



# Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: From Chrysalis of a State to an Emerging Middle Power

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## Abstract

This article explores Bangladesh's foreign policy overtures as the country celebrates fifty years of its sovereign existence. In fifty years, Bangladesh has seen a complete make-over in terms of emerging as a country with rightful assertiveness. Through the test of time, the country has been able to make the best use of the resources at its disposal and turn itself into an agenda-setter in its own affairs. This article highlights Bangladesh's economic stability, its foreign policy assertiveness, port diplomacy, contribution to the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs), Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and its humanitarian approach to the Rohingyas, among others. There may be challenges on the way to Bangladesh's future journey. However,

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with cautionary steps, it is also time that Bangladesh creates a positive identity in the international level.

Bangladesh, the youngest South Asian country, has traversed through a long journey to have completed its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a sovereign nation. A country that had started with no foreign currency reserve, now is considered as a saviour for others—in this case, for its South Asian neighbour, Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> Often negatively portrayed in the international media due to political turmoil, and also being a disaster-prone country—Bangladesh is still struggling to graduate itself from being boxed as a ‘small’ state. The scenario, however, is in swift transition. In its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a number of foreign policy observers has taken a keen interest in the changes that have taken place slowly but surely. Bangladesh has gained not only stability in terms of its political and economic bases, but has also turned itself as a country whose policies are based on pragmatic choices. Bangladesh no longer relies on foreign aid rather its strong economic condition has provided an opportunity to be assertive in its foreign policy endeavours and gradually turn itself into ‘a country that can say no’. In other words, we can trace the rise of an ‘assertive’ Bangladesh that is successfully setting the agenda of international politics when it collides its own national interest.

In this article, I outline the bases that led to the emergence of an assertive Bangladesh. One can argue that internal stability and economic strength are what makes a country bold in international politics. The obvious example in today’s world would be the rise of China. However, there are examples where a country with unmatched hard power—a combination of military and economic capabilities—has not been able to assert itself in international politics. The United State (US) can be cited as such an example. During 1976 to 1980 it had been less assertive in international politics and was rather inward-looking due to its domestic political problems.<sup>2</sup> A country’s overall national power, thus, is a reflection of its political

leadership and harnessing the resources that are at its disposal at the right juncture of history. Bangladesh, since its birth, has been pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy due to which its rise has been steady, and today it is in a stage of status-transformation.

This paper argues that the rise of Bangladesh has often gone unnoticed or been challenged because it has not followed any typical western model to graduate itself from being a ‘foreign aid recipient’ to an assertive state. In doing so, the first two sections highlight the internal and external dynamics that has created a strong Bangladesh. The next section elaborates how ‘the rise of a Bangladesh that can say no’ is gradually happening. It traces and analyses Bangladesh’s graduation to an ‘emerging middle power’ in the contemporary context.<sup>3</sup> The fourth section, however, demonstrates that the rise of a confident Bangladesh is not risk-free in an international environment which is not only witnessing the growing rise of the East in general but also a tumultuous arms race coming to the Indo-Pacific region. The concluding section summarises how chrysalis of a state, Bangladesh, is now being considered as an ‘emerging middle power’.

### **Bangladesh’s Economic Maturity: I Did It My Way**

Bangladesh started its journey as an independent and sovereign country with zero foreign reserve. Its sustainability as an independent country was questioned by many at the beginning. Bangladesh has successfully averted any major economic crisis through sustained and long-term economic policies throughout 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The establishment of ready-made garments (RMGs) industries and exporting of manpower provided the strength for Bangladesh’s economic miracle. The economic policy pursued led to Bangladesh’s graduation from the category of a ‘Least Developed Country’ in 2018 based on three criteria—per capita income, human assets index and economic and environmental vulnerability index.<sup>4</sup> Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh shall graduate to the status of a developing country in 2026 with five years of transition period,<sup>5</sup>

which is a testament to ‘acquiring a seal of global approval regarding its development achievements.’<sup>6</sup> The country that started with foreign aid for its recovery and reconstruction has emerged as one of the fastest economies of the world within the span of 50 years.<sup>7</sup> Bangladesh’s economic success has led scholars to brand it as a ‘Paradox of Bangladesh’ ‘Bangladesh Miracle’ or a ‘Bangladesh Surprise’.<sup>8</sup>

Three factors—the export of ready-made garments products, remittance earning and foreign direct investments (FDIs)—have enabled Bangladesh to withstand the shocks of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Bangladesh has been able to ensure steady food supply during the Covid pandemic to its 170 million people as well as to keep the economy moving.<sup>10</sup> From being a ‘food - deficient’ country, Bangladesh has not only emerged as a ‘food-sufficient’ country but is also on its way to export its agriculture-based products. With the onset of the pandemic, Bangladesh quickly joined the ranks of producing quality personal protective equipment (PPE) in 2020 and exported worldwide, including to the US.<sup>11</sup> No wonder, Bangladesh has been predicted as a ‘rising manufacturing power’ in 2019, which is currently the second largest RMG exporter after China.<sup>12</sup> Bangladesh’s capacity to cope with the changing need in the RMG manufacturing sector is a testament to this. On top of this, Bangladesh has provided Covid aid to its neighbour India and emerged as a lender for the first time in history by providing economic assistance to Sri Lanka in 2021.<sup>13</sup>

The pharmaceutical industry in Bangladesh has been showing a promising future for quite some time and is yet another example of a long-term diversification of the economic sector. With the pandemic setting in, Bangladeshi pharmaceutical company Beximco was the first to supply Remdesivir, one of the essential drugs for treating Covid-19 patients, in the US and gradually saw a rise in its profit in 2021.<sup>14</sup> As Bangladesh did not receive the expected amount of vaccine from the Serum Institute of India,<sup>15</sup> it explored other sources and later on signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China to produce vaccines locally.<sup>16</sup> Bangladesh stands with \$46 billion of foreign

exchange reserve in September 2021. Bangladesh is also working on creating a knowledge-based economy and eyes to establish itself as the IT hub of South Asia in an era of Fourth Industrial Revolution. It is already the second largest online labour supplier in the world with 16 per cent share of the global workforce and internally, the reflection of this was seen during the pandemic in a surge of online shopping and creation of supply chains through digital platforms.<sup>17</sup> Bangladesh's economic stability has been under much scrutiny and has earned it the title of a 'True Asian Tiger'.<sup>18</sup> In this context, it has been pointed out that Bangladesh did not follow a standard path to economic development. This has generally been considered as 'atypical' and therefore, a surprise. Bangladesh's success lies in following an indigenous path, avoiding 'one size fits all' approach and as a Bangladeshi economist has pointed out that it resembles Frank Sinatra's immortal song "I did it my way."<sup>19</sup>

### **Bangladesh: A Country with Foreign Policy Maturity**

Bangladesh as an independent country experienced its first challenge in international politics in terms of its identity and exercising its external sovereignty—that is gaining recognition as a legitimate member of the international community. It received its one of the first diplomatic recognitions from India on 8 December 1971. Gaining recognition of majority of countries, and especially of those who could assist in rebuilding the war-ravaged country became the primary challenge for Bangladesh, especially as China exercised its veto power to block Bangladesh's admission to the United Nations (UN). While Bangladesh-China informal diplomacy continued, so did Bangladesh's endeavour to redefine its identity and send the message around the world that Bangladesh stands as an example of 'Friendship to all, malice towards none.' This foundation of Bangladesh's foreign policy, laid out by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was soon reflected in its unconditional support to national struggles of people around in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Bangladesh's ideological position was communicated to the rest of the world which paved the way for it to fight against the politics of

misrecognition and eventually it was a full member of the UN. The foreign policy trajectory, goals, objectives and accomplishments, which led to the emergence of an assertive Bangladesh, can be categorised in the following manner.

### ***Development Diplomacy***

As stated in the earlier section, economic rebuilding stood as one of the top priorities for the new-born country. While initially Bangladesh was dependent on foreign aid, gradually manpower export and a thriving RMG sector changed Bangladesh's economic scenario. Bangladesh followed a distinct path of development diplomacy instead of limiting itself within the realm of economic diplomacy only.<sup>20</sup> While economic diplomacy can be referred to as "diplomacy [that] tends to be limited to the use of traditional diplomatic tools to achieve the economic goals of the state",<sup>21</sup> it is rather an umbrella term to include any area of economic relationship and engagements with international actors such as a state actor or an inter-governmental actor such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the likes. For Bangladesh, it not only undertook a comprehensive analysis of international demand and supply chain and became a part of it using its own resources, but also later on targeted its economic relations keeping in mind its particular development goals and objectives. One may find it difficult to differentiate and articulate between development diplomacy and economic diplomacy. The development diplomacy in Bangladesh's gears towards receiving foreign aid and identifies the areas of its strength to attract FDIs in its own capacity. Bangladesh has fared well by applying economic calculations in the manner where after securing its economic base through pursuing right strategies throughout the first three decades of its existence. Bangladesh is now seen as one of the key destinations of FDIs in the South Asian region where its locational reality at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal works as an easy access to the major sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) and thus provides an additional impetus. A number of Gulf countries are keen to make major investment in Bangladesh. In

this context, the discussions on investment possibilities of Saudi Arabia and Qatar are worth mentioning. As part of its 'Look East' policy, Saudi Arabia has created a \$250 billion fund, of which it is considering to invest \$25-\$30 billion in Bangladesh alone.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Qatar is also planning to invest in Bangladesh's special economic zones (SEZ).

China and Japan are two other big economies who are keen to become Bangladesh's development partner. The global rivalry of China and Japan has rather brought boon to many other countries including Bangladesh. Bangladesh has acquired such a strategic appeal that China's investment in Bangladesh in some key infrastructural projects has drawn attention worldwide, not only to Japan. As a result of this, Japan has moved forward with its own FDI proposals for Bangladesh. In fact, in the pre-pandemic period, a survey conducted in Japan found that Bangladesh was one of the top destinations for Japanese businesses to invest in, a trend that continued when Japanese investment started to shift from China during the period of pandemic.<sup>23</sup> As China and Bangladesh are planning to build sister cities between themselves, Japan has come up with its connectivity plans for Southeast and South Asia where Myanmar, Bangladesh and India shall be connected through physical infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> Bangladesh's cogent calculations of keeping itself distanced from strategic rivalry of other countries, and welcoming all who came forward with investment opportunities that matched with its development goals are the crux of its development diplomacy. Through its development diplomacy, Bangladesh has been able to create an assertive voice of its own. As Sri Lanka's economy falters, there are reasons for Bangladesh to learn from this experience so that similar crisis does not get repeated here. This actually works as a cautionary tale for Bangladesh to pay more attention to the areas that might lead to such disaster and how to avert such a future.

### ***The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh's Port Diplomacy***

Bangladesh's access to the Bay of Bengal remained hindered for the most part of its independent existence due to its particular geographical position. Often identified as an India-locked country due to the overwhelming presence of India on its three sides,<sup>25</sup> sharing the fifth largest land border with India and the lack of unhindered access to the Bay, it took a long time for Bangladesh to gain its rightful access. In 2013 and 2014, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) issued verdicts recognising Bangladesh's right to the Bay of Bengal vis-à-vis Myanmar and India. The then Foreign Minister of Bangladesh stated,

[T]hrough this verdict, Bangladesh could finally establish its sovereign rights on more than 118,813 sq kms of territorial sea, 200 nautical miles (NM) of exclusive economic zone and all kinds of animal and non-animal resources under the continental shelf up to 354 NM from the Chittagong coast.<sup>26</sup>

The verdict created a rightful euphoria over developing and harnessing sea resources for Bangladesh, coastal region's development, and developing a blue ocean policy for the country.<sup>27</sup> The gaining of a large sea-territory has led the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to adopt a sea-based approach in redefining Bangladesh's neighbourhood where the Bay of Bengal is widely attributed as Bangladesh's third neighbour. This location enhanced the geopolitical significance of Bangladesh to the rest of the world,<sup>28</sup> which coincided with the rise of China as well as the easternisation of the world.

One of the strategic buzzwords of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the Indo-Pacific, which coincides with the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) declared by Chinese President Xi Jinping's in 2013. As the world continues to shift its gaze towards the East, scholars and policymakers alike drew attention to the Indian Ocean as the strategic centre of gravity and its connection with the Pacific Ocean—home to world's some of the significant SLOCs.<sup>29</sup> Long forgotten geopolitical space of Indo-Pacific, thus, re-emerged as



a new strategic theatre of competition where countries from Asia, Europe and the North America find their interests converging. South Asia also did not escape international attention in this context. India is a part of two significant cooperative frameworks—the Brazil, Russia, Indian, China and South Africa (BRICS) and the Quadrilateral Security Alliance or Quad. China's presence in South Asia and especially in the Bay of Bengal has never come under such examination as it is being in the contemporary international analyses.<sup>30</sup> Great powers' activities and race to have Bangladesh on their side since 2013 onward is well-documented in a number of studies done on Bangladesh's geopolitical appeal.<sup>31</sup> With the rise of the concept of Indo-Pacific corridor, Bangladesh is viewed as one of the indispensable partners in materializing the corridor.<sup>32</sup> In a similar vein, the involvement of different countries in Bangladesh was also being analysed by scholars and policymakers alike. Without taking into consideration that Bangladesh-China developed a strong relationship since 1975 in different areas such as in political, economic and defence sectors, China's involvement in Bangladesh in recent years is being scrutinised keenly. The question remains however—whether Bangladesh needs China or both the countries need each other for fulfilling their own interests. Bangladesh's geopolitical location, once seen as a bane, has made itself a boon with its pragmatic choice in its port diplomacy.

Bangladesh abandoned the plan of its first deep sea port to be constructed solely under China's supervision in Sonadia in 2016. While this created a diplomatic rancour between Bangladesh and China for a while, it did not remain so. Bangladesh has rather learnt to diversify its options when it comes to port building. As the Pyara deep sea port, Bangladesh's first, is being built with Japan's assistance, the Chittagong Bay Terminal is divided into 19 components and distributed to multiple bidders originating from different countries. Bangladesh has learnt that it is unwise to depend upon only one country's assistance when it comes to building such critical infrastructure such as ports.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Climate Diplomacy and Bangladesh's Role***

Existential threats to a state's survival do not emanate only from an external actor anymore. The world has learnt, especially with the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, how interdependent the world is. Climate catastrophe is an area that is based on scientific evidence and has turned into existential threats for many countries of the world. Bangladesh has taken these observations as part of its foreign policy objectives where ground realities are reflected. On climate emergency, Bangladesh has taken a leading role since the past several years which is being recognised at the global stage.<sup>34</sup> As climate change and its inevitable catastrophe are not clearly discernible like any traditional threat, powerful countries are busy in forming formal and informal alliances and blocs such as Quad, AUKUS and BRICS. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has emerged as one of the climate leaders to represent climate vulnerable countries through its relentless diplomacy. Bangladesh may lack theoretical knowledge but has experimental and practical knowledge to deal with climate vulnerabilities and challenges, which are being carried out for the past ten years.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Bangladesh has emerged as one of the leaders on nature-based solutions (NBS), which include mangrove forest protection, protected area co-management, Community based Sustainable Management of Tanguar Haor (2006-2018) and coastal afforestation.<sup>36</sup>

Bangladesh has created its identity as a Climate Leader by working in three particular areas—mitigation, finance and adaptation and thus, planning to create the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCP), named after the Father of the Nation.<sup>37</sup> Bangladesh has established its Climate Change Trust Fund of \$450 million with its own funding,<sup>38</sup> and from being an Aid Lab, it has gradually acquired the title of being a Climate Adaptation Capital and recently also as the 'Best Teacher' in climate adaptation—a title conferred by the former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon.<sup>39</sup> Bangladesh's emergence as a knowledge leader in the climate area is globally recognised as it is chairing Climate Vulnerable Forum in the period of 2020-

2022. In this context, one must not forget the innovations of Bangladesh's crop scientists who are researching on climate change resilient crops keeping in mind the fast changes in the climatic conditions in Bangladesh and worldwide.<sup>40</sup> The success has been phenomenal as Bangladeshi scientists have been able to grow salt-tolerant rice and vegetables.<sup>41</sup>

Bangladesh's activities, thus, have been highlighted in the list of Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) list where a climate vulnerable country can make prosperity plan and offer to reduce the greenhouse gas (GHG) 'reduction target of 15% from a Business as Usual (BAU) level by 2030.'<sup>42</sup> In spite of the risk of losing 17 per cent of its land due to the sea-level rise, Bangladesh has made significant progress in adaptation and mitigation of climate catastrophe.

***Bangladesh's Role as a Global Peacekeeper and a Flag-bearer of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda***

The state system and its impenetrability depend upon the logic of anarchy of the international system—all states are equal by virtue of their sovereign power. The question in such a system of equality is—how to resolve crises between states as the UN lacks an intervention mechanism. It is out of this concern, the idea on the UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) emerged and deployed in the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in 1948. Bangladesh, although a latecomer in the UNPKOs, currently holds a prestigious position in terms of its overall troops' contribution in the UNPKOs.<sup>43</sup> In 2020, Bangladesh held the top position in terms of its contribution from its Armed Forces and Police.<sup>44</sup> Bangladesh Police received the Best Police Unit Award in 2019 by the UN. Bangladesh has so far contributed to 54 missions in 40 different countries where 1,63,887 peacekeepers have participated, including male and female members.<sup>45</sup> Bangladesh undertook the second all-female formed police unit (FPU) in Haiti, which has been an exemplary mission both in terms of their performance as well as breaking the boundaries of glass ceiling for female peacekeepers around the world. The idea that women with Islamic background and

originating from the Third World country lack agency was successfully challenged by the works done by Bangladeshi female police officers in Haiti. Also, the addition of two female combat pilots Flight Lieutenant Nayma Haque and Flight Lieutenant Tamanna-E-Lutfi in 2017 to the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)<sup>46</sup> stood as yet another symbol of women's empowerment as well as projecting a positive image of Bangladesh boldly shouldering the responsibility of maintaining international peace and security.

Bangladesh has introduced the idea that women must be integrated at all levels of peacemaking, peacebuilding and sustaining peace processes. Bangladesh's then Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury, initiated the idea in 1999 and proposed to the UN Security Council (UNSC) that without bringing women as equal stakeholders to establishing peace, a sustainable solution to ending conflicts cannot be found. While sharing his experiences of how his ideas came to reality in a *Foreign Policy* organised webinar in October 2020, Ambassador Chowdhury stated how the idea of including women on matters of security seemed alien and was initially rejected by all the five permanent members of the UNSC.<sup>47</sup> Ambassador Chowdhury did not lose hope when his initial plan to get the proposal passed on the 8 March 2000, celebrated as International Women's Day.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women was established in 1946, but the adoption of the WPS agenda was the first time that women were recognised at the high table of international security. The WPS agenda has fundamentally changed the way women's contributions are perceived and can be furthered to create a meaningful development of a country. A number of countries since then has prioritised women's issues in advancing foreign policy goals, such as Sweden being the first country to introduce a feminist foreign policy in 2014, and Canada announced a new ambassadorial position for women, peace and security in 2018. Canada also pursues a Feminist International Assistance Policy since June 2017, which is aimed at positioning Canada as a leader on gender equality in

its aid programmes. Under the WPS agenda, national governments are required to prepare National Action Plan (NAP) for integrating women at all phases of peacekeeping and peacebuilding. As of August 2021, 98 countries of the world have adopted National Action Plans,<sup>48</sup> including Bangladesh adopting it in November 2019. In mainstreaming gender and plans of WPS agenda, a number of countries experienced difficulties as it was considered as resources being transferred from the traditional domains to non-traditional and specifically to women's issues. Bangladesh, yet again has provided an exemplary guide for the rest of the world where its NAP is materialised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) as the key actor but gender mainstreaming takes place in coordination with 14 other ministries so that the transfer of resources is not seen entirely as being transferred to women's causes only. In other words, these ministries have undertaken gender mainstreaming under the WPS agenda but in an issue-specific manner, and therefore, contributing to the overall goal of creating women's empowerment and agency. Bangladesh promotes women's issues as a part of the whole-of-society approach, which can be educational.

### ***Rohingya Issue and Bangladesh's Humanitarian Approach***

Bangladesh is now home to 1.2 million forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals (FDMNs), that is Rohingya community from the Rakhine province of Myanmar. The Rohingya influx in Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon. It started from 1973-74 and continued till 2016 on a number of occasions.<sup>49</sup> The August 2017 influx was an entirely different scenario both in terms of quality and quantity. At one point of time, Bangladesh pursued a humanitarian approach seeing the repression of the Myanmar Military, Tatmadaw, on unarmed civilians and opened its border. While the international community lauded Bangladesh's approach and provided much needed economic assistance to manage the large number of Rohingyas, it has equally failed to arrange a safe repatriation of Rohingyas to their country of origin. The Rohingya influx has created unprecedented humanitarian crises in the Southeast region of

Bangladesh, which is strategically significant for pursuing its port diplomacy and its blue ocean economy. This has also brought environmental issues to the fore and uneasiness among the local people and the Rohingyas.<sup>50</sup>

Bangladesh has found itself in murky water as its biggest neighbour India has shown a cold shoulder on the matter and so have China and Japan, two of Bangladesh's biggest development partners. Instead of long-trusted friends, it was rather Gambia that took the case of violence on Rohingyas as a matter of grave concern since 2018 and raised it to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).<sup>51</sup> This has a few takeaways for international politics—such as an apparently 'small' nation has raised voice against injustice that other countries preferred to ignore. This was the first time that the plaintiff had no direct connection to an issue brought before the ICJ.<sup>52</sup> Simultaneously, this has a greater significance in international politics for the definition of 'small' does not depend upon the size of a country or its hard power, rather its willingness to assert itself in international politics. It can be argued that Bangladesh is doing in its own capacity in terms of placing priorities on issues that concern its national interest and thus, emerging as an assertive actor.

A safe and long-term resolution to the Rohingya crisis seems a far cry now, though it appears that some kind of 'quiet diplomacy' is being pursued by China to bring Bangladesh and Myanmar on board. The military takeover of political power in Myanmar has made the situation more difficult for Bangladesh to pursue the issue of Rohingya repatriation at the international level. This entire crisis has come not only as a surprise to Bangladesh but has also made it realize—there is no permanent friend or foe in politics; only interests are permanent. As a result, it has made Bangladesh bolder to pursue its own interest in turn. Bangladesh does not shy away from expressing its opinion and rejecting the offers that may contradict with its own national interest, as will be discussed later.

### ***Sino-Indian Rivalry and Great Power Politics in the Indo-Pacific: Bangladesh's Strategic Stance***

Bangladesh increasingly sees itself as one of the key players in the Bay of Bengal region due to its strategic location. Its location was once identified as a disadvantage for the country. However, the geopolitical shifts have made tectonic changes as to how Bangladesh is viewed and pursued by great powers. History testifies a raging great power politics surrounding the birth of Bangladesh—often ignored in the present-day analysis of international politics. The US-China rapprochement and the People's Republic of China gaining back its UNSC Permanent-5 membership were the results of the changing geopolitics of 1971.<sup>53</sup> As Bangladeshis fought on the ground, strategic alignments were reshaped at the international level, the reflection of which is reverberated in today's politics as well. Ironically, as Bangladesh celebrates 50 years of its independence, both the US and China are much closer to Bangladesh—the antithesis of the reality of 1971—as much as they both have drifted apart and need Bangladesh in their respective alliances to counter the other.<sup>54</sup> This has created a unique bargaining power for Bangladesh. Moreover, the Bangladesh of 2021 is a different entity which has a blend of both hard power and soft power to be reckoned with.<sup>55</sup>

As Bangladesh sees increasing international attention, it does see itself as one of the turfs to Sino-Indian rivalry too. China, Bangladesh's biggest trading partner and largest arms supplier, has assured Bangladesh of around \$39 billion assistance as both government to government (G2G) and private sector cooperation during President Xi Jinping's visit to Bangladesh in 2016, which brought forward a qualitative change in the bilateral relationship.<sup>56</sup> Under the rubric of a comprehensive strategic partnership, China is involved in a number of infrastructure projects that are seen strategically critical by India. The Chinese involvement in the Sylhet airport expansion project, Bangladesh's implementation of the Teesta project without a consensus with India, and the purchasing of 25 per cent stake in the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE)—are particularly

seen as critical where India's interests directly collide. In the first and third instances, Indian companies were out-bidden by Chinese companies, which were seen as an expression of China's projection of power in South Asia. During the pandemic, China's vaccine diplomacy trumped over India's, and the former's collaboration with Bangladeshi pharmaceutical companies to produce the Covid-19 vaccine in Bangladesh has also alarmed India.

Two perspectives are missing in the existing analyses on China's footprints in Bangladesh. First, there is a clear pattern of continuity in Sino-Bangladesh relationship in political, economic and defence sectors since the establishment of bilateral relations in 1975, unlike the topsy-turvy ride of the Bangladesh-India relations. On top of this, Bangladesh-China relations have maintained its trajectory and kept unfettered from their relations with other countries. In effect, Bangladesh has invested in its relationship with China, keeping in mind its national priorities and by its merit, than being influenced by third parties. Second, the tendency to analyse Bangladesh-China relations from a global perspective shadows the view of Bangladesh's national priorities and strategic calculations. While at the global level, pacts such as the Quad and AUKUS, without directly mentioning China's name, target China; for Bangladesh, having a trusted development partner far outweigh the benefits of shedding off its strategic neutrality. Bangladesh, thus, plans to create a comprehensive relationship with any country of the world whoever reciprocates such outlook. As part of Bangladesh's policy of neutrality, it has joined in partnership with China under two initiatives which aim to combat the economic and health issues that emerged due to the Covid pandemic. Bangladesh is also set to join in an India-led initiative that looks into non-traditional security issues emerging in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>57</sup> In its own right, Bangladesh has emerged as a much sought-after prize to both India and China than Bangladesh having to pursue the both.<sup>58</sup> This is where Bangladesh has taken a lead in terms of setting its diplomatic stances, which seemed unthinkable a decade earlier.



### ***Rise of Bangladesh's Soft Power***

Very few studies have paid attention to the increasing name of Bangladesh as a brand. It is still a long way to go; despite that, Bangladeshis at home and abroad are making their names by contributing in their specific areas of work, which is drawing a positive attention towards Bangladesh.

Dr. Muhammad Yunus, so far, the only Nobel Laureate from Bangladesh, is recognised globally due to his tireless work in the area of micro-finance and offering loans to the poor, especially to women. He stands as a brand ambassador of Bangladesh to the world. Bangladeshi scientists' achievements in the areas of science and technology are increasingly being recognised at the international level. Dr. Firdausi Qadri, researcher and scientist at the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh's (icDDR,b), has received Ramon Magsaysay Award, also dubbed as Asia's Nobel Prize, in 2021 for her contribution in the areas of vaccines, biotechnological therapeutics and critical research.<sup>59</sup> Dr. Qadri received L'Oréal-Unesco for Women in Science Awards in 2020, which recognised her contributions in the areas of improving health conditions in the Global South.<sup>60</sup> In 2020, three female scientists, including Dr. Firdausi Qadri, Salma Sultana, chairperson of Model Livestock Advancement Foundation, and Samia Subrina, professor at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) were recognised as the best and brightest 100 Asian scientists in the list published by Singapore-based magazine Asian Scientist.<sup>61</sup> Bangladeshi jute industry is rejuvenated by the works of Bangladeshi scientists in the areas of biotechnology and jute genomics and its products and export items are diversified contrary to the general belief that jute industry is suffering from a decline.<sup>62</sup>

In the areas of sports, arts and culture too, Bangladeshis are making strides that are being globally recognised. Bangladeshi cricketer Sakib Al Hassan, an unofficial ambassador for the country, is considered one of the bests in today's cricket world. In the areas of Theatre critically acclaimed *Matir Moina* (The

Clay Bird) was the first Bangladeshi movie that was nominated in the Academy Awards and received awards in the Cannes Film Festival in 2002.<sup>63</sup> In 2021, Bangladesh saw *Rehana Maryam Noor* to be selected for major screening at the Cannes Film Festival, and thus brought the spotlight back on the country.<sup>64</sup> Bangladeshi diaspora is not much-lagging behind in promoting their culture and Bangladeshi heritage at the global stage too. Bangladeshi Chef Kishwar Chowdhury, born to Bangladeshi father and Indian mother and a citizen of Australia, showcased traditional Bangladeshi food at Australian TV show MasterChef Australia. The world, first time, saw traditional dishes like *Panta Bhaat* (made from leftover rice) and *Aloo Bharta* (mashed potato done in Bangladeshi style), Bengali *Khichuri* (which is considered as a disaster relief food as well as a food to be served during rainy days) were showcased at the world stage.<sup>65</sup>

Bangladesh's contribution to the international community lies in flagging the necessity of recognising one's mother-tongue and culture, as Bengalis struggled on 21 February 1952 to establish Bengali as their state language. It was proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in November 1999 and adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 in Resolution A/RES/61/266.<sup>66</sup> A country that started off with scanty financial resources and underdeveloped infrastructure, has emerged as a 'South Asia's rising star' at its 50s.<sup>67</sup> Its soft power is a part of the projection of its emergence as a country that has learnt to promote its national interest deftly and firmly.

### ***Rise of a Bangladesh that can Say 'No'***

Bangladesh's geographic position puts it in a precarious situation where striving for its strategic autonomy may seem improbable. The rise of an assertive Bangladesh, therefore, seems an alien or premature concept, even to some Bangladeshi observers. However, Bangladesh has been deftly handling matters that are connected to its image and identity in international politics and rather boldly asserting its own voice. One of the first incidents in recent years can be found in

Bangladesh's purchasing of two Ming-class submarines from China as part of its military modernisation project 'Forces Goal 2030.' Despite concomitant Indian concerns, Bangladesh pursued a firm stand on the issue and continued with the purchase. Bangladesh received a request from the UK in 2019 to take the Islamic State (IS) bride Ms. Shamima Begum to Bangladesh as a citizen, who held a UK citizenship but born to parents of Bangladeshi origin. While Ms. Begum insisted on returning to UK, citing UK as her country of citizenship, Bangladesh also held on to its ground and did not accept UK's request as Ms. Begum never held a dual citizenship that would include Bangladesh.<sup>68</sup> Bangladesh sent a message to the world that it has a 'zero tolerance' on terrorism through its decision. During the visit of the US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E Biegun in Dhaka in 2020, as Bangladesh was offered to join the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and the Quad, Bangladesh clearly showed its reservation on the ground that it would not shed off its strategic neutrality.<sup>69</sup> On this matter, as the Chinese Ambassador in Bangladesh reacted by stating Bangladesh's joining the Quad would affect its relationship with China, Bangladesh sent a strong reply to China not to intervene in its foreign policy decisions.<sup>70</sup>

From its *Year of Fifty*, we can see that Bangladesh is gradually showing its strategic autonomy on the matters that are relevant to furthering its national interest. Bangladesh declined to endorse a non-binding UN General Assembly resolution on Myanmar that condemned the military junta but did not reflect the Rohingya issue strongly. Bangladeshi representative at the UN, Ambassador Rabab Fatima stated, "[W]e have abstained in protest. The language of the resolution with respect to the Rohingya crisis, especially the repatriation of those sheltered in Cox's Bazar, was not strong enough."<sup>71</sup> Bangladesh's decision was identified as an 'astute' move by political observers,<sup>72</sup> and sent a strong wake up call for the international community to address the Rohingya issue with more sincerity. Bangladesh was requested by the US to provide shelters to Afghan refugees after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, to

which Bangladesh, once again declined. The international community is used to seeing a Bangladesh which has seldom an agenda-setting power.

One might argue that it is too early to assert Bangladesh achieving strategic assertiveness in today's turbulent international politics. This is the beginning of a new journey for Bangladesh where it is on its way to achieving a strategic autonomy.

### **Life is not a Bed of Roses: Challenges Ahead**

For Bangladesh, the next journey, as it completes its 50 years of existence in 2021, is going to be fraught with different kinds of challenges than it had to attend to during its inception as a sovereign member of the international community. As this article began with Bangladesh's success in the economic front, it shall also identify the challenges in this area.

Economy of a country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is inextricably linked with the global economy as well as a country's relationship with its trading partners. The implications of foreign policy relations may often jeopardize the trading markets of specific goods for a country. For Bangladesh, the emerging diplomatic tension with the US, with the US placing sanction on Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) force on the alleged charge of violating human rights in early December 2021, has created similar apprehensions. The US is one of the biggest markets for Bangladesh's RMG products, along with the UK and Europe. Whether this sanction will affect Bangladesh's RMG exports to these destinations, this question looms over. This has also raised concerns that it is time for Bangladesh to diversify its trading partners given the RMG is the second biggest foreign currency earning sector of the country. Economic growth in the coming years would depend upon how Bangladesh can respond to this challenge as well as the challenges that will emerge after Bangladesh formally graduates from being a Lower Middle Income Country to a Middle Income country in 2026.

As stated here, diplomatic tensions between Bangladesh and US have emerged as a growing concern for the country on the eve of celebrating 50 years of bilateral relations of two countries in April 2022. Bangladesh not being invited to the US organised Democracy Summit in December 2021 and the US placing the sanctions on a few Bangladeshi nationals have been interpreted largely from two perspectives. While some have argued that this was a reflection of the Biden administration to indicate that it shall work as a gatekeeper of human rights issues throughout the world, others have argued that Bangladesh was specially targeted due to its increasing geopolitical significance and its closeness with China. Dhaka's insistence not to join in any formal pact or alliance that targets China is a part of its long-standing foreign policy dictum of maintaining non-alignment. It is argued that this message is lost to many observers and Bangladesh has maintained friendly relations with all the countries of the world, not only with China.

In terms of foreign policy challenges, the previous discussion leads to a broader landscape. The international order in 21<sup>st</sup> century is as shaky as it was steady with clear poles of power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The world is no longer a unipolar world with a clear US hegemony as it emerged with the end of the Cold War. It has rather turned to a multipolar, or even plurilateral, where states are forming short-term alliances and cooperative frameworks to meet the need of the hour. In such a volatile and unstable international political environment, Bangladesh needs to prepare itself adequately. The pandemic has taught us that not only the world is interdependent but countries need to develop their own resources to fend off the difficulties that may arise due to prolonged disconnect with the rest of the world. As stated before, Bangladesh has fared quite well during the pandemic in mitigating its effects, it has been argued that it is a reflection on its people's strength as well. Bangladeshis, as has been pointed out, have emerged as a nation of 'aspirational people',<sup>73</sup> who have made the tremendous achievements of the country possible. Keeping in mind of a fast-changing world, Bangladesh needs to strategise about the future challenges and

possibilities to stay on the present course of development in the economic sector as well as on its foreign policy assertiveness.

### Concluding Observations

This article celebrates Bangladesh's uniqueness in reinventing itself in international politics. A country that started its relationship with the US through receiving foreign aid, is the 51<sup>st</sup> largest trading partner (in 2018), where the trade balance is in Bangladesh's favour. Bangladesh's continued and balanced policies in the areas of development diplomacy, port diplomacy, promoting gender issues as the agenda of the international politics, climate diplomacy—have brought Bangladesh unprecedented international recognition, which in turn has made it bolder in pursuing its agenda. In fifty years' time, very few countries have been able to achieve what Bangladesh has been—sustainability and standing as a role model for the others. We can gradually see a Bangladesh Model in the making, unique in nature,<sup>74</sup> while one may contend this article as far-fetched and euphoric at times for asserting the rise of a Bangladesh that can say no. One might trace the origin of Bangladeshi modesty and tendency to play issues in a toned-down manner to the immortal 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali poem as follows:

*Aponare boro bole, boro shei noi;  
lok e jare boro bole, boro shei hoi.*

It warns one not to beat one's own drum—rather their work should speak for themselves. In 21<sup>st</sup> century, without a proper projection of the achievements, it would rather be hard for Bangladesh and Bangladeshi scholars to let the world understand how far we have progressed by making the best use of the resources at hand. Bangladesh's achievements are not baseless but need to be placed in their proper perspectives. As countries around the world are also on the same path of creating their own brand, it is time that Bangladesh and Bangladeshi scholars portray the appropriate identity of the

country, as in the end, quoting from the classic western movie *Shane*, 'right or wrong; it is a brand. A brand sticks.' Bangladesh, similarly, needs to create its own brand and its narratives for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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