

Introducing OCPASS...

The Osmani Centre for Peace and Security Studies (OCPASS) was inaugurated in May 2025. As a dedicated think tank, it focuses exclusively on peace and security issues that impact Bangladesh's national interests. The initiative was launched by the Army Headquarters, and a distinguished panel of experts from military and academic spheres was appointed to lead the institution. OCPASS operates with full autonomy, guided solely by the overarching principles of national interest.

The emblem of OCPASS features a green outer border encircling a globe, with the Centre's name and motto inscribed along the perimeter. The globe underscores Bangladesh's strategic position within the Indo-Pacific region, while the dotted representation of the world map symbolizes the digital age and the era of information. The green border and the red marking of Bangladesh on the globe reflect the colors of the national flag, symbolizing our identity and heritage.

Registered under the Societies Registration Act of 1860 (Act XXI of 1860), OCPASS is a self-governing organization recognized by the Office of the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms (RJSC). Named in honor of General MAG Osmani, the Commander-in-Chief of Bangladesh's Liberation War, the Centre embodies his ideals of principled leadership and strategic vision.

OCPASS's research agenda encompasses a broad range of fields, including geopolitics, geo-economics, peace, conflict resolution, national defense, regional and neighborhood studies, cyberspace and information warfare, legal studies, maritime studies and the blue economy, air power and aerospace, environmental issues (climate change), gender and human rights. The scope of research is designed to evolve and expand into additional areas in the future.

Governed by a General Body (Board of Trustees) and operating as an autonomous entity affiliated with the armed forces, OCPASS primarily addresses peace and security challenges of national and regional importance. It also analyzes global issues with strategic implications for Bangladesh and the wider region.

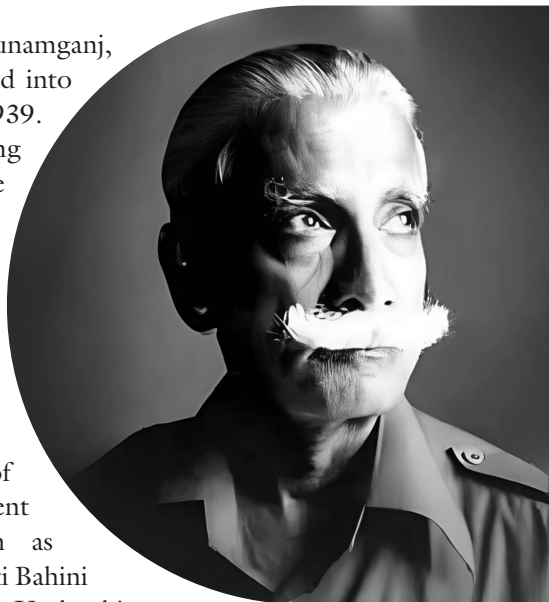
About General M.A.G. Osmani

General M.A.G. Osmani, widely revered as "Bangabir" (Brave Son of Bengal), was the Commander-in-Chief of the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Forces) during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War and is honored as the founding father of Bangladesh's Armed Forces.

Born on 1 September 1918 in Sunamganj, Sylhet, Osmani was commissioned into the British Indian Army in 1939. He served with distinction during World War II, notably in the Burma Campaign, and rose to the rank of Major. Following the partition of India in 1947, he joined the Pakistan Army, where he attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel before retiring in February 1967.

In 1971, with the outbreak of war, the Provisional Government of Bangladesh appointed him as Commander-in-Chief of the Mukti Bahini and Bangladesh Forces in April. Under his leadership, the armed resistance was meticulously organized, leading to the country's ultimate victory on 16 December 1971. On 7 April 1972, he was promoted to become Bangladesh's first four-star General, overseeing the formal establishment of the Bangladesh Army, Navy, and Air Force.

General Osmani passed away on 16 February 1984. His legacy persists through various institutions named in his honor, including Sylhet Osmani International Airport, Osmani Medical College, the Osmani Museum, and the Osmani Centre for Peace and Security Studies (OCPASS). His image remains a symbol of courage, dedication, patriotism, and impartiality—qualities that inspired the naming of the centre after him.



Editorial Notes

Inaugural Issue of OCPASS Perspectives

We are pleased to present the inaugural issue of OCPASS Perspectives, the flagship periodical of the Osmani Center for Peace and Security Studies (OCPASS), Bangladesh. This publication marks the beginning of a journey toward informed, independent, and thoughtful discourse on the critical issues shaping the security, peace, and strategic trajectory of Bangladesh in a rapidly evolving world.

OCPASS was founded on the belief that credible, impartial, and evidence-based analysis is indispensable in navigating today's complex geopolitical environment. As a new think tank committed to rigorous research and open dialogue, our mission is to contribute meaningfully to policy thinking on national and regional affairs—free from biases and prejudice.

The articles featured in this issue reflect a broad spectrum of themes, ranging from national security and strategic interests to regional dynamics, peacebuilding, and global geopolitics. Each piece is written in an op-ed style—analytical, provocative, and grounded in contemporary realities—yet accessible to policymakers, scholars, and engaged citizens alike. The opinions expressed in the articles are solely those of the authors and do not represent official position of OCPASS.

While this print version presents the core arguments and insights, full bibliographical references and extended resources will be made available in the upcoming web edition, soon to be published on the OCPASS digital platform.

We hope OCPASS Perspectives will serve as a forum for debate, a catalyst for ideas, and a platform for new thinking on the pressing challenges of our time. As we embark on this endeavor, we invite readers, researchers, and stakeholders to join us in shaping a more secure, just, and prosperous future for Bangladesh and the wider region.

Warm regards,
Editorial Team

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OCPASS Perspectives

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Security and Defence in the Foreign Policy and Diplomacy of Bangladesh

Dr. Isharaf Hossain

Diplomatic history, geopolitical strategy, and the concept of a nation's security interests and matters of strategic concern reflect advanced intellectual outlooks and analytical approaches. These themes are deeply interconnected and highly relevant to the broader discourse on security and defence within the foreign policy and diplomacy framework. While this relevance applies to all nations, it holds particular significance for Bangladesh, whose strategic landscape is dynamic and continually evolving.

Foreign policy is shaped not by a single factor, but by a complex interplay of objective conditions, the security environment, national unity, resource strength, social values, domestic pressures, and more. Henry Kissinger once said, “A nation’s values define what is just, its strength determines what is possible, its domestic structures decide what policies can be implemented.” As summed up by Tabarak Husain, a pioneering Foreign Secretary of independent Bangladesh, this perspective reflects essential directions for understanding foreign policy, particularly regarding security and defence. According to him, the general public is largely unable to grasp the core elements of foreign policy, except for those within well-informed circles. He therefore emphasises the importance of identifying and analysing broad national goals about domestic factors that shape foreign policy. He asserts:

By any standard of judgment, insurance against external threats to security ranks high among national goals. Maintenance of security calls for a wide range of actions. Of crucial importance are internal stability and national unity, underpinned by a collective willingness to make sacrifices in defence of national rights. Based on shared convictions, internal cohesion inevitably contributes to national security.

Thus, national security emerges as a vital component of foreign policy for the broad national goals of the country, central to the defence of national rights, national unity, and internal stability. In this context, defence diplomacy emerges as a relatively new phenomenon in the field. It is a recent development aimed at navigating the strategic complexities and uncertainties of the post–Cold War era. Despite its growing relevance, it has received limited analytical attention, particularly concerning defence relations in South and Southeast Asia. In the case of Bangladesh, although the core objectives of this discussion broadly align with those of defence diplomacy, my focus is to explore a different dimension: formulating and implementing the state’s foreign policy mechanism through integrating security and defence considerations.

A commonly held perception of defence or military diplomacy emphasises its role as a vital component of foreign policy. It involves using military resources and capabilities to achieve foreign policy objectives through peaceful means. Defence diplomacy is a tool for nations to build bilateral and multilateral relationships, strengthen security cooperation, and prevent conflict by engaging with other states and international organisations on defence and security matters. Its primary focus is fostering trust and collaboration through military to military engagements, joint training exercises, and personnel exchanges.

At a time, from a security and defence perspective, defence diplomacy plays a critical role in promoting stability by promoting dialogue and joint initiatives. Its primary objectives include preventing conflict, resolving disputes peacefully, and enhancing regional and global security. Defence diplomacy involves exchanging information, expertise, and best practices in defence and security, alongside collaborative efforts to address shared challenges such as terrorism, cyber threats, and transnational crimes. It is a valuable complement to traditional diplomatic channels by providing a distinct platform for engagement and cooperation, particularly within sensitive and strategic security domains.

From the perspective of traditional foreign affairs, defence diplomacy is a powerful instrument for advancing a nation’s foreign policy objectives, particularly in ensuring peace, security, and regional stability. Fostering cooperation and building mutual trust among states contributes to developing a more secure and stable international environment that benefits all nations. Defence diplomacy embodies a proactive and strategic approach, leveraging military capabilities not for confrontation but to support diplomatic efforts, strengthen national security, and expand a country’s influence on the global stage. As such, it is a vital tool for the effective implementation of foreign policy and the broader security interests of the state.

Recognizing its strategic importance, many advanced nations, including the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, China, and several NATO members have established dedicated defence diplomatic cadres. These cadres consist of officers and officials selected from mid to senior level positions within the armed forces or security services, who then undergo specialized training in foreign policy, military strategy, international law, intelligence cooperation, and cross-cultural communication. Once trained, they are systematically deployed to embassies, multilateral missions, strategic think tanks, and security forums, both domestically and internationally. In many countries, intelligence coordination is integrated into this framework to enhance information sharing and

strategic foresight. Bangladesh can learn from them for same purpose.

In this context, the integration of national security strategy and experts with the national foreign policy and its management is undeniably essential. The existing gap in this area could become a serious concern if a comprehensive national security policy is not formulated soon, especially as the geopolitical dynamics of the greater Indo-Pacific and South Asian regions are expected to grow increasingly complex in the near future. There is also a clear and pressing need for the involvement of security and defence experts in diplomacy. However, this must be approached with a neutral, politically unbiased perspective and handled in a thoroughly professional manner. Only then can the process effectively safeguard Bangladesh's national interests in the areas of security, defence and diplomacy under the broader objectives of its foreign policy.

Foreign policy formulation is an ongoing process that aims to match what is desirable with what is achievable. Policymakers should carefully evaluate all available options before choosing the most practical course of action to attain the intended outcomes. They must also consider the vital link between policy objectives and the resources needed to implement them successfully. So, Bangladesh could always consider and explore the possibility of adopting any progressive new proposal and system.

From the perspective of democracy, good governance, and a political system aimed at national unity, stability, peace, development, and progress, an open society, free institutions, a free press, and informed public debate are essential for building a sound and enduring national consensus. Unfortunately, there has often been a disconnect between our objective realities and the goals we aspire to in these areas. As setbacks occurred, doubts began to overshadow our intentions. Internal political developments undermined our credibility; with governance frequently in disarray and political parties entrenched in discord, our policies failed to inspire confidence domestically and struggled to earn trust internationally. In such a circumstance, it has been difficult for Bangladesh to pursue vigorous or sustained foreign policy initiatives. Despite this situation, Bangladesh needs a 'vigorous or sustained foreign policy initiative' as an essential dynamic of national governance and government. Thus, the current context for rebuilding new Bangladesh deserves all kinds of advanced and progressive initiatives and development.

Bangladesh currently adopts a defensive, peace-oriented, and non-aligned foreign policy, strategically balancing its position within a complex geopolitical environment. However, in recent years, especially following significant political shifts in August 2024, Bangladesh has transitioned toward a more diversified and multipolar defence strategy. Bangladesh has maintained its position as one of the leading contributors to United Nations peacekeeping operations. This active involvement has reinforced its international image as a responsible actor and enhanced its defence diplomacy through the strategic use of soft power. Bangladesh's current security and defence posture reflects a logical evolution of its strategic vision, shifting from a reliance on traditional alliances to a multipolar, pragmatic, and independent approach. This transformation contributes to regional stability and strengthens Bangladesh's role in global security dynamics. Expert observed and viewed: 'Foreign policy must guard against excessive reliance on liberalism, as an overdose can lead to the erosion of Bangladesh's vital

national interests.’ Therefore, it is essential to strengthen military deterrence as a core line of defence in foreign policy. One of the key gaps in current foreign policy is the insufficient emphasis on the role of military defence. Bangladesh must develop a credible ‘deterrent strategy’ to effectively safeguard its land, sea, and airspace.

To this context, the political elites of the country must prioritize good governance, prudent policymaking, effective conflict management, and bipartisanship in the broader interest of national security. The stability, security, and development of the region also require constructive engagement, regional collaboration, and the peaceful resolution of existing disputes to foster long-term, meaningful relationships. Therefore, it is imperative for Bangladesh to carefully consider the political, economic, and security implications of its foreign policy decisions. However, according to Kamal Uddin Ahmed, author of the book *Bangladesh and Its Neighbours*: both the medium- and long-term foreign policy goals of the country need to be thoroughly addressed by policy planners. “The current structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangladesh does not appear to meet the demands and challenges of the new millennium.” Hence, it is essential to restructure the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to include dedicated units for policy planning, research, and legal affairs in order to effectively address regional and international challenges. Bangladesh must pursue a pragmatic and proactive foreign policy, engaging actively with its neighbours to build an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding. Such an approach would not only enhance the country's ability to navigate complex foreign policy issues but also strengthen national security and promote sustainable development. To him, ‘indeed, the ‘art of diplomacy’ must be cultivated assiduously to meet the foreign policy challenges Bangladesh faces in the new millennium.’

A significant observation is very much relevant that was made by Dr. Syed Hamid Albar, former Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Home Affairs, during a regional discussion on Bangladesh held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2024. He viewed: “Dhaka needs its strategic narrative to tackle regional geopolitics.” He argued that Bangladesh has the potential to integrate into the ASEAN mechanism by leveraging its strategic geographic location and historical significance. However, achieving this would require a well-defined strategic narrative and a coherent diplomatic strategy to navigate complex global and regional geostrategic dynamics. Bangladesh's geopolitical position between two major powers, China and India, makes it a pivotal actor in South and Southeast Asia. At the same time, the legacy of the 1971 Liberation War continues to shape the country's national identity and international posture. Dr. Albar also stressed that this historical context should not be overlooked but used as a foundation for recalibrating Bangladesh's foreign policy. He noted that Bangladesh's joining of ASEAN demands more than dialogue; it necessitates concrete action and commitment. A strong and consistent presence in international forums is essential to build a modern and dynamic Bangladesh, reinforcing its voice and visibility on the global stage.

In line with such kinds of various opinions, it is both urgent and essential for Bangladesh to develop and modernize its National Defence Policy and System. These efforts, grounded in the reasons discussed here, will support the development of a more dynamic and effective foreign policy that prioritizes Bangladesh's highest national interests. Recent and ongoing national discourses and dialogues (July 2025) on ‘National Unity for National Security,’ involving various stakeholders, experts, think

tanks, including political leaders, also have echoed similar views, further validating the necessity and urgency of such development. In this cause, the essence of some views and recommendations of high-ranking officials and experts of the country are much relevant and deserve serious consideration: To effectively address and lead in the face of evolving strategic challenges and opportunities, Bangladesh requires an integrated and comprehensive 'Defence and Foreign Policy'. This policy must harmonize the principles and practices of defence, security, peace, diplomacy, and development, all aligned under the overarching framework of 'The Highest Priority to the National Interest of Bangladesh.' By adopting such a cohesive and forward-looking strategy, Bangladesh can position itself as a capable and influential actor in both regional and international affairs. Because, Bangladesh needs to develop its defence capabilities, but there is currently no clear emphasis on where that development should be directed. There is no concrete guideline, no strategic focus. Whether its immediate priority is to protect its sea lines of communication, defend its territorial integrity, or address other pressing concerns, the direction remains undefined. Thus, Bangladesh urgently needs a secure sea line of communication. This implies a strong and capable navy. Without secure maritime routes, Bangladesh's economy would collapse, no imports, no exports. In such a scenario, survival becomes uncertain. Therefore, Bangladesh must prioritize territorial defence. A robust defence position is essential; without it, Bangladesh cannot effectively implement or sustain its effective foreign policy.

To the current context, Bangladesh can draw also valuable lessons from its illustrious past to address all kinds of strategic needs and future advancement. In fact, a notable example is the successful integration of defence and diplomacy during the period from 1978 to 1981. This era marked significant policy shifts grounded in the principles of "national interest" and "public interest," effectively uniting the people and steering them toward common national objectives. To contemporary academic- experts, this period is often regarded as a demonstration of foreign policy functioning as an art form, reflecting the view of David Frost, the esteemed British media figure and author, who aptly observed, "Diplomacy is the art of letting somebody else have your way."

Therefore, to achieve the progressive and strategic position it aspires to, Bangladesh must adopt a vigorous and sustained foreign policy and system with the proper integration of security and defence outlook. These must be adaptive and forward-looking, addressing the shifting dynamics of regional and global power politics, evolving geopolitical realities, and the urgent need for economic and multilateral cooperation. Finally, Bangladesh can effectively safeguard its national interests and enhance its international influence only through a desired comprehensive and proactive approach.

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Bay of Bengal Geopolitics and Options for Bangladesh

Lt Gen Mohammad Mahfuzur Rahman,
PhD (Retd)

Indian Ocean is the strategic and demographic hub of the 21st century and Bay of Bengal has assumed enormous geo-strategic importance with Bangladesh located on its apex. Under the Mughals, Bengal Subah rose to global prominence in textile manufacturing and shipbuilding. Its economy in the 18th century became larger than European economy. During that period, Dhaka was already a vibrant city having a million people. As the geopolitical and economic power shifts from West to East and North to South alongside rise of China and India, Bangladesh is likely to rise also as it holds the key to reestablishment of a long-dormant historical trade route passing through China and India, the two rising economic giants. Since the end of unipolar world, China's peers and competitors are trying to contain her in East and South China Sea as well as in Indian Ocean.

During the time of President Obama in 2011, US started its geopolitical move of pivoting to Asia. The formation of Quad (US, India, Japan and Australia) and introduction of Indo-Pacific as an important geostrategic region were part of containment strategies to stranglehold China. In addition, building of around 180 military bases around East and South China Sea surfaced as potential tightening of the noose in case of crisis. In 2013, China came up with Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar in Bay of Bengal Region joined the BRI. China-Myanmar Economic Corridor invited China into Bay of Bengal (CMEC). The corridor has given China a much-desired strategic relief. Bay of Bengal is part of Chinese historical trade route, as such China no longer accepts Indian Ocean for India. China's other vertical expansion that projects into Indian Ocean is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

However, both Pakistan and Myanmar are going through instability threatening the dividends of economic corridors. China's expansion into India Ocean is of paramount importance, hence the other alternatives is China-Afghanistan-Iran Economic Corridor. India's concern is about its Siliguri Corridor, in case of crisis, as China might venture for China-Nepal-Bangladesh Economic Corridor leading to Bay of Bengal. China-Nepal Railway project is under serious study, (China's involvement at Doklum-2017 and Nakula-2021 in India-China-Bhutan tri-border and India-China border respectively which are close to Siliguri Corridor incidents of India's anxiety). China is interested to invest in Tista Project in Bangladesh near Siliguri Corridor as a BRI project. In case of desperate military situation between India and China, 22 KM Siliguri Corridor could be linked to potential China-Nepal-Bangladesh Economic Corridor. The Bay of Bengal is also within China's 'String of Pearls Strategy' and India's 'Necklace of Diamond Strategy'. As such, the Bay is turning into a hot spot of geopolitics and geo-strategy of regional and big powers of the world.

In Myanmar, both India and China are entering through Bay of Bengal to Rakhine (Myanmar) by their Kaladan Multi Modal Project and energy pipelines project respectively. The Rohingya issue has turned into a geopolitical issue now putting Bangladesh at bay. US has recognized Rohingya atrocities as genocide. However, China stood for Myanmar in Security Council against even condemning the Rohingya atrocities. The Burma Act and relation with Aung San Suu Kyi led NLD, now National Unity Government (NUG), is considered as entry of US through Bay of Bengal to Myanmar. This incursion of world leading power around Bay of Bengal is discomfoting to the regional powers. As a result, we shall see more and more blue water navies in Bay of Bengal. Once calm waters of Bay of Bengal is transforming into area of interest and area of influence of world leading powers. Besides, all major powers are now courting with Arakan Army to secure their interest in Myanmar that has geo-strategic significance for Bangladesh also.

Recent President Trump's "Tariffs War" is not only an economic issue but also a geo-economic and geo-strategic one. The US proposal to Bangladesh under "Economic and National Security" as well as under "Commercial Consideration" urges Bangladesh to reduce its dependency on Chinese defense equipment. At the same time, there is a proposal to buy US military equipment. There are ramifications to these proposals:

- Procurement of the US equipment would entail signing of defense agreements, i.e. "General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)". In short, this is a classified information and intelligence sharing agreement. The other agreement that would eventually follow is "Acquisition of Cross Service Agreement (ACSA)" a military logistics agreement.

- Since long, Washington was pushing Dhaka to sign these two agreements but Dhaka was hesitant and cautious. Signing these might cause unhappiness to China, the important development partner. The question is: will this be an act of crossing the 'Redline' of the regional power? Dhaka needs to fathom.

- The US equipment are way too expensive compared to Chinese defense equipment. Can Bangladesh afford the US equipment? China offers friendship price, procurement from its defense grants (gratis); those would not be available with the US.

- The other issue, whether the GSOMIA and ACSA are inconsonance with the

principles enshrined in our constitution and goes with the philosophy of our foreign policy.

Through this geo-economic move, the US is showing its intention to pressurize Bangladesh to distant itself away from China, especially in military cooperation. Possibly, the geostrategic location of Bangladesh as 'buffer' to Chinese energy corridor is an influencing factor behind such US behavior. However, premature decision could be counterproductive for Bangladesh. Meanwhile, it is once again substantiated that Bay of Bengal is turning into a ground zero of geopolitics where diplomatic acumen of Bangladesh would be very crucial.

How Bangladesh should navigate in this geopolitical murky water?

Peaceful Indian Ocean in general and Bay of Bengal in particular is the key to the development and economic emancipation of Bangladesh. Smaller littoral countries here need rules-based Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh is no exception. Ninety percent of Bangladesh's trade and commerce goes through Bay of Bengal. The tension here could seriously affect Bangladesh and dismantle her dream to become a Middle-Income country. The options available to Bangladesh are limited:

- Bangladesh should maintain a balanced approach in dealing with big powers. It should identify the red lines of regional and leading powers and avoid crossing those and extract reward in exchange of avoiding the 'NO GO' areas.

- Bangladesh should understand the limit of its strategic autonomy in decision making in the geopolitical murky water.

- It should follow Singapore model, the 'poisonous shrimp strategy' - blending hard and soft powers and maintaining strict neutrality. This is the most feasible strategy for Bangladesh to skillfully navigate complex geopolitical landscape, yet emerge as a significant power in the region.

- Institutions and ministries should develop India and China desks including experts on these regional powers and neighborhood that would be of immense value in decision-making.

- Bangladesh needs to return to meritocracy, a competence based strategic culture that ensures loyalty to national interests only and encourages 'speaking truth to power'. Only then, Bangladesh will be able to outwit adversarial situation in geopolitics.

Bengal was economic powerhouse when India was 24% and China was 36% of the world economy until the 18th century. These two civilizations were 60% of the world economy because they allowed the India Ocean as a 'Zone of Peace' that harnessed trade and commerce peacefully. A peaceful Indian Ocean in general and Bay of Bengal in particular can bring back these two regional giants to the pinnacle of economic success of the 18th century and also transform Bangladesh into an economic power house of pre-colonial era.

The author was a former Principal Staff Officer, Armed Forces Division and currently serves as Chairman OCPASS

Discursive Warfare and the Myth of Smallness: Reclaiming Bangladesh's Narrative Sovereignty

Capt A N M Kudratullah, BN (Retd)

There are moments in geopolitics that pretend to be pauses but are, in truth, choreography. A statesman announces a two-week grace period to “contemplate,” and somewhere far away the verdict has already been inked. The ritual travels. Scripts cross oceans. And here, in our tormented corner of South Asia, the same play unfolds with local actors: we are told—softly, repeatedly—that our dawn belongs to someone else’s clock.

This spell did not begin yesterday. At partition, East Bengal was labelled a burden: too distant, too unruly, too poor. And yet the “burden” earned the foreign exchange—tea, jute, fish, labor—while being treated as an afterthought. That foundational slight hardened into a habit of mind: dependence as common sense, deference as policy.

The postcolonial gaze from across the border perfected the art. A metropolitan confidence that mistook pedigree for virtue and proximity for entitlement. We were tutored on maturity, lectured on realism, told to “know our size.” The catechism of smallness began to sound like science.

Then 1971 remade the map and the marrow. But the victory was quickly mortgaged. Ekattorer Rin—the “debt of ’71”—was minted into a moral IOU, presented whenever Dhaka tried to stand a little straighter. Gratitude became a leash.

Over time, that leash found bureaucratic uses. When bodies fell at fences, we were told to be prudent. When rivers were held back by signatures that never came, we were told to be patient. When markets tilted and enclaves waited and identity laws

beyond our frontier redefined belonging, we were told to be practical. Silence was repackaged as statesmanship.

Worse, the leash moved inside us. Moner Bagh—the tiger in the mind—paced the corridors of our institutions. We began to police our own speech, to see foreign plots in every cloud and yet accept that nothing could be done. Neurosis masqueraded as strategy.

This is how discursive warfare works. Not with tanks, but with terms. If a people can be named small, they can be managed. If sovereignty can be redescribed as “stability,” then obedience can be sold as wisdom. The battlefield is the sentence; the weapon is the frame.

So when the Monsoon Revolution of 2024 briefly reopened the country to its own possibility, the counteroffensive arrived on schedule—from newsrooms, from chancelleries, from the discreet industry of regional whispering. We were declared “unstable,” “susceptible,” “too indebted to choose freely.” Not arguments—dismissals. Not analysis—containment.

Are we truly small, or merely written small? Who gets to hold the ruler? In this century, power is measured less by tanks than by tongues, less by maps than by metaphors. Our task is brutally simple and endlessly hard: to audit every borrowed word, to break the spell of received wisdom, and to repossess our name.

The Fallacy of Smallness: Bangladesh’s Geopolitical Agency in a Contested Region

In the lexicon of modern statecraft, few ideas carry such corrosive subtlety as the notion of “smallness.” It arrives clothed in objectivity—statistical, neutral, almost scientific. Yet, in practice, it functions as a verdict. For countries like Bangladesh, it is more than a word; it is a sentence, narrowing horizons, shrinking ambition, and dressing subordination as prudence. It is a narrative exported through polite communiqués and policy briefs, amplified by think tanks, and parroted by those who mistake dependency for diplomacy. Within this architecture of perception, sovereignty becomes a negotiable clause, and national will is relegated to the margins of someone else’s strategy.

But the fiction collapses under scrutiny. If size were destiny, Israel—a state smaller than many Indian districts—would not shape the security grammar of the Middle East or script passages of American foreign policy. Singapore would not sit astride the arteries of global finance, nor would Qatar—with a population barely a fraction of Dhaka—bend the world’s gaze with Al Jazeera and the spectacle of a World Cup. Lebanon, scarred and fractured, taught us a different lesson in the 1980s: weakness is never just about territory or tonnage; it is a story others write for you. Robert Fisk chronicled it in haunting detail—the way foreign powers turned Beirut into a chessboard, the way militias became proxies, and sovereignty was smuggled out through the airport lounge. Powerlessness was not inherent; it was engineered.

Bangladesh, by any serious metric, belongs nowhere near that category.

It is the eighth-most populous country on earth, home to 173 million people and commanding a GDP of nearly \$460 billion. It sits on the edge of the Bay of Bengal—once a strategic backwater, now a fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific. Its peacekeepers wear the blue helmet in some of the world’s most volatile zones. Its garment factories clothe continents. Its climate diplomacy has earned it an outsized voice in global summits. These are not the attributes of a minor player; they are the credentials of a middle power forced to live inside the parentheses of someone else’s narrative.

Yet the trope of smallness persists. Its origins are historical, grafted onto the trauma of partition and later cemented in the memory of 1971. It is true—an unassailable truth—that Bangladesh’s Liberation War was aided by external support at a moment of annihilation. But the story did not end with victory; it metastasized into a moral mortgage, a debt repaid not in gratitude but in compliance. What was solidarity has been rebranded as leverage. Ekattorer Rin—the so-called “debt of ’71”—is invoked like an incantation whenever Dhaka strains against the leash. It is as if independence was leased, not earned; as if the blood of our martyrs wrote a footnote rather than a title page.

Fisk would recognize the script. He saw it in Lebanon—in the foreign patronage that began as lifeline and curdled into leash, in the promises that masked predation. Beirut was a parable of power outsourced: militias fattened on external gold, politics hollowed out by borrowed legitimacy. The parallels are not exact, but the moral is rhymed: a nation that internalizes the fiction of dependence soon becomes its own jailer.

In Bangladesh, that fiction found its most ruthless administrator in recent decades. The ruling compact between power and patronage hollowed out institutions under the alibi of stability. Border killings became background noise. Water-sharing treaties turned into seasonal rumors. Identity laws across frontiers were greeted with silence, and electoral sovereignty was treated as negotiable—an item on the menu of “strategic understanding.” Submission was rebranded as statesmanship.

And yet, history does not end in acquiescence. The Monsoon Revolution of 2024 was proof—a tremor that cracked the façade of inevitability. What began as a revolt against recruitment injustice mutated into a referendum on an entire architecture of dependence. Proxies who once trafficked in the catechism of smallness found their sermons heckled in the streets. A new generation, fluent in code and conscience, rejected the false equivalence between obedience and order. They understood what Fisk understood: when the narrative becomes the battlefield, to surrender language is to surrender land.

Geography, too, has been misread—cast as vulnerability when it is, in fact, leverage. Bangladesh is described as encircled, a prisoner of cartography. But the map tells a different story: Dhaka sits astride the Siliguri Corridor, the thin umbilical cord that binds the Indian heartland to its northeastern limb. The ports of Matarbari and Chattogram are not provincial amenities; they are maritime chess pieces in an Indo-Pacific where container routes are arguments and infrastructure is ideology. Nothing moves without Bangladesh—not energy, not trade, not the grand designs of regional connectivity. To deny this is not ignorance; it is pretense.

And so the question lingers, sharp as a blade: who gets to define smallness? The

statistics are settled; what remains contested is the frame. The tragedy of Lebanon was not that it lacked size, but that it ceded its script. Bangladesh stands at the same crossroads. Will it continue to inhabit a borrowed narrative, or will it repossess its name—loudly, stubbornly, irrevocably?

Strategic Framing of Bangladesh in Post-2024 Regional Discourse

The political transition in Bangladesh following the Monsoon Revolution of 2024 did not unfold as a cataclysm but as a calibrated exercise in democratic reclamation. And yet, if one were to consume only the headlines, the impression would be of a state teetering on the edge of collapse. “Instability in Dhaka,” “Radical Undercurrents,” “External Hands”—the lexicon was neither accidental nor improvised. It was architecture, designed to dictate how the event would be read before the facts could speak. In this choreography of narrative, the uprising was stripped of its moral grammar and recast as pathology. Popular sovereignty was recoded as subversion.

This is no novelty in global politics. Noam Chomsky called it years ago—the systematic manufacture of consent, not merely within borders but across them. Robert Fisk chronicled its bloodier iterations in Beirut: the framing of every Lebanese faction as a proxy, every protest as a prelude to chaos, every attempt at autonomy as a threat to “regional stability.” The pattern, Fisk warned, was always the same—those who claim the mantle of order are often those who profit most from disorder. In South Asia today, the script runs with similar fidelity. When an entrenched regime collapses under the weight of its own corruption, the dominant regional discourse does not ask what moral debt the autocracy incurred; it asks who funded the protest, whose flag waved in the smoke, whose whispers stirred the crowd.

The logic is brutally simple. By securitizing dissent—what Nick Blash calls “coding democratic assertion as existential risk”—hegemonic actors convert internal emancipatory movements into external conspiracies. It is a form of discursive counter-insurgency: delegitimize the claim before it hardens into a fact, brand the march as infiltration before it becomes memory. The Monsoon Revolution, far from being a sectarian revolt or an ideological purge, was a textbook case of this distortion. What began as an uprising against job-recruitment injustice widened into a revolt against authoritarian entrenchment—a demand, clear and irreducible, for accountable governance. And yet, in the region’s dominant media echo chambers, it became an “instability event,” an outbreak to be quarantined lest it contaminate the neighborhood.

The irony is not lost on those who listen closely. When the old regime fell—an apparatus fattened on borrowed legitimacy, lubricated by patronage networks—it did not trigger anarchy but produced an interim government of remarkable sobriety. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus presided not over chaos but calibration: prisoners of conscience were freed, electoral frameworks reconstituted, and foreign policy recalibrated to restore multivector balance. But this was not the story the dominant narrative wished to tell. For power is not only about controlling events; it is about

controlling their interpretation. And interpretation, as Dolitsky reminds us, is where strategy meets ideology.

Consider the semantics of alarm: “Chinese infiltration.” It appeared within hours of Dhaka reopening its diplomatic aperture to Beijing—never mind that this relationship predated the uprising by decades, never mind that arms procurement and infrastructure partnerships were already normalized. The word “infiltration” is not a description; it is an accusation, a conjuring of malignancy. Pair it with the perennial scarecrow of “Islamist radicalism”—an almost Pavlovian reflex whenever Bangladesh asserts its agency—and the tableau is complete: Dhaka as drift, Dhaka as danger, Dhaka as destabilizer. The moral breadth of the Monsoon Revolution—its insistence on dignity, its repudiation of sectarian politics—was edited out of the frame. A pluralist revolt was packaged as a prelude to militancy. The cognitive work here is deliberate: to make sovereignty look reckless and subservience look wise.

The deeper architecture of this discourse is hierarchical. South Asia, in its hegemonic rendering, is not a community of equals but a solar system: one luminous core orbited by compliant satellites. Legitimacy flows outward, never inward. To dissent from this gravitational order is to invite labels: “unreliable,” “irresponsible,” “externally influenced.” These are not merely words; they are weapons—diplomatic silencers that choke a smaller state’s capacity to act without apology. And here Chomsky’s caution becomes prophecy: control the spectrum of permissible debate, and you control policy without firing a shot.

Yet facts, stubborn as they are, refuse containment. The empirical record following the uprising punctures the myth of chaos. No implosion of state capacity, no collapse of law and order, no proxy war blooming in the deltas. What emerged instead was a polity rehearsing maturity under duress—a nation that bled but did not bow. The interim government engaged not in ideological purges but institutional resets. This was not anarchy; it was audit. And herein lies the paradox Fisk would savor: the louder the narrative of fragility, the more it betrays the insecurity of those scripting it.

The geography argument—the tired refrain of “encirclement”—is equally hollow. Bangladesh’s cartography, so often invoked as a vulnerability, is in fact its counterweight. Nestled against the Siliguri Corridor—the brittle umbilicus of the subcontinent’s connectivity—Bangladesh is not a pawn but a pressure point. Its ports, Matarbari and Chattogram, are not provincial conveniences; they are geoeconomic choke points in a theater where maritime routes are the new trenches. Energy corridors, digital grids, blue economy—every calculus of the Indo-Pacific runs through this delta. To pretend otherwise is strategic theater, a denial game that masks dependency as dominance.

Why does this discursive war persist? Because the rise of a self-confident Bangladesh threatens the architecture of managed consent. A Dhaka that diversifies its alliances, asserts electoral integrity, and invests in narrative sovereignty erodes the monopoly of interpretation long enjoyed by its larger neighbor. And so the old playbook is dusted off: paint autonomy as adventurism, code pluralism as peril, and ensure that the world reads a protest not as prophecy but as pathology.

Breaking this spell requires more than policy; it demands pedagogy. Bangladesh

must not only craft strategies but stories—auditing every borrowed word, contesting every imposed frame. Independent journalism is the first rampart; cultural diplomacy the second. Partnerships beyond the binary of India and China must be cultivated—not as reaction but as design. And perhaps most urgently, as Dolitsky argues, the grammar of security must be rewritten so that sovereignty is not criminalized as instability.

Fisk ended many of his dispatches with a question, sharp and unbeautiful: “Who will tell the truth?” For Bangladesh, the answer cannot be outsourced. Narrative sovereignty is not a luxury; it is statecraft. Our discourse, more than ever, will determine destiny.

The Reckoning of Sovereignty

Be careful what you call “instability.” Sometimes, what you hear is not disorder—it is the earth cracking open to let history breathe.

Bangladesh is not a subplot in someone else’s script. It is not a buffer state scribbled into the margins of empires. It is a promise, carved into the blood and memory of 1971—a covenant between a people and their dignity. That promise was never meant to be outsourced, never meant to be leased to patrons of convenience.

The Monsoon Revolution was not an accident of rage. It was the slow accumulation of prayers whispered by mothers, of hunger endured in silence, of wounds carried across generations until one day the dam broke. And when it broke, the flood was not chaos—it was cleansing.

To those who guard the old gates of power with borrowed tools: understand this—you can censor a newspaper, but you cannot redact a nation’s soul. You can firewall a hashtag, but you cannot mute the hum of awakening. A people who once marched barefoot for freedom will not crawl forever for permission.

Sovereignty is not ink on parchment; it is breath in the lungs of the living. It is the boy writing slogans in smoke-stung eyes, the girl refusing to bend her voice, the farmer who votes though he has nothing left but hope. A nation is not an apparatus—it is an inheritance. And we will not squander ours.

The young are awake now. Their truths do not need think tanks for validation or chancelleries for translation. They are written on the streets, sung in the cadence of protests, encrypted in messages that no algorithm can cage. They speak a language older than fear: the language of dignity.

So let the pundits call it “instability.” We know better. That rumble in the streets, that tremor in the old order—that is sovereignty learning to speak again. And once a nation remembers its voice, no power on earth can make it forget.

The author is a retired Captain of Bangladesh Navy

Bangladesh—Pakistan Relations: An Occam’s Razor or Beyond the Conservative Fallacy?

Dr. Rashed Uz Zaman

The “Dhaka Spring” of 2024 saw in Bangladesh a hard-fought political transformation after fifteen years of rule by a single political party. The “July Revolution” of 2024 saw a student movement starting with a simple demand for egalitarian and merit-based principles in the recruitment of the government’s bureaucratic machineries, gaining traction among the masses as the erstwhile Awami League regime repressed the demands with brutal force, and resulting in the outburst of people in ousting the previous Awami League-led government on August 05, 2024. After the fated “36 days of July,” with a huge number of people killed and maimed for a simple demand, the country now is navigating through murky waters. The question remains — beyond the entrenched political gaze, how should the nascent Bangladesh 2.0 open its eyes for the strategic gaze?

Currently undergoing a transitioning phase, a major issue that is resurfacing in Bangladesh’s foreign policy during these shifting hours is how the relations with Pakistan will be in the coming days. Given the fact that Bangladesh and Pakistan share a rather complicated past, the question of resuming bilateral ties is rife with complexities.

Historical Context

After the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state from West Pakistan’s grip, the primary concern for the nascent country’s foreign policy was diplomatic

recognition (Ahmed 2016). The birth pangs of the new state was exacerbated by the dilemma of how to deal with the prisoners of war (POWs) and civil internees taken away by India, how to grapple with the issue of collaborators of Pakistan who remained in Bangladesh as “members of paramilitary groups, death squads, citizens’ committees, looters and informers,” and how to address the conundrums surrounding the non—Bengali Muslims colloquially referred to as “Biharis” (van Schendel [2009] 2020, 197–198).

In the face of securing the return of stranded Bengalis in Pakistan, Bangladesh had to compromise and allow 195 POWs to return to Pakistan. The context is that the August Agreement of 1973 between India and Pakistan allowed for the repatriation of an estimated 121,685 Bengalis to Bangladesh and that of 108,744 non-Bengalis to Pakistan (Chowdhury 2024). In the tripartite discussion between the foreign ministers of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan that followed in 1974, the war crimes trial and the repatriation issue started freezing the relations. Bangladesh was keen to securing the return of its stranded populace while ensuring the POWs were held accountable for their atrocities, India was concerned with returning its POWs to Pakistan, and Pakistan was unwavering in neither resettling the stranded Biharis nor the assets and liabilities (Chowdhury 2024).

Contentions with Islamabad was yet to be resolved, as the War of Liberation of Bangladesh was initially swept under the rug by Pakistan. For instance, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto remarked that East Pakistan was still a part of Pakistan that was “inseparable and unseverable” (M. S. Rahman 2016). No Pakistani ruler is yet to straightforwardly apologize for the act of barbarity during the 1971 War, although some eminent Pakistani citizens had done so (van Schendel [2009] 2020, 196).

Added to the complexities was the geopolitical reality of India surrounding Bangladesh from three sides, a major factor in foreign policy considerations of both countries. It is of note that after Bangladesh emerged as an independent state, India—Pakistan relations was subject to the Simla Agreement, a six-clause peace treaty signed in July 1972 and ratified by India and Pakistan, which often created contentions in Islamabad as a humiliating treaty (e.g., Malik 2023). Pakistan was initially adamant in not recognizing Bangladesh, and in its 1973 constitution had ideated Bangladesh as its former province (‘East Pakistan’) — while taking a jab at India as a foreign aggressor present on the ‘province’ of the federation of Pakistan (M. S. Rahman 2016, 384).

The recognition efforts started bearing fruit in 1974, as Pakistan hosted the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Conference (OIC) in Lahore that year, and the demography of Bangladesh comprised the second largest congregation of the Muslim populace of the world (Ahmed 2016, 369). The popular parlance is that various Muslim countries’ leaders persuaded both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to settle the scores and attend the Islamic Summit (Rahman 2016). Pakistan recognized Bangladesh on February 22, 1974, and Mujib participated in the summit on February 24 of the same year (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385; A. K. M. A. Rahman 2020).

The reciprocal attempt at thawing the relations snowballed into a tripartite conference, leading to an agreement between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan on

April 10, 1974 in New Delhi (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385). As per the agreement, Bangladesh granted “clemency” to 195 POWs, while Pakistan expressed “profound regrets” for any crimes that the Pakistani Armed Forces “might have committed” — followed by an official visit by Bhutto to Dhaka on June 28, 1974 (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385). But the major sticking points remained inconclusive, as Bhutto rejected discussions on the division of assets or the repatriation of 300,000 Biharis (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385). The bilateral relations picked up pace after the August coup of 1975, when Pakistan was the first country to recognize the new Bangladesh government, sent Bangladesh rice and cloth as a gesture of goodwill, and signed two formal agreements pertaining to trade relations, shipping, and airline links in April 1976 (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385; *The New York Times* 1977; *Emphasis added*). High-level visits occurred in-between military regimes (e.g.: Ziaur Rahman’s visit to Pakistan in 1977, Hussain Muhammad Ershad’s state visit in 1986; Zia-ul-Haq’s visit to Bangladesh in 1985) — yet, the apples of discord never got thoroughly resolved.

The matter of apology has always remained a burning question in Bangladesh—Pakistan bilateral interactions, and a major marker of their ups and downs of relations. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Sahibzada Yaqub Khan visited Bangladesh to discuss the resettlement of stranded Biharis and General Mirza Aslam Baig (the erstwhile chief of staff) was content to visit “old colleagues,” but neither was the apology issue resolved, nor did the resettlement progress (Baxter 1991, 152). The prominence of the apology debate during 1996–2000 resulted in Pervez Musharraf’s cancellation of a planned meeting with Sheikh Hasina in September 2000 due to the latter’s critical remarks on undemocratic change of power, Dhaka threatening to expel the deputy high commissioner of Pakistan on the grounds of his “derogatory remarks” on the Liberation War, and Islamabad’s subsequent withdrawal of the diplomat (as quoted in M. S. Rahman 2016, 385).

There were still efforts to retain ties — albeit with no visible results — in the front of diplomatic visits. After her visit to Pakistan in 1998 as Prime Minister, there were several instances in the 2008–2024 period where Sheikh Hasina cancelled her plans to visit Pakistan or had not responded to urging by various Prime Ministers of Pakistan to visit the country, and the permafrost remained by the reciprocity of the heads of government in Pakistan.

Foreign Policy Complexities in Bangladesh—Pakistan Bilateral Issues: In Permafrost?

The second section looks at the root causes of why bilateral relations plummeted between 2009 to 2024. The four outstanding issues standing in the path of normalcy for Bangladesh can be denoted as “Four Rs”: i. Recognition, ii. Resolving the issue of POWs, iii. Repatriation of stranded nationals in both countries, and iv. Reaching an agreement on sharing assets and liabilities (M. S. Rahman 2016, 384). While the recognition issue has been resolved in a broad manner, the impasse in Pakistan’s apology and the issue of POWs remains a primary concern for Dhaka, as even now the major underlying contentions remain in permafrost, regardless of any change in

political spheres of both countries.

The creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 might have created some hope initially, but the barring of bilateral and politically contentious issues from SAARC deliberations by dint of Article X (2) of the SAARC Charter had ensured that Bangladesh and Pakistan could not address any of the aforementioned challenges in this cooperative framework (SAARC [Website] 2020). With the continued downward spiraling into almost oblivion in a regional culture lacking cooperation, SAARC has often been called to either introduce new plans of action or introducing new members (Bishwakarma and Hu 2022), or “calling it quits” (The Kathmandu Post 2019).

The clarion call for a new hope for SAARC revival is heard across various quarters amidst changing winds in the political spheres, as the Pakistan Prime Minister has congratulated the Chief Adviser of Bangladesh (Husain 2024), while the Pakistan envoy to Bangladesh is currently meeting political leaders for strengthening ties (UNB 2024a). Bangladesh is also trying to maintain reciprocity by dint of seeking Pakistani trade and investment in textile and jute sectors (Dhaka Tribune 2024b), ensuring visa fee travel to Pakistan (Dhaka Tribune 2024a), and strengthening economic ties (Ahmar 2024).

In functional areas such as economic cooperation, the disproportionate *ad valorem* tariff imposed by Pakistan on Bangladesh-originated products (2–59 per cent, *vis-à-vis* Bangladesh’s 0–25 per cent on Pakistan-originated products), and Pakistan’s continuous refusal to sign a free trade agreement (FTA) with Bangladesh on the basis of the latter’s least developed country (LDC) status remain areas of concern, especially when Pakistan holds a major trade surplus *vis-à-vis* its huge exports to Bangladesh (Gulzar 2022; see also Tables 1 and 2).

A rule of thumb has been established that an Awami League-led government would be keen to maintain tighter ties with India, while a Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government would seek to retain a higher degree of bonds with Pakistan (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385). Pakistan’s President General Pervez Musharraf (also the chief of army staff at that time) visited Bangladesh in July 2002, expressed his “regret” for the events of 1971, and 51 civil society organizations of Pakistan apologized to Bangladeshi civilians for the atrocities (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385). While the erstwhile Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia thanked the President of Pakistan for the efforts towards reconciliation, it was duly noted that the step should have been towards a formal “apology” and not “regret” (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385).

The post-2008 Awami League government again followed the old pattern, while the creation of the International Crimes Tribunal stirred the memory of the broader populace and amassed into the Shahbagh Movement. In December 2013, the Pakistan National Assembly passed a resolution condemning the execution of Abdul Qader Mollah, former assistant secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islami, who was convicted by the court in Dhaka for crimes against humanity (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385). The resulting furor in the government saw Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoning Pakistan’s high commissioner and handing a protest note against the resolution (M. S. Rahman 2016, 385). The rule of thumb has been further

established by the remarks of the Indian Army Chief, who remarked on a possibility of change in Bangladesh—India relations because of regime change – something that can be translated in a relatively greater engagement with Pakistan (The Business Standard 2025).

The thawing of the surface glacier, therefore, may be possible by dint of bilateral trade and cooperation functionally issues — but the deep core of relations will not be possible unless and until the Gordian Knot is cut — that is, by dint of melting these four permafrosts, through political means.

Continuity and Discontinuity in Bilateral Framework

The Foreign Adviser of the Interim Government of Bangladesh has recently hinted that sans a formal and public apology, a normalization of relations with Pakistan may remain a pipe dream (Dhaka Tribune 2024c). Pining for a revival of SAARC, the Chief Adviser of Bangladesh and the Prime Minister of Pakistan met at the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2024 (Dhaka Tribune 2024c). Hope floats on functional areas of cooperation such as trade, defense cooperation, and civil aviation.

Regarding trade ties, Bangladesh has a long-running trade deficit vis-à-vis Pakistan regardless of regime (see Tables 1 and 2). Both tables denote that although Pakistan's trade surplus (vis-à-vis Bangladesh) is lesser than India's trade surplus (vis-à-vis Bangladesh), in no year in the available data of the past two decades has Bangladeshi exports to Pakistan surpassed Pakistani imports to Bangladesh. In fact, Pakistan is the second-largest import source for Bangladesh so far as South Asian states are concerned, and the trade imbalance vis-à-vis Pakistan is a continuous feature of Bangladesh's trade flow (The Daily Star 2025, see also Tables 1 and 2). In this regard, it is interesting to note that Bangladesh's mammoth trade deficit vis-à-vis India is also a seemingly permanent reality due to the two states' geographical proximity (see Tables 1 and 2). This well establishes the dictums of the gravity or spatial interaction model of trade, where trade flows between two countries are proportional to their sizes of economy and inversely proportional to their distance (Poon and Rigby 2017). It is to be noted that although the exports and imports greatly fluctuated since 2016-17 (Table 2), these two South Asian states remain Bangladesh's biggest trading partners in the region, maintaining a continuum.

Pakistan is a major source of intermediate goods and textiles for Bangladesh (World Integrated Trade Solution [WITS] Database 2024). For every year in the past five years, intermediate (or semi-finished) goods have been predominant in Pakistan's exports to Bangladesh, with a close following by textiles and clothing (WITS 2024). Fluctuations have started afterwards, as recently, minerals have started taking the third place, which used to belong to hides and skin (WITS 2024). Data derived from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) also show Bangladesh's dependency on Pakistan for cotton and cotton-related products for the past two decades, while cement has started becoming a notable export for Pakistan to Bangladesh since 2018 (OEC 2024, in an HS4 measure). Pakistan Business Council (PBC) estimated that

beyond the ninefold export—import ratio in Pakistan’s favor in 2022, Pakistan had an export potential of at least \$2.95 billion in Bangladesh — which remains untapped till date (Gulzar 2022).

Bangladesh is an exporter of raw materials, textiles and clothing, and consumer goods to Pakistan (WITS 2024). While raw materials and textiles (mostly as jute and jute yarn) take the lion’s share of the exports, fluctuations have been observed in the exports of consumer goods (mostly tea) and intermediate goods (raw tobacco and scrap vessels) in the past five years (OEC 2024, in an HS4 measure; WITS 2024). Therefore, it is a prerogative that Bangladesh has to think of diversifying its export commodities while increasing its own domestic production of intermediate and finished goods, especially to create a preferential trade agreement in the absence of an FTA while seeking to graduate from the LDC status (Gulzar 2022). These avenues of economic relations bear the continuum of relations between the countries. However, a discontinuity is currently proposed in Bangladesh as glaring trade imbalances from South Asian states prompted the state bank to urge for indigenous production of imported materials (The Daily Star 2025).

In the meantime, the incipient acquisition of artillery ammunition, tank ammunition rounds, RDX explosive and high intensity projectiles in 2024 after strenuous relations of nearly two decades is being dubbed as Bangladesh’s ambition to establish dominance in the region while strengthening bilateral cooperation with Pakistan (Durrani 2024). This seeming break from a continuum of non-defense cooperation must be understood in the light that Bangladesh had a one-time case of importing dredgers from Pakistan in 2019 with no subsequent follow-up (Gulzar 2022, Emphasis added). Without a long-term and reiterated interaction, a fledgling “big” arms procurement does not necessarily always translate into strategic bilateral ties. Furthermore, given the geopolitical reality, India is bound to formulate a strategy of securing its own national interest in light of such a purchase.

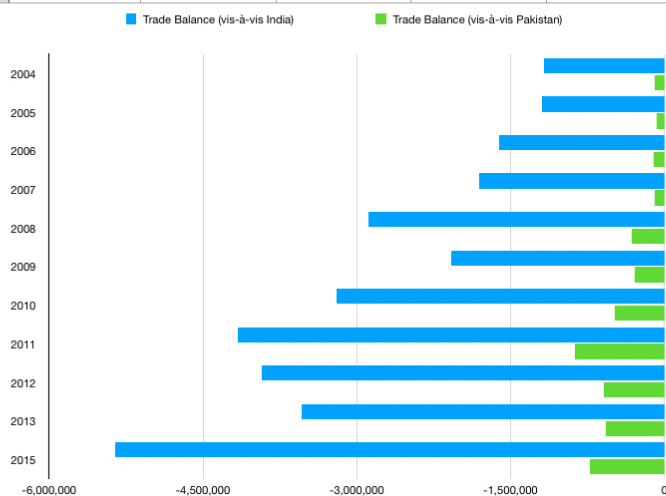
As for the Interim Government’s aviation plans, the stretching 2204-kilometers of Indian territory stands in the way of direct overland flights. Even if such flights are commenced, very few sections of Bangladesh would be able to avail the opportunity to travel to Pakistan, notably the traders, businesspeople and students (Dhaka Tribune 2024a). Given New Delhi’s tendency of portraying the Interim Government as well as the successive elected government in a religiously extremist hue, the effectiveness of the decision of waiving Pakistani visa hangs in the balance as the Indian visa gets more and more difficult to obtain.

Table 1: Bangladesh's Trade with India and Pakistan (2005–2015)*



Bangladesh's Trade with India and Pakistan (2005–2015)* (in Thousand USD) [*The data from 2014 is missing] (Source: The World Bank)

Year	Export to India	Import from India	Trade Balance (vis-à-vis India)	Export to Pakistan	Import from Pakistan	Trade Balance (vis-à-vis Pakistan)
2004	105,206	1,278,712	-1,173,506	44,663	142,379	-97,716
2005	177,731	1,372,039	-1,194,308	80,751	156,659	-75,908
2006	257,884	1,875,666	-1,617,782	53,351	155,962	-102,611
2007	523,693	2,333,892	-1,810,199	96,886	189,115	-92,229
2008	273,188	3,159,168	-2,885,980	81,204	396,459	-315,255
2009	270,001	2,352,752	-2,082,751	69,356	362,846	-293,490
2010	319,381	3,521,325	-3,201,944	83,661	568,823	-485,162
2011	470,534	4,630,682	-4,160,148	85,789	963,201	-877,412
2012	443,229	4,370,404	-3,927,175	68,311	662,176	-593,865
2013	383,144	3,918,452	-3,535,308	58,434	632,508	-574,074
2015	517,891	5,882,080	-5,364,189	47,743	777,573	-729,830

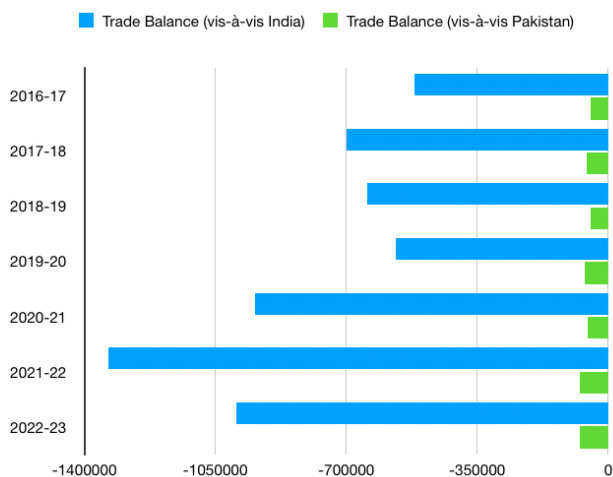
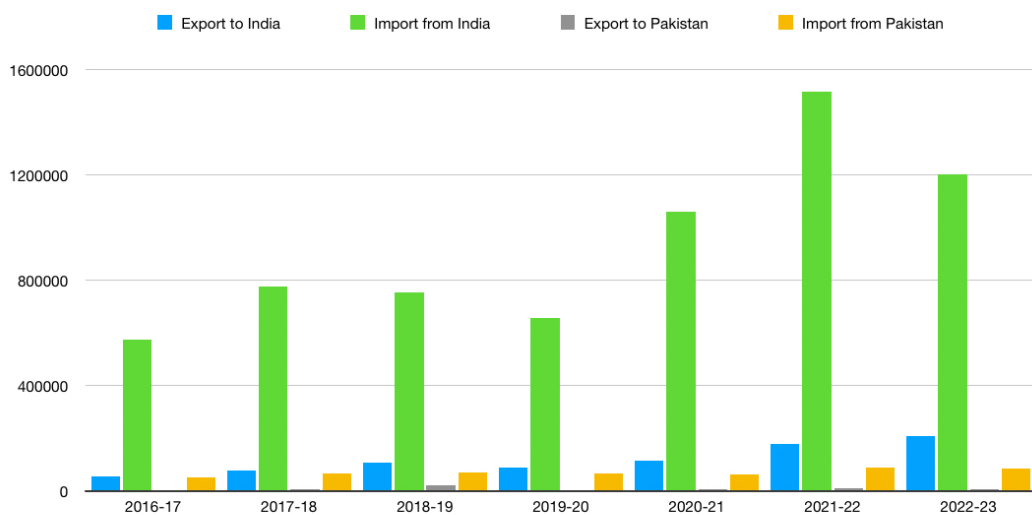


*Data from 2014 unavailable. (Data Source: World Integrated Trade Solution Database of The World Bank)

Table 2: Bangladesh's Trade with India and Pakistan (From 2016-17 till 2022-23)

Bangladesh's Trade Balance vis-à-vis India and Pakistan (From 2016-17 till 2022-23) (in Million BDT) (Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)

Year	Export to India	Import from India	Export to Pakistan	Import from Pakistan	Trade Balance (vis-à-vis India)	Trade Balance (vis-à-vis Pakistan)
2016-17	56166.41	573552.28	5139.17	51984.63	-517385.87	-46845.46
2017-18	76172.58	776828.02	6071.78	63997.20	-700655.44	-57925.42
2018-19	107101	752025	19523	67782	-644924	-48259
2019-20	88479	656981	3781	67254	-568502	-63473
2020-21	114558	1059725	7617	63551	-945167	-55934
2021-22	177757	1516786	9754	86426	-1339029	-76672
2022-23	207315	1201351	7570	83510	-994036	-75940



(Data Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)

Scenarios between Bangladesh and Pakistan Relations

The recent media uproar in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan regarding the warming of Bangladesh—Pakistan bilateral ties are focusing on the political actors. But it must also be remembered that an undercurrent of Bangladeshi youth exist among the pro- and anti-Awami League populace who are staunch believers of the 1971 Liberation War, and a complete erasure of the memories of the War Crimes Tribunal from this collective is impossible due to their active participation in or implicit support to the Shahbagh Movement in 2013–14.

Particularly striking here is the divisiveness of the country after the remarks of the Ameer of the Jamaat-e-Islami establishing interference-free relations with both India and Pakistan (Kumar 2024). Despite the South Asian collective amnesia, a considerable portion of the youth believe in the normalization of ties lying with the notion of an apology, partly due to the Awami League regime's active pursuit of flagging 1971 as its fountainhead of political ideology, and partly because of the Liberation War shaping the psychological contours of a crucial demographic dividend in an age of information.

Furthermore, the presence of the army in Pakistan's foreign policy formulation ensures the near impossibility of rendering an apology to Bangladesh and the resurgence of the political and military infights within the state. The liabilities of 1971 have always been a sore point for both political and military officials of Pakistan, and the current setting vis-à-vis Bangladesh has a probability of exacerbating the tension.

The India factor remains a major concern in regional cooperation efforts as well, as strenuous complexities await the future interactions among South Asian actors in SAARC and beyond. Given historical trajectories, a confrontational relation between Bangladesh and India is very likely, especially without the mechanism to address bilateral misapprehensions and contentious political issues, while tête-à-tête among the political leaders providing little channel to discuss the gigantic areas of entanglement.

The fluid political situation in Bangladesh at least until the next election is another area of grave uneasiness. The political vacuum and the attempt by former oppositions and opportunists alike to take hold of the throne, while the ousted political party's possible trajectory of returning to the political scene will befuddle foreign policy decision making process.

Challenges and Options: Occam's Razor, or beyond the Conservative Fallacy?

In the case of the impending Bangladesh—Pakistan relations, the simplest path dependency stems from the historical trajectory, where a regime-centric stronger or weaker tie awaits the relations. At the same time, in accordance with the same principle of simplistic precedence, the past interactions with Pakistan is yet to result in lasting political relations beyond functionalist approaches to cooperation between the

two countries. The overall trade relations will remain skewed in Pakistan's favor until Bangladesh's growing contemplation on diversifying export products and increasing domestic productions becomes a reality — especially as the precarious state of the Pakistan economy raises concerns.

This simplistic precedence is the prevalent theme of Occam's razor — a philosophical principle that posits that “plurality should not be posited without necessity” — or, in simpler words: when two theories collide, “the simpler explanation of an entity is to be preferred” (Britannica 2024). In basic scientific terminology, when one hears the sound of hoof beats, it is better to presume “horses” than “zebras.” Although there are complex dynamics of Bangladesh—Pakistan relations, the empirical evidence over the years points out towards a reality where a normal relation with being too friendly is the maximum level of expectation (Emphasis added). Change may happen but not overnight, most possibly no drastic change will occur during the tenure of the Interim Government, and the remaining possibility of a major overturn in the relations rely upon an election.

For Pakistan, apology is an impossible concept given its predominant military presence in the political machinery. The Occam's razor principle would starkly point out that occasionally Pakistan may have informally “regretted” its actions, but the tussle between their military and political dimensions will remain in place for the foreseeable future, and will continue stalling the normalization process (e.g. many Pakistan military officials blaming the political arm for the 1971 War; see The Economic Times 2022). The continuation of simpler principles, in this regard, leads to a conservative fallacy that a betterment of ties between Bangladesh and Pakistan could never be possible.

Reality disagrees. Despite this fallacy, economic relations (however strenuous) has sustained over the years. Therefore, a working relation between the two countries can be retained by functional and soft power issue areas, namely, trade and cultural exchanges. Interactions among people has increased in the era of globalization, and in this exercise of soft power through cultural exchange, Bangladesh and Pakistan is slowly growing closer. Beyond the people-to-people connectivity by bilateral trade and development (e.g., the operation of the Bangladeshi non-governmental organization BRAC in Pakistan since 2007), functional issues like sports, music and drama series remain a common area of interaction between the two countries' youth. Dhaka has orchestrated concerts of popular Pakistani singers such as Atif Aslam and Hasan Raheem, and band like Jal (The Daily Star 2023; UNB 2024b). Cricket, a popular sport in both countries, is another avenue of cooperation for people-to-people, evident in the latest visit of the Bangladesh Cricket Team to Pakistan for participating in the International Cricket Council [ICC] Champions Trophy 2025, held in Pakistan and United Arab Emirates (UAE).

However, cautious optimism has to be exercised; as even in the happy occasion when Occam's razor loses its sharpness and Bangladesh and Pakistan gets to resolve their bilateral differences by dint of functionalist logic trickling into greater political cooperation, the presence of India retains the sharpness of the razor all over again. For its own national interest from a “Kautilyan brand of realism,” India will pursue a

foreign and security policy that may follow the principle of safeguarding its sovereignty, avoiding wars, achieving peace — but not without the guarantee of force backing up their benevolence (Zaman 2006, 242). Thus, if any aspect of a Bangladesh—Pakistan tie is perceived to be cautionary by India, the possibility of a retaliation is extremely likely. Therefore, Bangladesh must tread softly when reestablishing ties with Pakistan, as there can be no ignoring the elephant in the room.

Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

Minimal expectations based on the simplistic principle for now is the guiding trajectory for Bangladesh and Pakistan. Increase in connectivity efforts is suggested to start with non-contentious bilateral issues and spilled over in the political spectrum, with keeping the presence of India as a neighbor to both of the countries in mind.

In the absence of a concrete apology, a degree of contriteness could be shown and efforts towards normalization might be taken up seriously instead of keeping at a rhetorical level. The efforts by the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ease the visa regime could be open towards more than the few socio-economic beneficiaries of the upper class.

In this regard, the two countries are urged to provide more accessible and open educational opportunities for students. This has become very pertinent in the face of both states' poor performances in the Global Knowledge Index 2023, where Bangladesh is ranked 112th and Pakistan stands at 117th out of 133 countries, securing the lowest ranking among the South Asian states (Knowledge for All 2024). As the global North is decreasing state funding in scholarships and incentives for international students, a South-South cooperation should make way for furtherance of knowledge in this region. This is especially applicable as both states host a significant number of Australia Awards, Commonwealth, Chevening, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), Erasmus-Mundus and Fulbright alumni who frequently contribute to the academic excellence and policy circles in their home countries after their return from the reputed educational institutions of the global North. Furthermore, research organizations are proposed to be given their true independence to raise their own merit (Ahmed 2016).

Defense cooperation could go beyond arms procurement and focus on intangible capacity buildup. Courses offered in National Defence College (NDC) or Defence Services Command & Staff College (DSCSC) in Dhaka and National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad might consider increasing the number of officials participating in various courses, workshops, seminars and exercises. Although there is mutual institutional participation by NDC, DSCSC and NDU, the number is still low. In this regard, the two states should also take into consideration their common experience of serving in various missions of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO), where both Bangladesh and Pakistan are highly engaged as top troop contributor countries (TCCs). Lessons and skill sets mutually acquired in the UNPKO enables the states to explore greater areas of cooperation. The increase in areas of cooperation will have positive policy implications for both of the countries,

and may set an atmosphere of normalization by dint of a tensions—first approach.

Bilateral trade relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan have been skewed in favor of Pakistan for a long time. Bangladesh may address the need for its diversification of finished goods, increase investment in skilled labor, and grab the opportunities present within the domestic market of Pakistan.

Tourism between the two countries is another avenue through which the Bangladesh and Pakistan may get to know each other better in the current context. Given the fact that many Bengalis still live and work in Pakistan, Bangladesh could tap this hitherto untapped potential and utilize their presence there to increase the opportunities for tourism at home, and vice versa. Although security issue pervades both Bangladesh and Pakistan, opening up non-political and functional areas of cooperation (for instance, Pakistan hosting international cricket tournaments such as the ICC Champions Trophy 2025) may ease tensions and amp up state efforts to make the countries friendlier for foreign visitors (Asian News International 2025).

In conclusion, Bangladesh can hope for a somewhat relatively warmer relations with Pakistan in the coming days, and hope for good ties with Pakistan. But to hope for excellent ties at this juncture of history and at the very outset would be an unrealistic expectation. The bottom line: building upon simple (yet effective principles) may pave the road to a better outcome in the future than entering the premises with the hope of a gloriously promising interaction and then losing all hope upon perceiving the prevailing reality.

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Burma Act, Rohingya Act and Rohingya Repatriation

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The relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar warrants careful analysis, given that Myanmar has experienced prolonged periods of military governance and is often described as exhibiting characteristics of apartheid (oppressive and tyrant regime). The challenges facing the region have largely stemmed from policies implemented by successive military regimes since 1962, particularly those under the leadership of the Tatmadaw. These administrations, notably during General Ne Win's tenure, pursued isolationist and nationalist policies—labelled the "Burmese Way to Socialism"—which limited democratic development and restricted human rights. Additionally, religion and ethnicity were frequently used as instruments for political control.

Early attempts at integration, such as General Aung San's efforts through the Panglong Agreement of 1947, fell short of achieving broad ethnic representation. The Tatmadaw's primary interests have consistently centred on maintaining authority, securing economic benefits, and ensuring immunity from legal accountability. Despite sustained international renouncement, especially from the United States and Western countries, Myanmar's leadership has continued its governing approach with relative impunity.

Efforts by the international community have not succeeded in fully addressing concerns regarding human rights violations and governance practices in Myanmar, particularly related to the Rohingya crisis. The United States intensified its diplomatic response after 1989, which included declining to recognize Myanmar's name change,

reducing its diplomatic presence following the 1988 protests (from Ambassador to Chargé d'affaires), and questioning the legitimacy of the 1990 elections. In consonance with the International Religious Freedom Act, the U.S. designated Myanmar as a Country of Particular Concern due to significant and ongoing violations of religious freedom, including arbitrary detention, mistreatment, and enforced disappearances.

In 2003, the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act (BFDA) was enacted to recognize the National League for Democracy (NLD) as the legitimate representative of the Burmese people, reinforce democratic movements in Burma, impose sanctions on the ruling military junta, prohibit the export of financial services to Myanmar, ban all imports from Myanmar, and freeze the assets of designated Burmese financial institutions. To further strengthen these measures, the United States passed the Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008, amending the BFDA to extend sanctions to officials of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), modify provisions concerning humanitarian assistance to Burma, prohibit the importation of gemstones originating from Burma, and encourage coordinated international efforts to restore civilian democratic rule.

The United States also sanctioned Maung Maung Soe, Chief of the Myanmar Army's Western Command, for his role in the 2017 atrocities against the Rohingya population. Economic sanctions were applied to the Burmese Army's 33rd and 99th Light Infantry Divisions and targeted individuals, including Thura San Lwin, Khin Maung Soe, Aung Kyaw Zaw, and Khin Hlaing, among other members of the military junta. Additionally, there was an attempt to pass the 'Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2019' (BURMA Act of 2019) to authorize humanitarian assistance and impose sanctions related to human rights abuses in Burma. In March 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared that the Myanmar military's actions against the Rohingya in August 2017 constituted genocide. Subsequently, in December 2022, the BURMA Act of 2022 was enacted to promote democracy and human rights, authorize humanitarian and civil society support, and impose targeted sanctions in response to ongoing human rights abuses in Burma.

The BURMA Act of 2022 outlines United States policy toward Myanmar (Burma), authorising the President to implement new sanctions, allocate appropriations for assistance, counter human rights abuses, and restrict imports from Myanmar. The Act specifically mandates support for accountability through independent, credible investigations and prosecutions of potential genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity—including those involving sexual and gender-based violence and violence against children—committed against ethnic or religious minorities such as the Rohingya, by members of Burma's military, security forces, and other armed groups.

Although the United States is neither a signatory to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) nor recognises the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC), there was an expectation within the international community for US engagement in the ICJ case against Myanmar initiated by The Gambia. Deeper US involvement would have further demonstrated the intent and effectiveness of the BURMA Act 2022, especially regarding the prosecution of responsible parties.

Despite these legislative intentions, Myanmar has not yet undergone a meaningful

democratic transformation, instituted a civilian government, or undertaken constitutional reforms. The country remains distant from achieving an inclusive political system featuring free, fair, and credible democratic elections, nor do all political parties currently possess the ability to exercise their rights to participate at all levels, including voting and standing for office.

The Act also calls for national reconciliation in Myanmar, beginning with a nationwide ceasefire and leading to a peace process inclusive of various ethnic groups—including the Rohingya, Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Karen, Kachin, and Karenni—to establish a political system that addresses natural resource governance, revenue sharing, land rights, and constitutional reform conducive to broad-based peace.

Persistent shortfalls—including declining international funding for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh amid increasing needs—prompted the drafting of the Rohingya Genocide Accountability and Protection Act (“Rohingya GAP Act” or “Rohingya Act”) in 2024. This proposed legislation aims to provide enhanced protection, support, and humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons, reinforce Rohingya civil society organizations, facilitate voluntary, safe, and sustainable repatriation to Myanmar, and promote accountability for crimes committed by the Myanmar military and security forces. Notably, the Act seeks to ensure that Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi camps receive rations that meet minimum humanitarian standards for food and nutrition. As of now, this Act has yet to be enacted.

Several noteworthy developments occurred in 2023 and 2024, including the coordinated offensive by the Three Brotherhood in Shan State and the decisive victory achieved by the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State. The Tatmadaw and Border Guard Police (BGP) suffered significant defeats, abandoning their posts along with substantial quantities of arms and munitions. These setbacks for the Tatmadaw, particularly in Shan and Rakhine States, coupled with the introduction of the Rohingya Act in Washington, sent a strong signal to China regarding potential risks to its national interests in Myanmar, especially concerning the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC).

In response, China promptly intervened to ensure that Lashio—the largest city in northern Shan State—remained outside the control of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), a key element of the Three Brotherhood alliance. Lashio holds strategic importance both as a commercial hub and as the location of the Myanmar regime’s Northeastern Regional Military Command.

Simultaneously, the AA expanded its operations southwards into the Ayeyarwady Region. Notably, the armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG) allied with the AA to challenge Tatmadaw positions in southern Myanmar. The AA is reportedly targeting military junta defence industrial facilities in the Bago and Magway regions. In Rakhine State, the AA, through its political arm, the Arakan People’s Revolutionary Government (APRG), administers crucial sectors such as the judiciary and public health, signalling ambitions for greater autonomy and potentially a confederate status.

The AA’s success in Rakhine has implications beyond Myanmar’s internal dynamics; it poses significant challenges to China’s influence, particularly concerning the CMEC,

impacts India's Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) and related trade initiatives, complicates Rohingya repatriation efforts from Bangladesh, and is actively reshaping the geopolitical and security landscape of the region.

What options does Bangladesh have to prioritise its national interests, especially sustainable Rohingya repatriation? One approach is to continue dialogue with all parties, including the AA, to seek a long-term solution. However, Tatmadaw's reluctance to recognise the AA as a stakeholder complicates this process. Myanmar's recent diplomatic protest to Dhaka over discussions with the AA was followed by the urgent recall of Bangladesh's Ambassador to Yangon, Mr. Md. Monowar Hossain, and Defence Attaché Brigadier General Md. Aftab Hossain in May 2025.

Some opine a coercive course of action by supporting the armed wing of the Rohingya, like all other ethnic groups of Myanmar, as an alternative. Can Bangladesh afford this option fundamentally, principally, or financially? Indeed, Bangladesh cannot dictate the options/decisions that Rohingyas in Cox's Bazaar or the Rohingya diaspora take independently. Another option is the combined efforts of the international community, including the active role of the USA and China. Unless internal and external forces compel the leadership of Tatmadaw, the hope of resolving the Myanmar or Rohingya issues seems never going to see the light of success. We saw the same thing in 1988 through the 8888 uprisings (the People Power Uprising), which resulted in the fall of General Ne Win, the emergence of Aung San Suu Kyi, and the pathway to the 1990 election. Internally, at least three major stakeholders need to be in an active role, i.e., NUG, Tatmadaw (need to be compelled), and AA, besides other ethnic groups (general mass), as they will have to accept the Rohingya as citizens of Myanmar.

Like the international community, Bangladesh can hope for more involvement from the USA, China, and the West to compel Myanmar's current military leadership to fulfil the expectations of the international community. The AA needs to understand that Bangladesh is the only opening for it, as it is surrounded by all unfriendly elements. CNF in the North and Tatmadaw in the East and South. This is an opportunity to make the Rakhine "rice bowl" of Asia again from its present deplorable state. A stable Rakhine will help China to further its geopolitical and economic interests. The Rohingya Act needs to be enacted as quickly as possible to allow the USA to be involved more deeply in the issue. Let the perpetrators be brought to justice in the ICJ and set an example to the other potential junta not to try this venture again. Let the impunity of the military junta cease forever, which they have been enjoying for decades. Let the citizens of Myanmar have a sigh of relief that they couldn't take for the last 63 years. Let Bangladesh be free from the challenges thrust upon it by Myanmar for decades, and establish a good relationship with the citizens of Myanmar.

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Post-Pahalgam Indo-Pak Escalation and Its Implications

Brig Gen Mahboob Sarwar, PhD (Retd)

In the afternoon of May 12, 2025, people in the Subcontinent breathed a sigh of relief as the news of an Indo-Pak ceasefire started to break. Tensions between the two arch-rivals flared up following the carnage of twenty-six people by militants near Pahalgam in the Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) on April 22, 2025. As usual, Indians were quick to blame Pakistan for sponsoring the horrific killings of innocent tourists. Pakistan was prompt to deny any involvement, condemn the attack and sought impartial international inquiry into the incident. But intense hype and war hysteria implicating Pakistan's involvement created by the Indian Media and the ruling BJP affiliates reached a level from where it was impossible for the Indian PM to back out from some sort of military actions. Indians, thereafter, conducted airstrikes at alleged terrorist hideouts inside Pakistan at the early hours of May 7, 2025, despite repeated call for restraint from the international community and Pakistan's stern warning for grave consequences. The Pahalgam attack eventually led to an intense aerial confrontation between the nuclear-armed neighbours with both sides exchanging air, drone and missile strikes across the border. Fortunately, intervention by the international community, de-escalation was successful within just four days.

Indian administered J&K has been a flashpoint for separatist attacks with a long-drawn-out struggle for self-determination, making the area unsafe for tourists for decades. Experts categorise the recent Indo-Pak escalation as unprecedented and a race between Western and Chinese military technologies that will certainly draw huge interest amongst the defence circles worldwide. The conflict bears significance beyond Indo-Pak frontiers. This article aims to analyse the post-Pahalgam escalation and its impacts in the subcontinent from Bangladesh perspective.

Indo-Pak Kashmir Flashpoint

Kashmiri Separatist Movement. The Kashmir dispute has been an unresolved colonial legacy, originated at the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947. The partition plan allowed the Muslim-majority region to join either country but the ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, chose to join India. The event drew both nations to the first ever Indo-Pak war in 1948. An armed rebellion against Indian rule in J&K began in the late 80s, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths. With about 60% Muslim population, J&K is the only Muslim majority state in India and used to enjoy special status. But in 2019 Kashmiri discontent deepened, when the Hindu nationalist BJP govt abrogated the Article 370 and 35A that acknowledged the special status of the state in terms of autonomy and its ability to formulate laws for the state's permanent residents. Since overturning of the region's special status, tourist visits soared, and Kashmiris started to fear demographic change in the state. Both local and international rights bodies have documented, sexualized violence used as a weapon to terrorize or humiliate Kashmiri Muslim communities. Human Rights Watch, in a news release in July 2024 notes, 'the Indian security forces continue to conduct repressive policies including arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, and other serious abuses. Despite an active insurgency in J&K, the ruling Hindu nationalist government encouraged tourism to project normalcy following its controversial action to revoke the autonomy. The Kashmir issue is definitely far bigger and complex than merely a cross-border terrorism or Indo-Pak rivalry. Indian's attempt to brand it as an act of terrorism is an attempt to mask the decades old Kashmiri struggle for self-determination.

India's Israeli Playbook in Kashmir. Indian policies in J&K and with neighbours resemble copycat Israeli doctrine in the Middle East. Occupation of Kashmiri lands by moving settlers, demolition of houses of suspected militants, arbitrary detention and torture, undermining sovereignty of neighbours in the pretext of terrorism are vivid replication of Israeli policies adopted by India. Mr Arman Ahmed, an analyst at the International Council on Human Rights, writes in the daily New Age that India's Operation Sindoor in Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir has been a deeper connection is in strategy: the employment of psychological warfare, media framing, identity politics, and a broad invocation of self-defence to justify pre-emptive attack. Authorities in J&K have demolished several houses of alleged militants and detained scores of Muslims for questioning as investigations continue into Pahalgam killings. Unsurprisingly, Israel was the only country that openly expressed support for India during its recent escalation with Pakistan. Mr. Nasir Qadri, a human Rights lawyer from the J&K, in an article published in the TRT News says, "Kashmiri dissidents were imprisoned under draconian laws, often without trial." Lawyers, journalists, political leaders, even grieving families, were surveilled, arrested, or silenced as witnessed in Gaza. Israel's doctrine of deterrence that India tends to adopt against Pakistan insisted periodic, repeated strikes. Maliha Lodhi, Pakistan's former ambassador to UN writes, how borrowing from the Israeli playbook and applying it in a nuclearized environment would not work.

Sindoor vs. Bunyan Marsoos – The Outcome

Indian strike at suspected terrorist hideout on May 7, was code named ‘Operation Sindoor’ signifying retaliation for the widowed women at Pahalgam. Chief of Pakistan military’s media wing claimed that none of the so called terrorist camps existed at the sites and these were mosques, civic centres and civilian residential areas. However, Indian airstrikes came at a cost as the Indian Air Force (IAF) reportedly lost six advanced jets including the IAF crown jewel, the French made Rafale jets were downed by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). The four-day conflict showcased intense air battle in recent history involving around 110-120 modern fighter jets, what PAF called a multi-domain operation. Analysts both in India and outside accepts without hesitation that the PAF outshined IAF in a textbook demonstration of a Net-centric warfare. Month after the mishap, Indians are yet to accept or declare the exact number of the jets lost in the conflict. In an analysis of visuals posted online, The Washington Post confirmed the presence of debris consistent with at least two French-made fighter jets, specifically a Rafale and a Mirage 2000, operated by the IAF. Sources in the Indian Military confirmed that on May 7th, the IAF operation against only two targets lasted about half an hour and resulted in at least six aircrafts losses. The matter exposed the IAF weaknesses, raising serious concerns.

The airspace over the Indo-Pak border has been one of the highly defended skies, which make it costly for any Air Forces to venture on a cross-border strikes by any means. PAF lately inducted Chinese J-10C jets and upgraded the locally produced JF-17 Block III jets with powerful radars capable of ‘Beyond Visual Range (BVR)’ engagements, significantly boosting its air power. Moreover, Pakistan over the years has built a robust Air Defence (AD) network with the induction of Western and Chinese Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), sophisticated Surface to Air Missile (SAM), and modern jets equipped with BVR missiles backed up by resilient electronic warfare capabilities. To overpower such a formidable AD, the IAF as an aggressor, essentially needed to conduct ‘suppression of Enemy AD’ in short SEAD operations against the adversary. Such operations entail persistent precision strikes to neutralise early warning radars, air bases, SAM sites including command and control nodes using a combination of Cruise Missiles, Drones and precision airstrikes for days. Indians surely lacked that capacity and resolve. Moreover, such level of sustained air strikes against Pakistani forces were definitely out of the planning table from Indian perspective considering Pakistan’s ability to retaliate equally. On the third day, Indian forces launched massive drone strike all along the Pakistani front using Israeli Harop Loitering Munition to take down Pakistani AD network but that failed to have any impact against Pakistani countermeasures.

On May 10, 2025, Pakistan initiated its own retaliatory strike, code named ‘Operation Bunyanun Marsoos,’ meaning concrete structure in Arabic, as it vowed to respond at a time of its own choosing. Pakistan’s military media claimed that it targeted and destroyed several Indian air bases in J&K and India’s Punjab province. It also claimed destroying a BrahMos missile storage facility in the Indian city of Beas.

Meanwhile, Indians launched missiles at three air bases in Pakistan at the early hours of the same day. Pakistani and international media outlets claimed that Pakistani forces carried out massive cyberattack on Indian official websites, railway network and India's power grid as part of the operation. From Pakistan's perspective, it had no options than to retaliate as doing otherwise would give India permission to strike Pakistan, whenever Delhi feels aggrieved.

Indian defence and security analysts Mr Pravin Sawhney observe that the PAF displayed much superior operational and technological prowess and Pakistani forces definitely finished ahead of the Indians. Experts both in India and outside note that Operation Sindoor lacked strategic insights and failed to achieve its objectives both in the political and military terms. A New York Times report says, 'Strategically, the battlefield tossup was a clear setback for India.' The setback has seriously dented India's aspiration as a regional superpower or an aspiring diplomatic and economic power. India actually finds itself equated with Pakistan and must have realized that an outright military victory against an adversary possessing nuclear arsenals is nearly impossible. The Indo-Pak standoff highlighted a China-Pakistan alliance winning against a combined Western, Russians and Indian endeavours. Indian analysts have started to question the handling of the situation, particularly the disproportionate response against suspected terrorist camps. Columnists also conclude that India actually raised Pakistan's geopolitical profile post Sindoor as it finds itself equated with Pakistan. Some Indian analysts however claims that the operation has imposed cost on Pakistan military. Indian analysts have observed that Operation Sindoor emboldened Pakistan rather than deterred it. Most importantly, the conflict allowed to internationalise the Kashmir issue. President Trump's offer to assist in resolving the Kashmir issue aligns with Pakistan's objective of bringing international attention to Kashmir and encouraging India to engage in dialogue. That kind of initiative Indian always rejects.

Fallout from the Indo-Pak Conflict

The Indo-Pak escalation happened at a crucial geopolitical setting, creating uncertainties for smaller states in the Subcontinent across diplomatic, economic, and strategic fronts. Like the previous similar attacks, Pakistan insists that Pahalgam attack is a 'false flag operation' for domestic consumption, staged for electoral gain in upcoming state elections. Indian hand behind the separatist movement in Baluchistan is evident from Ajit Doval's 2014 statement, "You do one Mumbai, you may lose Baluchistan." As an immediate fallout, separatist activities in J&K and elsewhere will certainly be on the rise. Potential implications are discussed subsequently.

- Despite internal political upheavals, Pakistan effectively countered its much larger adversary, challenging the perspective and adding to Indian frustration. Indian defence and security analyst, Mr Parvin Sawhney suggests that 'Operation Sindoor' was actually paused, and true ceasefire is yet to be achieved. Therefore, speculations for wider hostilities in the near future are real. Given Pakistan military's ever growing reliance on Chinese military technologies, China would never want Pakistan, its

‘Ironclad friend’ disappoint against Western technologies used by India. Vice President of the Beijing-based Centre and Globalization, Victor Gao in an interview at TRT’s Strait Talk says, “China is a staunch friend of Pakistan. No country in the world should second guess China’s commitment to defend the legitimate interest of Pakistan in terms of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.” With that backdrop, in the event of a full-scale war, greater Chinese involvement is inevitable. In such scenario, the Subcontinent may see Indo-China faceoffs in India’s Northeast, which may add to wider regional insecurity. There are concerns for Bangladesh getting absorbed militarily against threats to its territorial integrity.

- Recent escalation helped Indian and Pakistani military planners to rediscover each other’s weaknesses to be exploited in the next conflict. Pakistan is considering 20% increase in its defence budget and initiated procurement spree of the state of the art military hardwares. China is reportedly expediting the delivery of the fifth generation J-35A stealth jets, advanced AWACS and highly sophisticated HQ-19, Ballistic Missile defence systems to Pakistan. India, stunned by the failures of its French Rafael jets and S-400 SAM systems, is consulting with the French and the Russians to get additional jets and related critical fixes. Indian use of military might to interdict alleged militant sites with vague pretext induces security vulnerabilities to its smaller neighbours. As Mr Bilawal Bhutto, the former Pakistani foreign minister, at a press conference at the UN says, “India has turned into a source of insecurity to its neighbours.” South Asian countries facing complex socio-economic issues, must now prioritize defence and security in the face of renewed Indian stance.

- A new front of ‘Water War’ is initiated by India by suspending the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) signed in 1960. Pakistan has warned India that any disruption to its share of water would be considered as ‘an act of war.’ Former Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto even went on to say, “blood will flow if India stops river water.” There is speculation that China, with infrastructures upstream to block waters of the Indus and Brahmaputra, may become involved in water disputes in the Subcontinent. Bangladesh has been the worst victim of Indian water aggression since independence. India getting tangled with water wars in its western front, could complicate negotiations on contentious issues like the Teesta River. Furthermore, Chinese interest in the Teesta river water management project may further complicate existing water disputes.

- Pahalgam issue definitely cast a shadow and prospects for revival of SAARC diminishes further. India's relations with its neighbours have deteriorated due to growing anti-India sentiment in South Asia. Given India's support for the deposed regime, Bangladeshi political entities are concerned about India's role in Bangladesh's internal affairs. The BJP-led government in Delhi has intensified these issues, impacting prospects for any future reconciliation. For the same reason, the only regional forum SAARC could not be functional since its inception. India's apprehensions regarding any perceived rapprochement between Bangladesh and Pakistan could add to renewed diplomatic tension.

●India's increased security around the Siliguri Corridor, comes amid Bangladesh's deepening ties with China and diplomatic normalcy with Pakistan. Experts feel that India's recent hostile posture along Bangladesh border is rooted to the frustration stemming from its fiasco in Kashmir and reasserting regional dominance. Indo-Bangla border already earned the infamous title of being the deadliest border in the world, could experience more violence. Frequency of border incidents between the Indian border forces and Bangladeshi villagers are on the rise. Some of the incidents may lead to skirmishes between the border guards and spiral out of control. Moreover, with extreme disregard to international laws and norms, Indians are likely to intensify the 'Push in' of undocumented Muslim migrants including Rohingyas into Bangladesh. An Indo-Pak faceoff could intensify militancy or terrorism in South Asia, with possible spillover effects in Bangladesh. Like in the past, troubled Chittagong Hill Tracts region may turn volatile with moral and logistical support from across the border. Analysts have observed India's nervousness as Bangladesh adopts a more neutral and sovereign stance in its diplomatic relations. Additionally, in the field of trade and commerce in the Subcontinent, Bangladesh would continue to suffer due to the retaliatory measures and supply chain disruptions due to airspace closure, which is unlikely to be eased soon.

Conclusion

Any major escalation in the Subcontinent would impact nearly two billion people in a densely populated region. A post-Pahalgam arms race in South Asia would also have serious implications for socio-economic conditions in an area already facing extreme poverty and hunger. Undoubtedly, peace in the Subcontinent will remain elusive as long as the Kashmir issue remains unresolved. As such, dialogue between the parties is essential. The regional forum SAARC could help address terrorism as necessary clauses exists in its charter. It is crucial that sound judgment prevails and India recognizing that the use of military power does not lead to sustainable outcome. An extended or worsening conflict between India and Pakistan could negatively affect Bangladesh's security and economic prospects. In response to the military build-up around the Siliguri Corridor, Bangladesh should focus on diplomatic engagement, enhance its defence capabilities and explore strategic partnerships. Additionally, Bangladesh may consider strengthening ties with other regional powers to counterbalance India's influence. Overall, diplomacy should be prioritized to promote stability in South Asia.

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Bursting the ‘Chittagonian’ Myth about the Rohingyas

Dr. Abdullah Al Yusuf

The repeated outmigration of the Rohingyas from the Rakhine State of Myanmar can be attributed to a single factor- the persistent denial of their indigenous ethnic identity and citizenship by the Government of Myanmar. The ethnic cleansing of this community that began in 1978 under the infamous ‘Nagamin’ operation initiated by Burmese Junta and the subsequent waves of Rohingya exodus including the recent genocidal mass murder are all premised on an ill-conceived anti-Rohingya narrative which describes Rohingyas not as the natives of Myanmar but as Bengali migrants or ‘Chittagonians’ who had arrived the country following the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824 and during the subsequent British colonization of Arakan.

1824 AD, the year of British invasion into Arakan, serves as a critical landmark in formulating this anti-Rohingya narrative. The Article 11 of Burmese Constitution issued on January 4, 1948 reserved citizenship for the indigenous races only. The expression ‘indigenous race’ has been used to refer to those racial groups who had ‘settled in any of the territories included in the Union as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1823 AD’. The reference to 1823 AD as a precondition for indigenous identity serves as a critical tool to purposefully deny Rohingyas as an indigenous race of Myanmar. Presumably, any future attempt of Rohingya repatriation could be seriously undermined by such ill-intentioned narratives. Therefore, it seems quite relevant that we address this issue and ascertain the extent to which such narrative bears any element of truth.

All the historical, anthropological, archaeological and epigraphic evidences suggest that the Rohingya ancestors started living in the northern part of Arakan since the

latter part of the 4th Century when the first city-state 'Baishali' was established. Dven Chandra, the first king of Chandra Dynasty, outsourced the much needed work force for building the city from Gaura. This working class who ploughed the land, baked the bricks, built the city, dug the irrigation canals and constructed the temples with their sweat and blood are the Rohingya ancestors. Therefore, Rohingya identity is deeply rooted in the soil of Arakan. Their connection to the land spans over almost two millennia. Attaching a Chittagonian label to their identity is anything but true.

It is true that some population movement from Bengal to Arakan did actually take place during the British rule. However, these were the same people, both Rohingyas and Rakhines, who had previously fled from Arakan to escape Burmese persecution. In 1784, when the Burmese King Bodaopaya invaded the then independent Arakan, almost 3,00,000 Arakanese, both Rohingyas and Rakhines, fled to neighboring Chittagong for safety. When the British East India Company captured Arakan in 1824 following the First Anglo-Burmese War, those 3,00,000 or so Arakanese went back home. Therefore, this population movement may not be perceived as a fresh wave of migration. Rather, it would be more appropriate to call it a 'reverse migration': people going back to the land where they naturally belong. The anti-Rohingya scholars manufactured purposeful stories to hide this fact, exaggerated the size of the Rohingya Muslims returning to Arakan, and at the same time underrated the size of Rakhine returnees.

Alongside the Rohingyas, a huge number of Rakhines also fled to Bengal following the 1784 Burmese invasion of Arakan. Francis Buchanan, a physician cum historian of British East India Company, during his journey to the Southeast Bengal in 1798 observed that: "Various parts of the Hills in this neighborhood [between Chandpur and Barratulla] are inhabited by the Mugs [Rakhines]...These people left their country on its conquest by the Burmans, and subsist by fishing, Boat building, a little cultivation, and by the Cloth made by their Women. They also build houses for the Mohammedan refugees [Rohingyas], of whom many came from Arakan on the same occasion". In a single village near the Ramu River, Buchanan identified at least fifteen thousand Rakhine refugees. From this, one can form an idea about the total number of the Rakhine refugees then distributed all over the Southeast Bengal.

During the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, the British forces were supported as much by the Rakhines as by the Rohingyas against the Burman occupation forces. Upon victory, most of the Rakhines as well as Rohingyas went back to Arakan. The anti-Rohingya narratives oftentimes paint a biased image of this reverse migration. They portray the return of Rakhines as natural but misrepresent the return of Rohingyas as 'influx of Muslims from Bengal'. They tend to remain oblivious about the two hundred thousand Rohingyas who had fled from Arakan into Bengal during the Burman invasion in 1784. That the same Rohingyas should be willing to go back home, now free from the danger of Burmese persecution, is a fact often lost sight of.

In his 'Account of Arakan' written in 1777, Major R.E. Roberts, an employee of the East India Company, mentioned that almost three fourths of the population of Arakan were Rohingyas or their descendants. After the conquest of Arakan, in 1826, the British were surprised to observe that the Rohingya population of Mrauk-U period had been reduced to only twenty percent of the total population of Arakan.

Michael Walter Charney, a noted Arakan scholar, speculates that while some artisans and skilled labors might have been dispatched to Burma, a large number of others might have moved north of Naf River, into Bengal.

An official report of the East India Company mentioned in 1800: “We have received intelligence, that a very extraordinary and unexpected emigration has taken place of the people of Arracan into the Chittagong District. We are assured by private letters, that no less than 35,000 persons have fled...and sought protection in Chittagong”. The number of escapees must have multiplied over the years to an extent that compelled the Burmese king to send an army into Chittagong to fetch them, causing the British annoyance, culminating into the war.

It has been argued that the depopulation of Arakan under Konbaung rule left the vast paddy fields unattended causing the fertile valleys to germinate nothing but wild plants for many years. Therefore, the British encouraged the Chittagonians, by offering lucrative wages, to migrate into Arakan as agriculturalists. Consequently, thousands of Chittagonian coolies are said to have moved to Arakan and engaged in ploughing and harvesting the fields. It is further said that these Chittagonian ‘coolies’ produced so much crops out of those once abandoned paddy fields that Akyab became one of the major rice exporting cities in the world.

In these arguments, a clear correlation has been established between the skill of the Chittagonian farmers and the quantity of rice produced in Arakan. Before drawing any such conclusion, one should remember that this was not the first time Arakan witnessed bumper production of rice. One may recall that archaeologists discovered at least thirteen granaries to store surplus rice and eight paddy sale centers attributed to the Mrauk-U period. One may also recall that Mrauk-U kings employed designated government officials to monitor the production, storage, distribution and export of rice; employed Indian and Armenian informants to monitor the regional and global market price of rice before selling it to the Dutch; and employed a full minister, Pyi Soe Gyi, to oversee the rice exporting management.

Going further back, one would also see that the name of one of the first cities of Arakan, ‘Dhannyabati’, means ‘grain blessed’, indicating that Arakan was surplus in rice production since the first city-state came into existence. One would naturally wonder if the British sponsored Chittagonian migrants turned Arakan into a frontline rice exporting country, who then contributed to the bumper production of rice during the Chandra and Mrauk-U period, and where had those people gone. They were the Rohingyas. During Konbaung period they fled to Chittagong, and during the British rule they just came back to their ancestral land.

It is understandable that given the persecution of the Arakanese under Konbaung rule, Arakan might have had shortage of manpower to work the fields despite the Rohingya repatriation. Consequently, the British officials might have looked for additional workforce from Chittagong. However, during that period Chittagong had no less demand for labors either. Known as ‘Porto Grande’ to the Portuguese and Venetian voyagers, and described as ‘the most famous and wealthy city of the Kingdom of Bengal’, Chittagong always had a high demand for labors to run its own economy.

During the early years of the British rule, the Bengal Assam Railway initiated

the construction of extensive railway network connecting Chittagong with the interior parts of Bengal and Assam. Consequently, there was a huge demand for the construction workers. The Shipbuilding industry of Chittagong needed a continuous supply of labors. From the mid-fifteenth to the early nineteenth century, Chittagong was the global center for building ocean-going vessels including naval ships. The East India Company built their vessels from Chittagong. Chittagong also produced some of the finest watermen in the world. When the cost of hiring British mates went high, the steamer companies started recruiting and training these skilled Chittagonian watermen to command the barges and steamers. Warships built at Chittagong were used by the British Navy in the famous Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

Therefore, from the British perspective, building war ships, establishing and maintaining the railway network, and running a regional sea port would certainly look more important than cultivating the lands in Arakan. Similarly, from the Chittagonian perspective, the diverse employment opportunities at home would certainly look more assuring than clearing the jungles of Arakan and farming. Therefore, the story of the influx of Chittagonian migrants into Arakan under British patronage lacks credibility.

In the 1921 Census of Arakan, the Indian Muslims were segregated into two distinct categories: the indigenous pre-British rule ethnic group designated as ‘IndoBurman’ [Rohingya] and British-era migrants of Indian [Chittagonian] origin. According to the Census Report, out of the 201,000 Indians counted in Akyab, 154,000 belonged to the first category, the indigenous ethnic group, the Rohingyas. The remaining 47,000 were the ‘seasonal immigrants’ who ‘will return shortly after to India [Chittagong]’.

Lieutenant G.A. Strover, the Assistant Commissioner for Akyab on the Tax Settlement for the 1867–68 Season, described in an 1868 report: “During the reaping season, and indeed before, coolies from the Chittagong district come over in hundreds [...] As soon as the work is over, the coolies return to their homes, and re-cross our frontier, where they remain until the next season comes round. It is a pity immigration does not assume a more solid form”. The report makes it amply clear that the Chittagonian workers used to visit Arakan only during the harvesting season with the purpose of making some extra money, not to settle there permanently. While coming to Arakan, they would invariably leave their spouse and family back at home. Therefore, when the work was over, they would haste back home to meet their families.

Besides, the turn up of seasonal workers would also vary depending on the prospect of harvest in Arakan visà-vis in Chittagong. As U Kyaw Min observed: “The amount of [seasonal] migration fluctuates greatly, falling to very small dimensions after a good season and rising considerably after a bad season in Chittagong”. As discussed before, Chittagong had plenty of job opportunities. Therefore, despite offering higher wage, the British administration could not retain those guest workers beyond the harvesting season, let alone persuading them to settle in Arakan permanently. The British administration was so frustrated over the issue that Lieutenant Colonel J.F.J. Stevenson, the Commissioner for Arakan, was even in the opinion of introducing the Chinese and Shan cultivators to reduce the dependence on the Chittagonians who would not stay back in Arakan permanently. Therefore, all the make-belief stories

of large-scale Chittagonian migration to Arakan under British rule are nothing but fabricated narratives lacking credible evidence.

Since 2017, Bangladesh is trying hard to send back the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Citizens (FDMN), the Rohingyas, to their ancestral land in Rakhine. Negotiation continues. Presumably, the hardest part of negotiation could be the identification process- separating Rohingyas from the Chittagonian locals. They have similar physical make-up, same color of eyes, same skin tone, and most importantly, they speak almost the same dialect. Consequently, the anti-Rohingya lobbyists might attempt to cash on the 'Chittagonian' label purposefully attached to Rohingya identity. This article was a humble attempt to remove that label basing on historical facts and documents.

As the documented history reveals, Rohingya identity is rooted in the soil of Arakan since the later part of the 4th Century. Their linguistic and other similarities with the Chittagonians are only obvious given the fact that the Arakan Coast is geographical contiguous to Chittagong and an extension to the Ganges Delta. On the contrary, Arakan is separated from the rest of Myanmar by the Arakan Yoma. Consequently, for centuries, Arakan grew under the influence of Bengal, not Myanmar. Trade and commerce went on a regular basis between these two people. Linguistic or other similarities were the inevitable outcome. Nonetheless, mere having some similarities in outlook or language do not merge two people into one. Rohingyas continue to be Rohingyas, not Chittagonians.

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Forging Consensus on National Interest and National Security

Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir

The mass uprising of 2024 marks a pivotal moment to forge a lasting consensus on national interest and national security. Yet, the very question remains marginal in public discourse, despite its foundational importance in today's shifting global and regional contexts. Throughout history, nations that have charted sustainable paths have done so by cultivating a strategic culture. In its absence, stability and developmental progress risk faltering.

Previous generations secured our political independence through immense sacrifice; the current one faces the equally vital task of securing our strategic sovereignty in an increasingly complex world.

It is incumbent upon our political parties to embrace this crucial subject matter, anchoring their approach in the principles of strategic autonomy – the capacity to make independent, sovereign decisions – and developmental deterrence – a doctrine of peace, stability and rights as the bedrock of progress.

This moment of collective reckoning demands transcending partisan divisions to address fundamental questions about our sovereignty, developmental trajectory, and place in an increasingly turbulent world order. Historical precedents demonstrate that nations which fail to institutionalize their strategic interests during periods of transition inevitably face existential challenges.

Today, as geopolitical tensions reshape our region and global power structures become increasingly multipolar, Bangladesh stands at another inflection point where decisive action could determine our trajectory for decades to come.

Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is not born of inertia—it is forged in moments of conflict, crisis, or transformation. Strategic culture represents the codification of a nation's historical experiences, geopolitical realities, and aspirational goals into a coherent framework for action. It encompasses far more than military preparedness, extending to the totality of national capabilities. These include economic strength, diplomatic agility, technological advancement, and cultural influence, which collectively determine a country's ability to shape its destiny.

After its 1962 defeat to China, India reorganised its defence posture, moving away from a purely Gandhian ethos toward a deterrence-based policy grounded in self-reliance. China, over decades, has defined its "core interests" with clarity: the supremacy of the party, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and developmental continuity.

Across the Atlantic, the United States has consistently articulated its national interest through strategic doctrines—from Monroe to Truman—tying economic prosperity to geopolitical dominance. After the trauma of 1940, France reasserted its sovereignty under de Gaulle, withdrawing from NATO's military command in 1966 while acquiring independent nuclear capability.

Post-Meiji Japan prioritised industrialisation and national consolidation. Vietnam, emerging from colonialism and war, placed reunification and socialist reconstruction at the heart of its strategic identity. Indonesia rooted its national security in the Pancasila—an indigenous philosophy that melds moral and ideological values.

These cases affirm that it is often moments of rupture that compel nations to define their interests, and that strategic culture must extend far beyond military doctrine—encompassing areas such as education, diplomacy and development planning.

These examples also underscore several fundamental principles that could help steer Bangladesh's approach. Strategic cultures emerge from concrete historical experiences rather than abstract theorising, requiring continuous institutional reinforcement across generations. This must be informed by idealistic aspirations and pragmatic calculations of national capability, recognising both what a nation hopes to achieve and what it can realistically accomplish given its resources and constraints.

Strategic Imperatives

For Bangladesh, constructing a viable strategic culture must begin with recognising our unique geopolitical circumstances. Situated in the world's largest river delta with a dense population and limited natural resources, our national security faces multidimensional challenges that demand integrated solutions.

The Bay of Bengal's emergence as a strategic theatre requires the formulation of a comprehensive doctrine. With competing infrastructure projects, naval deployments, and resource claims transforming maritime neighbourhood, Bangladesh's exclusive economic zone represents both an economic lifeline and potential flashpoint requiring careful management. Our southern coastline and offshore resources demand protection

not just from traditional security threats but also from environmental degradation and illegal exploitation that could undermine long-term development prospects.

Traditional security paradigms often neglect the economic dimensions of national power, a luxury Bangladesh cannot afford. Several critical areas demand immediate attention to reduce vulnerabilities and create opportunities. Supply chain resilience requires reducing import dependence for essential commodities including food, medicine, and energy. Technological sovereignty means developing indigenous capabilities in critical sectors like semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy technologies where global competition is intensifying.

Our financial architecture needs modernisation to mitigate risks and ensure uninterrupted access to global markets. Energy security demands diversification of sources while preparing for the renewable energy transition that will reshape geopolitical relationships in coming decades. The experience of countries of East Asia demonstrates how targeted industrial policy can transform economic vulnerabilities into strategic advantages - a lesson Bangladesh must adapt to its own context.

The demographic challenge cuts both ways - population density could become either a crushing liability or dynamic asset depending on how effectively human capital is developed and productive employment opportunities created.

No strategic framework can succeed without addressing the human foundations of national power. Educational reform should incorporate strategic literacy in curricula to cultivate informed citizenship capable of understanding complex security challenges. Social cohesion requires addressing inequality and polarisation that undermine national resilience in times of crisis.

Cultural confidence needs nurturing through narratives of national identity that transcend political divisions and connect contemporary challenges to our historical experiences. The spirit of the Liberation War, with its emphasis on sovereignty and self-determination as well as peoples' resilience, demonstrated in 1990 and 2024, for rights and democracy provides a powerful foundation for such narratives if framed inclusively.

Environmental security presents another critical dimension, as Bangladesh confronts existential climate threats while managing shared water resources that are vital for agriculture and livelihoods.

Geopolitical security requires careful navigation of great power competition in the Indo-Pacific while preserving our autonomy and freedom of action in international affairs.

Strategic Autonomy

Contemporary discourse often presents Bangladesh with binary options - alignment with either Eastern or Western blocs. This framing fundamentally misunderstands the nature of 21st century statecraft and unnecessarily limits our strategic possibilities. The most successful middle powers have developed nuanced approaches in great power conflicts while cultivating issue-based partnerships across ideological divides. Vietnam's "bamboo diplomacy" offers instructive parallels, demonstrating how flexibility can coexist with firm principles. Despite historical tensions, Vietnam has cultivated deep economic ties with former adversaries while preserving its political

system and strategic autonomy. Similarly, Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN shows how mid-sized states can shape regional architectures without great power patronage, creating space for independent action while contributing to collective security.

For Bangladesh, the path forward lies in constructing a national security architecture grounded in strategic autonomy and developmental deterrence. This is not deterrence in the classical, militaristic sense, but a strategic doctrine that ensures stable conditions for unimpeded development. Singapore's modernisation of its defence capabilities, not for aggression but to safeguard its economic trajectory, provides a telling example.

Imagine four scenarios of engagement—aligning with a neighbour, leaning towards a superpower, pursuing a balancing act, and adopting an independent, mutually inclusive strategy. This is presented as a 2x2 matrix: Alignment vs. Autonomy on one axis, Short-term Gains vs. Long-term Risks on the other in Table – 1.

The first scenario—aligning with a neighbour—may bring tactical advantages but risks subordinating Bangladesh's long-term interests to the strategic calculations of a more powerful partner. Such an approach can quickly erode autonomy, especially if regional priorities shift or diverge.

The second—leaning towards a superpower—offers the allure of economic or security dividends but can entangle the country in geopolitical rivalries, compromising its ability to pursue independent goals.

A third option is to adopt a balancing act—navigating between competing powers to extract benefits while avoiding full alignment. While this may appear pragmatic, it demands an agile and nuanced diplomacy. Without a coherent domestic strategic framework, it risks becoming reactive and inconsistent.

Table – 1: Strategic Autonomy Scenarios

Scenario	Advantages	Risks
Alignment with Neighbour	Immediate support	Loss of autonomy
Independent Strategy	Long-term sovereignty	Requires strong consensus

Source: author

The fourth and most sustainable path is an independent, mutually inclusive strategy—one that centres national decision-making in the country's own priorities, informed by the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. This approach seeks to build respectful, equitable relationships with all nations while maintaining sovereignty in foreign and domestic policy. It requires strong political consensus at home, normative legitimacy rooted in the ideals of the Liberation War, and a clearly articulated vision of Bangladesh's place in the world. A coherent framework could guide Bangladesh's actions in multilateral platforms, trade negotiations, climate diplomacy, and global development partnerships—projecting a distinctive strategic identity.

Strategic Thinking

The absence of dedicated national security institutions remains Bangladesh's most glaring vulnerability as it confronts these complex challenges. Unlike a National Security Council or elaborate security bureaucracies, Bangladesh lacks permanent structures for systematic long-term threat assessment, inter-agency policy coordination, strategic human capital development, and crisis response planning.

Building these institutions requires more than bureaucratic reorganisation - it demands a fundamental shift in how we approach national security as a society. Our universities must create specialised programmes in strategic studies to develop indigenous expertise rather than relying on foreign training and perspectives. Public discourse needs to move beyond partisan rhetoric to engage in rigorous debate about national security priorities and trade-offs. Professional development pathways should be established for civilian and military strategists, creating career tracks that reward deep expertise and long-term thinking.

Legislative oversight mechanisms require strengthening to ensure democratic accountability in security policymaking. Parliamentary committees on defence and foreign affairs need enhanced research capabilities and access to expertise that can inform their deliberations. Civil society organisations and media outlets have a role to play in fostering informed discussion about security issues, moving beyond sensationalism to substantive analysis of the challenges we face.

From Principles to Practice

Translating these concepts into actionable policy requires concrete steps that bridge the gap between aspiration and implementation.

A comprehensive White Paper on National Security could outline strategic priorities and implementation roadmaps, providing a reference point for public debate and institutional development.

An Annual Strategic Review process would allow for regular assessment of emerging threats and opportunities, ensuring our policies remain responsive to changing circumstances.

Public-private partnerships should be expanded to engage business and civil society in security planning, recognizing that national resilience depends on whole-of-society efforts. Regional confidence building measures can help mitigate tensions with neighbours while creating space for cooperation on shared challenges like climate change and transnational crime.

Conclusion

The convergence of domestic transformation and international realignment creates both unprecedented challenges and unique opportunities for Bangladesh.

A peaceful and prosperous Bay—the largest in the world—should be central to

foreign policy vision, while defence policy must ensure credible deterrence. Amid Indo-Pacific rivalries and regional instability (e.g., Myanmar's conflicts), strategic autonomy will help Bangladesh navigate complexities without entanglement. Bangladesh must capitalise on its demographic dividend and its strategic location in the Bay of Bengal.

This endeavour requires moving beyond short-term political calculations to embrace a generational perspective. The institutions we build today, the consensus we forge, and the capabilities we develop will determine whether Bangladesh emerges as a subject rather than object of 21st century geopolitics.

The alternative—continued ad hoc responses to crises without strategic underpinnings—risks consigning Bangladesh to perpetual vulnerability in a world where only the strategically conscious thrive.

History shows that nations which defer defining their core interests eventually have those interests defined for them by external forces.

As we commemorate the sacrifices of our struggles, the most fitting tribute would be constructing the institutional and intellectual foundations for enduring security and prosperity. The time for this national project is not tomorrow, but today, when the lessons of our past and the possibilities of our future converge to create an opportunity, we cannot afford to waste.

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QUAD's Growth unto Trump 2.0 amidst Fast Evolving Geopolitics of Indo-Pacific and Ramifications for Bangladesh

Brig Gen S M Mahbubul Alam (Retd)

Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004 brought Australia, India, Japan and the United States into an informal diplomatic alliance for an effective and well-coordinated disaster response operation into the affected areas. Championed by then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the alliance took a formal shape in 2007. Popularly known as 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD)' or QUAD or QUAD 1.0, it started its journey with the primary aim of countering China's rise under the cloak of a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. After a decade of latency, it found a strong revival in 2017 during Trump 1.0 and kept growing with near-bipartisan support of the USA and transformed into a fairly credible alliance with a multitude of objectives while countering China's rise and hegemony in East and South China Sea remained at its core. This resurrection of QUAD is also branded by some as QUAD 2.0. QUAD 2.0 under Trump 1.0-Biden-Trump 2.0 has been experiencing an all-round growth and strength. However, its solidity and actual delivery could not surpass suspicion under the leadership of unpredictable, unique and norms-defying President, Donald John Trump (DJT).

While in a transition from unipolar to multi-polar, the world has been experiencing tremendous geopolitical turbulence and DJT in his second term in office, kept injecting stimuli to it. As Europe and the Middle East (ME) have been going through geopolitical shock and awe, USA with its allies shored up their race for Indo-Pacific more than ever before. Within the overall ambit of Indo-Pacific, South Asia (SA) has also been at the threshold of a hot war between its two nuclear rivals.

Geopolitical literature is replete with writeups on QUAD. However, Trump's 2.0 era with his non-traditional and maverick leadership, reinvented the topic for wider debate for common students of geo-politics in general and for the countries in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) in specific. Like all the ASEAN countries, Bangladesh, as a smaller state of South Asia amidst two nuclear rivals, will feel the tremor of QUAD's new-found ramifications. Hence it is crucial for Bangladesh to study the transformation of QUAD unto Trump 2.0 era, its ramifications for Bangladesh and suggest options for Bangladesh for navigating the challenges and opportunities facing Bangladesh from QUAD 2.0.

QUAD's Growth unto Trump 2.0

Idea of QUAD was conceived in 2004 while the four nations got together for conducting disaster relief operations in the wake of Indian Ocean Tsunami. China became unhappy and served diplomatic protest note to the member states. Japan's Prime Minister, Shinjo Abe formalized the informal alliance with the overarching aim of countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. However, Australia's ambivalence about China's reactions and consequential withdrawal from the alliance in 2008, global financial downturn in 2008-2009, Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' and USA's strategy of engaging China instead of isolating it, put the alliance into nearly a decade of doldrum. USA-Australia defense cooperation recommenced in 2010 that led Australia to rejoin the QUAD camp. Abe in 2012, recapped the idea of Asia's 'Democratic Security Diamond' (QUAD 1.0) involving the same four nations. In 2016, he further postulated his strategy of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP)" with 3 pillars: political, economic and security with pseudo-motive of countering China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Trump in his 1.0 in 2017, was utterly convinced to accept FOIP as the geo-strategic superstructure for garnering countries of common concerns against China. QUAD got further boosted around this time due to geo-political convulsions taking place between China and its neighbors in the South China Sea (SCS) and Spratly Islands and in the Doklam Plateau, China's surge in defense budget and BRI's strategic overshoot. Finally, QUAD awakened from a decade long inertness in November 2017 with added features including promotion of 'Rules-based System in the IPR'. In the same year, QUAD graduated to a ministerial level dialogue with the assurance of maintaining ASEAN centrality among host of other newer issues.

From the very inception of his term, Biden did not deviate much from Trump's path concerning QUAD rather he injected further stamina to it through the first ever Leaders' Virtual Summit in March 2017. This was followed through quickly by its leaders' first in-person Summit on 24 September 2021 hosted by Joe Biden in Washington D.C. Biden also hosted a video conference with his counterparts on 03rd March 2022 to discuss security and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Tokyo hosted the next in-person meeting on May 24, 2022. On May 20, 2023, Australia hosted the next in-person summit in Hiroshima instead of Sydney. Though it was the turn of India but Biden insisted in hosting QUAD's last in-person 'Leaders' Summit' in 2024 in Wilmington, Delaware, Biden's hometown, prior to his farewell from Whitehouse.

Trump in his 2.0 did not lose sight of China and consequently of QUAD. In less than one month of his term, the Foreign Ministers Meeting took place at the State Department in Washington D.C., USA on January 21, 2025. In its meeting row, 10th QUAD Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Washington D.C. on July the 01st was the latest. The meeting laid special attention on issues like: maritime and transnational security, economic prosperity and security, critical and emerging technology and humanitarian assistance and emergency response.

Evolution of QUAD's Objectives

QUAD 1.0 started with the primary objective of achieving FOIP meaning to keep its strategic sea lanes of communication free from military and political influences. Its core objective was to secure rules based global order, freedom of navigation and liberal trading. However, curbing Chinese domination in the Indo-Pacific was at its inner core from the very inception.

QUAD in Trump 1.0 gained a great fillip whose momentum continued during Biden Administration and seems to be maintaining the impetus during Trump 2.0. From relatively simpler objectives at its inception, QUAD until Trump 2.0, embraced host of objectives for its sustainable growth and relevance in the region. Key elements of the enlarged objectives aimed at navigating growing natural and manmade security challenges including non-traditional security (NTS) like: health, climate change, infrastructure, technology, cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance, maritime, disinformation, terrorism and the likes.

QUAD under Biden Administration showed significant growth with initiation and development of six working groups like: health, cybersecurity, climate, space, infrastructure and Critical and Emerging Technology (CET). Key highlights of the 6th QUAD Summit, 4th In-person Summit and the last of the Biden Administration, included a wider range of subjects: health, maritime security, quality infrastructure development including digital public infrastructure (DPI), CET, climate and clean energy, cybersecurity, space, counter terrorism, people to people initiative (PPI).

On the very 1st day in office of Trump 2.0, QUAD's Foreign Ministers met at US State Department on 21 January 2025 that radiated a clear signal of Trump's China centric strategic attention. In a joint statement after the meet, the four nations reiterated their commitment to shoring up FOIP and upholding rule of law, democratic values, sovereignty and territorial integrity. They further stated that they would strongly face any unilateral attempt of upsetting status quo by force or coercion.

QUAD's Future in Trump 2.0

The scholars are divided into three broad categories on QUAD's future under Trump 2.0. The first one views QUAD to be a potent mini-lateral platform with evolving objectives due to its resurgence during Trump's 1.0, US's bipartisan support for its steady growth during Biden Administration and maintenance of

its momentum by Trump 2.0. The second group brands QUAD as an auxiliary effort of US's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which banks on AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) and host of other initiatives for its effectiveness. However, there exists a diametrically opposite view to the first group due to unpredictable Trump's increasingly inward looking and protectionist policies and utter indifference to its allies and partners. Mark Esper, the US Secretary of Defense during Trump 1.0, openly emphasized the need for its partners and allies to strengthen their forces with US platforms and arsenals under its expanded Foreign Military Sales Program for better interoperability and effectiveness as an alliance against adversaries and competitors instead of their unwanted dependance on the US and it made a big news in Business Standard in 2020. Trump 2.0 appeared more transactional with heightened realism as Secretary of State Marco Rubio, during the QUAD meet in early 2025, characterized strength and weight of future US alliances with three conditions - if these will make the US safer, stronger and more prosperous.

While countering China has always been at the core of US Indo-Pacific strategy including QUAD, Trump 2.0 graduated China to be the defining challenge of the century. However, the author alludes that the future of the QUAD under Trump 2.0 is likely to remain uncertain with strategic inconsistency. Trump's "America First" doctrine and preference of unilateral interests over multilateral commitments are likely to prejudice the cohesion and long-term vision of the QUAD. While the US is pushing its partners with iron hand for shoring up contributions than mere jumping on the anti-China bandwagon; the partners, with diverging national interests and priorities, are struggling to cope with. Japan's uneasiness with US over tariff tensions, India's disappointment with the U.S. during OPERATION SINDOOR and in previous border faceoffs with China at Doklam and Galwan Valley, and Washington's recent attitude towards Pakistan have created unwanted pressure on the already-overstretched seams of the alliance. With such visible fissures and trust deficit in partnership, the QUAD is less likely to pose itself as a credible counterbalance to China under Trump 2.0.

Ramifications for Bangladesh

In its history, Bangladesh is navigating its worst geo-political, geo-strategical and geo-economic realities. Bangladesh is neither a QUAD member state nor it has been invited to be so. A Bay of Bengal (BoB) littoral state, Bangladesh is geo-strategically located at the junction of South and South East Asia. In the north it harbors India's geo-strategic vulnerability (Shiliguri Corridor) while in the South East, India has a grip on its vulnerable 'Waistline'. As a lower riparian country Bangladesh is dependent on both India and China for its rightful water share. For its supply-chain security, Bangladesh is dependent on both India and China having overwhelming trade deficit with both the countries. Bangladesh is heavily import dependent on China including its critical supplies of military hardware while its relatively shallow export basket has its primary destination to the USA and the EU. Bangladesh satisfied its major development partner by joining China's BRI but kept distance from the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Since its birth in 1971, Bangladesh has been going through intermittent political spasms. Despite so, its socio-economic performances have been remarkable due to its huge market and internal circulation of economy. Bangladesh could do even better if regional alliances like: SAARC and BIMSTEC would be effective. However, Bangladesh's effort of joining the ASEAN is very much time-tested. India is a QUAD member state and is passing through its worst time with its immediate neighbors and with its de facto QUAD leader, the USA. Its relationship with Bangladesh is at its all-time low now that is one of Bangladesh's reckonable security challenges. Bangladesh is also in a precarious situation with the Rohingya refugees with no solution in its immediate horizon, which has been further complicated by Myanmar's ongoing civil wars with Arakan Army (AA) and other insurgent groups. While Trump 2.0 has started maintaining relative distance from Ukraine, its footprints are well seen and felt in the BoB. As Bangladesh is passing through its worst internal security challenges, its external geo-strategic dynamics are becoming increasingly volatile due to great powers' race for Indo-Pacific and the revitalized QUAD under Trump 2.0. Bangladesh's dilemma can be better understood from one of the famous quotes of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, "When elephants fight, the grass suffers, but when they make love, the grass suffers also". Smaller states' dilemma in a great power competition scenario is almost synonymous like: joining a camp versus seeking strategic autonomy, building credible deterrence versus avoiding militarization, maintaining regional order versus preserving core national interest. Bangladesh is faced with all these dilemmas, which have been further complicated in its post revolution time under an interim government for last one year.

Options for Bangladesh

As smaller states face identical dilemmas their coping strategies are also fairly common though it is very difficult to implement the same. As Carol Moseley Braun posits, "There are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, just permanent interests". Bangladesh should also remain focused on attaining its national interests and develop appropriate coping strategies that may include: maintain strategic autonomy, attain political stability and social cohesion, focus on economic development and national security, develop a strong strategic culture through strong leadership and develop an effective strategic communication with strong diplomacy and informational capability. It should be carefully avoiding joining camps while remaining focused on skillfully exploiting every opportunity presented by QUAD 2.0. Bangladesh should nurture friendly relationship with all its neighbors and make effective contributions in revitalizing regional forums like: SAARC and BIMSTEC. It should also remain open to joining other regional forums like: ASEAN, RCEP whenever feasible. It must formulate its national security policy (NSP) and activate its national security council (NSC) for handling national level security crises and challenges. Bangladesh's people have been proving its strength of national will with supreme sacrifices since its independence struggle in 1971 while its latest display was during the July Revolution in 2024. Bangladesh needs strong political leaderships to exploit its full potential for socio-economic

development, especially, diversification of its export basket and markets. Above all, it needs a smart Armed Forces with credible deterrence capabilities with a view to securing its development initiatives and outcomes.

Conclusion

QUAD 1.0 found a steady and strong transformation to QUAD 2.0 under Trump 1.0, Biden and Trump 2.0 and reclaimed its importance in the overall playout of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. However, DJT's non-conformist leadership, his America First Policy, tariff war, ultra-realism driven foreign policy in Making America Great Again (MAGA), his perception about alliance and partnership have significantly shaken global geopolitics in general and in IPR in specific. Despite enormous potentials, QUAD is now struggling to maintaining its cohesion and serving its ultimate purpose of counterbalancing China's influence in the IPR. Bangladesh is not a QUAD member state but it is a BoB littoral state, geo-strategically located to connect South Asia with South East Asia. Like all other smaller states, Bangladesh is also shaken by the first evolving geo-politics in the IPR. Like all other smaller states, Bangladesh has also tough choices in navigating the geo-political schism in the IPR. In so doing Bangladesh has to develop all its elements of national power in maintaining its strategic autonomy, hedging all its vulnerabilities and exploit any opportunity presented to it.

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July Uprising and its Reflection in the International Media

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“There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.”

— Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

The above statement of Lenin has proved to be timeless when it comes to understanding the context of the July uprising of Bangladesh. Protest started as an anti-quota movement had eventually turned into a full-scale mass uprising with significant deeper consequences. These consequences and associated issues were well captured by prominent media outlets from different parts of the world. Significance of the reactions and narratives of international media can not be ignored for all the valid reasons. The reactions and narratives had varied across different regions where studies can be dedicated to identify differences between the Western and Non-Western media narratives related to the July uprising.

The July uprising in Bangladesh has drawn the attention of the Western media and its prominent newspapers. Evidently, Bangladesh was under constant scrutiny by Western media outlets for quite some time, and the peak of global attention was achieved when Time magazine featured the former prime minister by stressing the future of democracy in Bangladesh prior to the January 2024 national election. After the election, the U.S. embassy issued a statement expressing dissatisfaction and condemning the outcome of the election in Bangladesh. This official stance of

the U.S. was reported by prominent media outlets, including Reuters. In a post-5 August scenario, prominent international media outlets like the Washington Post and The New York Times continued to feature Bangladesh in an optimistic tone as Bangladeshi people had achieved the greatest outcome through “revolution.” The New York Times, The Washington Post, BBC, and CNN have pushed different narratives regarding the mass uprising.

The New York Times has covered Bangladesh's student protests and has reported on the increasing death toll of the protesters, the curfew imposed, the shutdown of the internet, and restricted phone calls. The paper claimed that the country was on the brink of total anarchy, framing the protest as a clash between government forces and the protesters. In "Behind Bangladesh Protests, Rage Over Inequality," the newspaper tells the story of a young Bangladeshi protester wearing a black T-shirt with his arms outstretched, daring the police officers to shoot. The consequences of the protests are highlighted in articles like "Facing Mass Protests, Bangladesh Leader Quits, Setting Up Power Struggle," which explains how protesters took to the street amidst the curfew demanding the resignation of Hasina. Moreover, the newspaper condemns the authorities for attacking demonstrators, detaining student organizers, and arresting about 10,000 people, highlighting the torture of student leader Nahid Islam in custody. The newspaper frames the use of excessive force and arbitrary detentions as morally questionable and a violation of human rights. The responsibility for the crisis was then placed on the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who responded to protests by deploying more forces rather than addressing inequalities in job quotas and by failing to hold timely dialogues, which exacerbated the situation and resulted in the regime's toppling.

The coverage of The Washington Post detailed how the clashes between the demonstrators and the security forces took lives. It highlighted the growing conflict as a direct struggle between the people and the government, resulting in internet blackouts and curfews. The newspaper also focused on how the quota system proposed by the then government ignited anger towards the regime, turning demonstrations into a movement for justice. The consequences of the protests were depicted in “Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigns and flees country,” which discussed how the fall of the prime minister followed the killing of hundreds of protesters by security forces. The newspaper denounced the Awami League government's unlawful killings, detentions, and repression as human rights violations. The podcast "The student revolution that toppled a government" emphasized how the politicization of daily life and the regime's repression incited public anger, leading to the revolution.

CNN's coverage detailed how violence erupted between student protesters, pro-government supporters, and armed police, particularly during clashes at Dhaka University, where members of the Chhatra League attacked students. Stories such as “Bangladesh prime minister flees to India as anti-government protesters storm her residence” explained how forceful suppression and rising casualties fueled the revolution and culminated in the prime minister's resignation. CNN highlighted criticisms from human rights groups in pointing to excessive use of force and labeling protesters as ‘terrorists’ while shutting down internet access.

The coverage of BBC described how peaceful demonstrations against the quota

system turned violent, as Chhatra League members and police responded with tear gas, rubber bullets, and unlawful arrests, while the government blamed opposition groups for infiltrating the protests. The coverage also included vivid eyewitness accounts in the article “Drenched in blood—how Bangladesh protests turned deadly,” where students described being arrested and tortured, and reporters saw fires, barricades, and rising hospitalizations during clashes. There were reports exposing the government-led state violence, including curfews, shoot-on-sight orders, and the use of live rounds that killed hundreds. Responsibility for the crisis that led to the uprising was ultimately on the fallen regime, as their refusal to reform quotas and reliance on repression escalated public unrest.

The Western narrative of the July mass uprising is heavily focused on the repression of the Awami regime as an authoritarian one and compares its unlawful activities against American democratic values. The New York Times has leaned on a critical stance regarding the Awami government-led repression of the student-mass people movement and emphasized the failure of the government to timely address the demands of the students regarding the reformation of the job quotas. Additionally, the article featured personalized storytelling about Abu Sayed, highlighted human rights violations, and ultimately depicted the regime's fall as a catalyst for political changes in the country. The Washington Post vividly described the instances during the July uprising, emphasizing the internet blackouts, curfews, unlawful detention, use of excessive force on the peaceful protestors, and the killing of the protestors by the security forces. The public outrage ultimately deepened, leading to the fall of the government. The newspaper holds the government responsible for its fall, and the narrative of the paper aligns with liberal American democratic values. CNN primarily highlighted the human rights violations committed by the Awami regime, which resulted in mass casualties, and promoted a narrative emphasizing democratic values and the rights of protestors who were under threat. From the UK outlets, the BBC focused on the severe use of force by the Bangladesh Chhatra League and Bangladesh police on the demonstrators, indicating a violation of the western liberal democratic values. The outlet also held the regime responsible for its ultimate downfall because of repression and eroding democratic values in the country. Despite the differences in the convergences of the lenses of the four newspapers, there remains a common theme, i.e., the focus on upholding the Western democratic values and the fall of an authoritarian regime due to repression and human rights violations.

The narratives of the July mass uprising in Bangladesh varied significantly between Western and non-Western media, with distinct narratives emerging from South Asian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern newspaper sources.

The initial response of the Indian newspapers to the July uprising predominantly centered on concerns regarding the safety of Indian nationals residing in Bangladesh and reports of anti-Hindu violence. The Times of India published a misleading statement attributed to a senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, with a headline that Hindus were being persecuted across Bangladesh, with an estimated one crore refugees potentially entering West Bengal. Similarly, they reported that the Awami League government was overthrown with the support of Pakistan-backed Jamaat-e-Islami. The Economic Times reported that Pakistani intelligence agencies and China played a role in fostering anti-Indian sentiment within Bangladesh. In the post-uprising

period, the Indian newspaper narrative shifted towards emphasizing alleged threats to Hindu minorities as a result of the changes in status quo in Bangladesh. Certain outlets framed the uprising as a potential security concern for India, characterizing it as the rise of radical Islamists that could destabilize the region and trigger a refugee crisis.

Chinese newspapers started reporting on the crisis in Bangladesh after the resignation of Sheikh Hasina and the formation of the interim government. China Daily underscored the necessity of restoring social stability in post-uprising Bangladesh and reiterated China's commitment to maintaining a strong bilateral relationship. They also highlighted the friendship between the two countries and the scope for future collaboration. Meanwhile, Global Times reported on Hasina's allegations that the United States had played a role in her removal. Some reports also covered India's response to the uprising. Chinese newspapers reports stressed the need for social order and continued economic collaboration between China and Bangladesh. Coverage largely adhered to the principle of non-interference, portraying the uprising as an internal matter for Bangladesh.

Middle Eastern newspapers, including Al-Ahram and Arab News, closely monitored the student-led mass uprising from its inception. The Gulf News published multiple articles reflecting on Sheikh Hasina's political legacy, referring to her as the "Iron Lady of Bangladesh". Additionally, coverage from Middle Eastern media frequently analyzed the geopolitical implications of Hasina's removal, with several reports suggesting that the transition would complicate South Asian regional dynamics. The Middle Eastern news outlets provided a comprehensive coverage of major developments during and after the protests. They published a number of articles on the exiled prime minister's rule and legacy and how her removal will have geopolitical implications for South Asia.

It is quite intriguing to notice the differences between Western and Non-Western media narratives. The Western media narratives were shaped by the longstanding political culture of Western nations which is about upholding democratic values. On the other hand, non-Western nations like India, which is also a democratic nation itself, did not follow the similar path of Western media. As an immediate neighbor of Bangladesh, Indian media outlets were influenced by the nature of India-Bangladesh bilateral ties. At the same time, Chinese and Middle-Eastern media took cautious steps as their governments did not have any directly associated interests which could be affected by the change of the status-quo in Bangladesh. Finally, it can be realized that Western media outlets were more pro-active to capture the essence of mass uprising where Non-Western media outlets either distanced or took cautious approach to comment on the protests which took place in those weeks of July where decades happened.

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Indo-Bangladesh Border Insecurity: Fresh Perspectives

Brig Gen Md. Amin Akbar (Retd)

Bangladesh and India share one of the most dynamic and sensitive borders in the world. Since Bangladesh's independence, the management of this border has vacillated between moments of cooperation and conflict. Among the positive milestones, the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement—ratified by India in 2015—stands out. This landmark accord enabled both countries to exchange adversely possessed territories and enclaves, bringing long-awaited peace and stability to the lives of border communities. Other cooperative efforts include the establishment of the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) and Border Haats, the operationalization of Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) and the enhancement of cross-border trade and movements. The people on both sides are tied by familial, religious, ethnic, and cultural links.

However, the border is also a site of tragedy. The erection of fences has been accompanied by the deaths of thousands of Bangladeshi nationals at the hands of the trigger-happy Border Security Force (BSF) of India. The killing of Felani Khatun remains a symbol of highest cruelty in the border. There have been occasional skirmishes between BSF and the Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB), notably the 2001 Boraibari incident, which resulted in casualties on both sides. The border remains highly porous and vulnerable to organized crimes such as smuggling, human and drug trafficking, cattle rustling, and unauthorized trespassing. Cross-border trade and movements are periodically disrupted due to diplomatic or economic tensions. Recently, India has unilaterally begun “push-in” operations targeting alleged illegal immigrants, further complicating an already volatile environment.

The timing of recent escalations—coinciding with the July Uprising of 2024 in Bangladesh—has raised questions about India’s underlying strategic intent. Many in Bangladesh perceive this as an attempt to fulfill agenda through coercion. Public sentiment in Bangladesh is also shifting, with citizens increasingly rejecting an “all-accepting” mindset as regards to India. As bilateral relations recalibrate, tension along the border is expected to persist or even rise. Bangladesh cannot afford to either ignore or shy away from responding appropriately. In this backdrop, this article explores ongoing developments and offers relevant strategic and security perspectives.

Security Anxieties and Possible Impacts

Border crises rarely emerge in isolation—they often reflect deeper diplomatic and strategic fault lines. Following the July Uprising, Bangladesh-India relations have entered a period of pronounced strain. India has reinforced its border security posture, and a series of incidents have occurred in the no man’s land, where civilians from both sides—sometimes in the presence of border guards—have clashed over minor disputes. In a rare and troubling incident, unarmed Bangladeshi villagers detained a few BSF personnel who had apparently crossed over and threatened locals. Such incidents point to a dangerous trend of riot-like clashes. This adversarial mindset risks eroding the longstanding bonds of coexistence and mutual dependence—damage that could take years to repair. If left unchecked, these tensions may spiral into armed skirmishes and even broader conflicts.

Soon after, a mini “trade war” unfolded, with both sides imposing retaliatory restrictions on selected imports via land ports. India suspended cross-border transshipment of Bangladeshi goods to third countries using Indian Territory—though seaports remained accessible. These abrupt measures came without prior consultation or sufficient response time. Indian consumers, particularly in northeastern states, have grown accustomed to Bangladeshi Fast Moving Consumer Goods and agricultural products, which offer competitive pricing and quality. The resulting supply chain disruptions will not only cause consumer discomfort but also hurt Bangladeshi exporters. These setbacks signal slowdown in economic cooperation and regional growth. While India may lose more as a trade surplus country, Bangladesh will also lose momentum. The likely outcome is a rise in smuggling and informal trade, compounding the already fragile border situation.

Worsening matters, India’s controversial “push-in” operations have reignited sense of insecurity. Without any specific surveys, India alleges that 20 million Bangla-speaking Muslims have migrated illegally since Bangladesh’s independence—disrupting its domestic socio-political and security landscape. These figures are widely disputed, and there is no agreed framework for joint verification or repatriation. It is widely believed that the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) are designed to unilaterally push back certain categories of unwanted people including Rohingya chain migrants to destabilize neighbors—violating international norms and human rights principles. If this

persists, Bangladesh may face a second Rohingya-like crisis with potentially greater consequences. Bangladesh is unlikely to violate international law by pushing these individuals back forcibly; more so, attempt by BGB to resist the incursions by force may lead to dangerous escalations.

India shares borders with several countries. While securitization may be justified along its contentious borders with China and Pakistan, there is little justification for such aggressiveness along the Bangladesh frontier. Even Nepal and India have demarcation disputes, yet their border remains largely peaceful. Bhutan's border with India is similarly calm. Not much is either heard about Myanmar borders with India. So why is the Indo-Bangladesh border so persistently tense? Many believe this stems from entrenched misperceptions, faulty mindset, and flawed security assumptions within Indian strategic circles.

Allowing border tensions to fester could prove catastrophic. Borders can become battlegrounds for settling disputes through indirect means. Should border guards decide to facilitate rather than deter illicit flows, destabilization becomes likely. Without collaboration, efforts to prevent smuggling or infiltrations are virtually futile, as offenders exploit gaps in enforcement. The 1980s insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts offers a cautionary tale—harboring of armed groups only deepens insecurity. Mismanaged border responses today could create a strategic security dilemma, triggering structural changes in Bangladesh's security doctrine— a potential recipe for a Thucydides Trap that both nations might consider avoiding.

Possible Coping Strategies for Bangladesh

The post-July Uprising era in Bangladesh represents a fundamental shift—ushering in undeniable new perspectives, confidence, and assertiveness. There is no going back to pre-uprising era when national interests could be compromised for vested interests or appeasement. However, this newfound clarity should not be mistaken for belligerence, rather it indicates firmness in upholding sovereignty and protecting national interests with dignity. Going forward, Bangladesh must assert its independent geopolitical outlook through a balanced mix of cooperative and competitive strategies in both cognitive and physical domains. Border management should reflect this recalibrated posture.

Cognitive Domain: Reframing the Narrative, Mindset and Attitude. Bangladesh must counter false narratives and confront distorted perceptions through discursive resistance —particularly within Indian media and policy circles. Key messages must be communicated clearly: India needs Bangladesh as much as Bangladesh needs India; there is no inherent strategic contradiction in the bilateral relationship; coercion and intimidation will not yield lasting benefits; people-to-people ties are more stable than party-to-party dependencies; and finally, the dividends of cooperation far outweigh the risks of hostility. At the same time, honest dialogue is needed to address mutual security concerns and dispel myths. Bangladesh has no desire to participate in great power rivalry or destabilize the region. However, this should not be confused with weakness; Bangladesh reserves the right to seek appropriate security partnerships and

solutions to defend its sovereignty.

Cognitive reframing is a gradual process. Government-level discourse often moves slowly, as strategic considerations of national interests and deal-making need time for due assessment. Meanwhile, civil societies of both countries should engage to complement official efforts and defuse ill feelings among the people. Media, including social platforms, academia, think tanks, NGOs, human rights groups, and influential public voices on both sides must work together to challenge divisive rhetoric and promote constructive narratives. Promoting interdependence and good neighborliness, civil society actors can help shift mindsets and influence policy over time.

Physical Domain: Resilient Border Strategy. Bangladesh should display strategic resilience—not passivity—when addressing border violations. Every incident of extrajudicial killing or forced “push-in” must be documented, pursued legally, and exposed through both domestic and international legal mechanisms. Perpetrators—whether security personnel, their commanders, or policymakers—must be held accountable, even through universal jurisdiction, if necessary. While Bangladesh should accept lawful returnees, false cases should be camped and repatriated involving UNHCR or IOM, if required. Media advocacy is also crucial. Strategic use of international media can help name and shame violators, generate global pressure, and deter future abuses. If state channels prove ineffective, cross border coalition of human rights groups (e.g., with Indian organizations like MASUM) and legal activists can yield complementary outcomes.

Bangladesh must also take proactive steps to reduce border crimes—as both a gesture of good neighborliness and a strategic move. This entails strengthening border infrastructure, modernizing forces, employing technology, and integrating the border population into the whole scheme. Over time, reduced crime may open the door to expanded border trade and localized economic zones, creating shared prosperity and reducing conflict incentives. Should peaceful efforts fail, Bangladesh will retain the moral high ground to escalate its response in defense of national sovereignty.

Conclusion

India-Bangladesh relations are inherently complex and often contradictory. On the one hand, the two nations are bound by shared history and sacrifice. On the other hand, decades of border killings and less-than-friendly gestures at the border cast a long shadow. India’s border policy toward Bangladesh appears increasingly incoherent—oscillating between partnership and provocation. Such a dichotomous approach is likely to cause strategic confusion and deepen the trust deficit among the otherwise friendly nations.

Instead of pursuing a confrontational path, both countries should commit to peaceful coexistence and promote principles of amity. There is no need to invent discord or manufacture insecurity as the ties that bind us far outweigh what divides us. An aggressive mindset will only harden Bangladesh’s resolve—especially in this post-

Uprising context. With open hearts and honest discussions, both countries can clear up the strategic discomfort and make their border affairs more humane and mutually beneficial. India should take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become an all-weather friend and collaborate when a New Bangladesh is appearing on the horizon. Finally, it should be also understood that a stable and prosperous Bangladesh is in the best interest of India.

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