the adversarial relationships between major political parties, particularly the *Bangladesh Awami League* (BAL) led by Sheikh Hasina and the *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* (BNP) led by Begum Khaledazia. These parties operate under a "winner takes all" mentality, driven by a fear of losing power due to previous corrupt activities and mistreatment of the opposition.

Both parties and their allies have accused foreign powers of exerting significant influence on Bangladesh's political landscape. Before the elections, Sheikh Hasina publicly accused the United States of attempting to overthrow her government, while BNP leaders and their allies claimed that India, China, and Russia were directly supporting the Hasina government through a disputed election [10; 11]. The post-election period revealed a competition among these three powers to send congratulatory messages and meet with Sheikh Hasina. Conversely, Western powers, particularly the US and the UK, declared the election as neither free nor fair [7]. Therefore, the actions of these powers will undoubtedly shape the country's future and influence its domestic politics, international relations, and regional political dynamics [20].

The reactions from numerous national and international bodies suggest that the establishment of one-party or one-person (Sheikh Hasina) rule in Bangladesh is being perceived [20]. By conducting such elections, it effectively undermines the electoral system, the Election Commission as an institution, and democracy as an ideology [16].

Has Bangladesh fallen into the trap of geopolitics?

To address this question, we must observe the responses of major powers, particularly those from the West, in the upcoming days. Notably, Bangladesh has seen frequent visits from officials and leaders of major powers in recent years. The competition among these powers' visits underscores the significance of the country in the region. Experts assert that each power has been attempting to influence or pressure the country to align with a single power.

The United States aims to enhance its partnership with Bangladesh for its own interests and vision – a secure and free Indo-Pacific region, preventing any single power from establishing sole dominance in the area. Additionally, the US is a major destination for Bangladeshi ready-made garments and has had security-related cooperation with Bangladesh for years. Following the 12th election, Washington is faced with a dilemma: whether to reevaluate its relationship with Dhaka and act accordingly, or maintain the status quo. Continuing to work with Bangladesh as before would be seen as a departure from its policy of promoting democracy and human rights. Therefore, if the US and its Western allies employ covert or overt measures, it could have serious adverse effects on Bangladesh's economy.

Moreover, the support given to the ruling regime by India, China, and Russia does not guarantee that Bangladesh's relationships with these countries will remain unchanged, according to Ali Riaz, distinguished Professor at the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois University, USA. Competition between these nations, especially China and India, will intensify as they seek to expand their spheres of influence. This is not a matter for the distant future but rather a concern for the near term. Due to the ongoing economic crisis, Bangladesh will need to rely more on external support. This will bring Bangladesh and China closer, but the extent of this closeness that is acceptable for India is a question for the future. Therefore, whether Western countries "act" or not, the country will continue to be a theatre for the Great Game [23].

From a geopolitical perspective, each dominant power must prioritise its own interests. The upcoming policies and actions of the current government will reveal whether it will prioritise its national interests or feel

compelled to align with the interests of major powers as a result of their support for the regime. According to Anu Muhammad: “*The current government is unlikely to leave any of these countries’ agendas unfulfilled – except for the democratic and human rights agenda. Consequently, Bangladesh may find itself compelled to meet these countries’ demands, making sacrifices in the process*” [19].

In the light of above discussions, several challenges may emerge in near future for Bangladesh:

- Can Bangladesh restore its status of non-alignment and maintain balanced relations with all major powers?
- If Western powers impose restrictions on Bangladesh, particularly on goods and services, what alternatives does the country have to sustain its growing economy in world markets?
- There is a growing discussion among political scientists and international relations experts that Bangladesh may struggle to balance its relations with India, China, and Russia following the 12th election due to the country’s ongoing financial needs and crises. What potential challenges could arise from the Indian side if Beijing’s engagement with Dhaka becomes more proactive due to its broader investments across the country and possible demands?

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh’s non-alignment approach and hedging foreign relations are facing potential threats due to its struggles in handling domestic political turmoil and the division of external powers. It is noteworthy that both India and the US are vying for Bangladesh’s support, while China (and Russia) also have interests in the country. The current regime is unlikely to disregard China, but it must navigate this delicate balance considering the influence of major powers. Additionally, Bangladesh heavily relies on the US and the EU as key destinations for exports and a source of remittances. Realising that nations cannot pick their neighbours and must coexist with them – ideally in peace – is crucial.

From both geopolitical and economic perspectives, Bangladesh’s role in regional and international politics and economy cannot be underestimated. Therefore, a primary concern of Bangladesh’s foreign policy should be to maximise the advantages of available opportunities.

In summary, Bangladesh must navigate the complex realities it faces on the international and internal fronts. First, political and social elites must find a path to resolve domestic political turbulence and promote social cohesion. Second, Dhaka needs to create leverage not only to address its challenges but also to safeguard its overall interests. Lastly, special attention must be paid to regional and international political dynamics, and appropriate actions must be taken for the betterment of the country and its citizens.

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