

The Geopolitical and Strategic Realities: An Important Constituent Part of Bangladesh in Developing Foreign Relationship with Other Countries

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Abstract: Bangladesh today is a secular democratic country, although the West often calls it a leading moderate Muslim country. Lying at the edges of South Asia it has immense geo-strategic and geo-economic importance. Bangladesh lies at the cross-roads of South Asia, South-East Asia, Central Asia and along the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh could not remain out of the ambience of the changes obtaining globally and regionally. Considering her geopolitical and strategic realities, Bangladesh can formulate a dynamic and benevolent foreign policy with various countries that preserves national interest. This study is an attempt to delve into an analysis of the geopolitical and strategic realities of Bangladesh from various angles.

Introduction:

Geopolitics is the study of the influence of geography, along with economics and demography, on the politics of a nation. Geopolitics helps in understanding forces that affect the politics of national states, especially their foreign relations. It provides political leaders with scenes for demonstrating hardheaded statesmanship; comforting and easy applause lines and a workable model of 'gamesmanship' in international affairs.¹ Geopolitics is a new way of seeing international politics as a unified worldwide scene. Outstanding features of the physical location and resources of a country determine to a large extent its status in global politics.² Like geo-politics, national resources, population, military power are important elements of national power. But out of the various elements in the formulation of foreign policy of a country, geographic location occupies a significant position. Because, the country which is geographically situated in a favorable area, can easily formulate its foreign relations with other nations.

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¹ Gearoid O. Tuathail, and Simon Dalby eds., 1998. Rethinking Geopolitics, (London: Routledge), p. 1.

² Gearoid, O. Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge eds., 1998. The Geopolitics Reader, (London: Routledge), p. 16.

Bangladesh is a small and big country of South Asia (small in respect of size and big in respect of population), covering an area of 55,598 square miles (147,570 square km) and has a population of 150 million. The country lies between latitudes 20°38' and (about 26°38'N 390 miles [625 km] from its extreme north and South extensions) and between longitudes 88°81' and 92°41'E (about 190 miles [305 km] from East to West). The Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura border Bangladesh in the west, north and east respectively. Myanmar forms the Southern part of the eastern frontier. The total length of the land border is about 4,246 km, of which 93.9% is shared with India and about 6.1% with Myanmar. The country is bounded in the south by the Bay of Bengal. Although Bangladesh is a small country, the length of the coastline is more than 580 km. The territorial waters of Bangladesh extend 12 nautical miles (22.22 km) and the area of the high seas extending to 200 nautical miles (370.40 km) measured from the base lines constitutes the economic zone of the country.³

The geopolitical and strategic realities of Bangladesh

Bangladesh's geographical location is such that she has practically only one neighbor -India. Bangladesh has no option but to depend on India at least for land communication with the outside world. This situation is potentially alarming as she may be put into dangers in time of crisis relations with India. Despite her geographical handicaps vis- a- vis India, Bangladesh seems to possess some geo-strategic importance in her South Asian setting.⁴ Bangladesh's geopolitical importance has increased due to at least three factors. First, Bangladesh is referred to as the third largest Muslim country in the world and as the second in the region. The second factor is Bangladesh's location within the 'geo-strategic frontier' of India, South Asia's most powerful country. And the third is Bangladesh being in close proximity with China, Asia's largest power, considered a strategic rival of both the US and India.

Bangladesh's strength lies in having a huge population, homogeneity of race, common language, fertile lands, availability of gas and locational advantage. Homogeneity and absence of feudal social structure (social

³ Banglapedia, National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, 2003. vol.1, (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh) p. 486.

⁴ Nuruzzaman, Md. "National Security of Bangladesh: Challenges and Options" in Md. Abdul Mubeen and Muhammad Humayun Kabir, 2003. 25 Years of BIIS: an Anthology, (Dhaka: Academic Press and Publishers Limited in Association with BIIS), pp. 9-10.

mobility) have increased unity among people. Common language of the people is an asset because it avoids conflicts and social divisions.⁵ The geo-strategic realities of Bangladesh can be understood in the following manner, which offers enormous strategic and economic opportunities for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has locational importance which commands access to the Indian Ocean through the lanes of the Bay of Bengal, location of Bangladesh, as one of the rim states of the Indian Ocean, and lying on the south-west of China and east of India, will, with the passage of time, be more important and significant strategically. Moreover, Bangladesh being a kind of hyphen between South Asia and South East Asia, the two of the fastest growing regions in Asia, can make its role more determining in the events to come.⁶

Geographically the Indian Ocean basin is an aggregate of several sub-regions. It includes South Asia, part of the Middle East, South-West Asia, South East Asia and the South Eastern part of the African continent. The political map of the Indian Ocean comprises 44 littoral and hinterland states,⁷ 35 of which have access to the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean has assumed tremendous geo-strategic as well as geopolitical importance for the countries comprising the Indian Ocean region as well as for the extra-regional powers. Undoubtedly the conceptual paradigm of geopolitics has undergone cataclysmic changes in recent decades, yet it has not in any manner mitigated the significance of the Indian Ocean as such.⁸ In the strategic realm, the Indian Ocean provides the littoral states as well as the outsider states with trade and transportation, natural resources and other things. The geographic location of waters, especially around the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, provide some of the best locations for the external powers. Major Powers concentrate on the Indian Ocean region because of

⁵ Rashid, Harun Ur, 2004. *International Relations and Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: The University Press Limited), p. 63.

⁶ Ahamed, Emajuddin, 2004. *Political Essay on National and International Issue*, (Dhaka: Boipatra), p. 173.

⁷ Indian Ocean Basin, August 28, 1979. 34th General Assembly Official Records, Supplement no.45, United Nations New York, 1975, in Yevgeni Rummyant, 1988. *Indian Ocean and the Asian Security*, (Ahmedabad: Allied Publisher Private Limited), p. 46.

⁸ Singh, Anil Kumar, 2003. *Indian's Security Concern in the Indian Ocean Region*, Military Affairs Series, (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications Pvt Ltd.), p. 72.

strategic and economic significance. A new power game in the region is of a high probability and this may have a significant destabilizing impact on the regional states. The regional states should keep in mind that this region is vital to the regional and global economy.⁹

Bangladesh's role in the South Asian inter-State relations is one of the important factors for the geopolitical and strategic realities of Bangladesh. Because, Bangladesh's role in the South Asian inter-State relations also adds to her geo-political importance. Bangladesh enjoys enough diplomatic leverage in the South Asian environment especially after the formation of SAARC, the idea of which was mooted by Bangladesh itself.¹⁰ Besides, almost all the smaller nations of South Asia are at odds in their bilateral relations with India and they are thus juxtaposed to their bigger neighbor. Any external power hostile to India has the possibility to have a confident friend in the region.¹¹

The Chittagong Hill Tracts is also an important part of Bangladesh that can play a vital role in enhancing the geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh. It can be the area of global rivalry. Chittagong Hill Tracts comprises three districts of Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari. The area can be an important part for the economy of Bangladesh. At present the agricultural land of Bangladesh is facing pressure of cultivation and growing crops for population boom. In order to mitigate that situation we have to think about different alternatives, Multi-dimensional farming in the hills of Chittagong Hill Tracts may be a good alternative. Multi-dimensional farming is such farming where agriculture, horticulture, poultry, fishery, animal husbandry and tourism will be practiced in an integrated way. One practice supports another. The geophysiographic location, water resources of Kaptai Lake, hills, fountains, tribal villages and different ethnic people hydro electronic power etc. and all other facilities are in favour of multi-dimensional hill farming. If Bangladesh government takes proper steps to develop the infrastructure of this area, it would be a great source of income for the economy of Bangladesh that generally would enrich the strategic importance of Bangladesh in future.¹² Attaching considerable 'strategic importance of

⁹ The Daily Star, August 29, 2009.

¹⁰ Karim, Aminul, *Journal of International Affairs*, vol.6, no.1-2, July -June,2000, p. 9.

¹¹ Nuruzzaman, Md., "National Security of Bangladesh: Challenges and Options" in Md. Abdul Mubeen and Muhammad Humayun Kabir, 2003. *25 Years of BIIS: an Anthology*, op. cit., p. 11.

¹² Alam, Jahangir, "Chittagong Hill Tracts, a treasure for Bangladesh," in *Bangladesh Quarterly*, July-September 2007, pp. 42-44.

the Chittagong Hill Tracts' to India, Partha Ghose has even questioned the wisdom of the Indian leaders at the time of partition for their failure to press for the merger of the Chittagong Hill Tract with India since the majority of its population was non-Muslim.¹³

Bangladesh is rich in some mineral resources- both proven and probable, although no concrete data is still available. Mineral deposits like gas, oil, hard rock, lignite, silica, sand, white clay and limestone have been found. The prospects of a huge reserve of natural resources will certainly add a few more feathers in the consideration of the great powers of this and other regions.¹⁴ There is no doubt that promising mineral resources of Bangladesh can be a vital factor to increase the geo-strategic realities of Bangladesh that will provide an option for Bangladesh to formulate its foreign policy with the various nations.

The Asian Highway (AH), an international network of 1,41,000 km of standard highways crisscrossing Asian countries with links to Europe, was conceived in 1959 by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP) with the aim of promoting regional cooperation among the mainland countries of Asia. If Bangladesh becomes a part of this globalize network, it will get connected with the countries located both to the east and the west. It will also open up huge opportunities from the economic point of view as the AH will be providing shorter routes for movement of goods and passengers, leading to huge savings in transport costs. If Bangladesh is included in the network, donors and private sectors from across the globe would find Bangladesh an attractive place to invest in.¹⁵ In the context of geographical contiguity of the proposed cooperating states, the future opening of Asian Highway trade and other forms of economic cooperation is likely to be bright. So the proposed Asian Highway project is one of the important factors of developing land transport among the South and South East Asian countries. Bangladesh has assumed the importance of being middle point of the road between South and South

¹³ Ghosh, Partha S, "Cooperation and Conflict in South Asia", in Abul Kalam ed., 1996. Bangladesh Internal Dynamics and External Linkages, (Dhaka: The University Press Limited), p. 202.

¹⁴ Aahmed, Emajuddin, 2004. Political Essay on National and International Issue, op. cit, p. 173.

¹⁵ The Daily Star, June 19, 2009.

East Asia, which can play a vital role in increasing the geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh.¹⁶

It is pertinent to note the following to understand the role that Bangladesh plays in India's strategic dynamics. First, Bangladesh's location is a strategic wedge between mainland India and Northeastern seven states of the Indian Union. Each of these states is land-locked and has shorter route to the sea through Bangladesh. Currently, Calcutta port is used by these states for both domestic and imported cargo. Second, the navigable rivers in India's Northeast that could connect West Bengal or Orissa ports pass through Bangladesh. The only entry to and exit from the Northeastern region of India is through the Shiliguri Corridor that is close to the Chinese border and within striking distance of Bangladesh. The Shiliguri Corridor is the most sensitive 'choke point' for the Indian Union. Third, most of the Northeastern states of India are virtually under siege where decades old insurgencies are raging unabated, particularly in Assam, Tripura, and Nagaland. These states are yet to be fully integrated with the Indian Union. Fourth, Arunachal Pradesh, still disputed between China and India, is within close proximity of Bangladesh. Fifth, Bangladesh provides easy land access to Southeast Asian countries that are important for India's 'Look East Policy.'¹⁷

China has been constantly an important factor in Bangladesh's foreign policy since the establishment of diplomatic, military and economic ties in 1975. Since then the governments of Bangladesh of all political complexions have pursued similar Chinese policy. In this context, the growing linkage, connectivity and possible land connection enhances Bangladesh's regional geo-strategic status particularly for the following reasons: first, China enjoys access to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar; second, Dhaka's proposal to connect Kunming with Bangladesh by road through Myanmar could be an alternative route for China; third, to the point of quest for natural resources China is known to have shown interest in Bangladesh's energy sector. This assumes significance in the context when both India and China are competitors in energy sector in terms of consumption and international investment.¹⁸

^{16.} Sanjay, Bhardwaj, "Bangladesh at 35: Internal Dynamics and External Linkages," in *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 9, no.1-2, June and December 2005, Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs, p. 49-50.

^{17.} http://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/2006/15thanniv/bangladesh&theworld/bd_world02.htm.

^{18.} *Ibid.*

For the foregoing appraisal of geopolitical and strategic realities of Bangladesh, it can be decided that as an important constituent part of making foreign policy, geopolitics can play a vital role for Bangladesh's foreign relations. Giving priority to geopolitical and strategic realities, Bangladesh can make her foreign relational with regional and great powers as well.

Bangladesh has already proved its strategic value to the great powers. Bangladesh's moderate voice in regional and international forums, its significant role in UN peacekeeping operations and the global war on terror, its success in poverty alleviation through its extensive micro credit programs and a growing economy, all have contributed positively in drawing the attention of great powers. Besides, the traumatic events of 9/11 once again compelled the US to become deeply involved in the South Asian region with explicit interests and a new geo-strategic vision. The eventual shift in US foreign policy has transformed the geopolitical environment of South Asia. The US effort to develop a strategic partnership with India, with the apparent intention of containing China's growing influence in the region, is another significant development in South Asian geopolitics. While the US-India strategic engagement has many other dimensions, it has complicated the regional security environment and demands a far-sighted geo-strategic policy and constructive engagement of US by Bangladesh and other South Asian nations.¹⁹

The policy option for Bangladesh:

Keeping in view Bangladesh's geopolitical standing, coupled with its poor economic, industrial and technological state, makes it difficult to work out viable geo-strategic options without prejudicing national interests. According to reputed geo-strategists, a usable way out lies in pursuing foreign policy and diplomacy while maintaining a minimum credible deterrence against any direct military threats to national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The simple logic of geography suggests that Bangladesh's security and development can not be pursued in isolation; rather, it has to be done in cooperation with its neighboring states and great powers like China, USA and other powers.²⁰

¹⁹ Rahman, Md. Shafiqur, "United States interests in South Asia and geo-strategic option for Bangladesh", in NDC Journal, A Professional Journal of National Defense College, vol.6, Number-1 June, 2007, p. 159.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 168.

The global power is clearly shifting towards Asia, while the strategic landscape in the region remains marked diversity of conflict. With phenomenal rise of China and India, the Indian Ocean will matter more as these key players enter into a great power-rivalry in these waters as the whole Indian Ocean sea-board, including Africa's eastern shores, becomes a vast web of energy trade. China and India are trying to make bilateral relations with the littoral states of Indian Ocean region. China has already made its bilateral relations with Pakistan, Srilanka and Myanmar for gaining military supremacy in the Indian Ocean region.²¹ Triggered by economic growth and strategic perception (shaped by the history and strategic culture) both China and India are investing in extensive military modernization and expansion. These are evidenced by their efforts to build up maritime strength with a view to attaining supremacy in the Indian Ocean. As a littoral state Bangladesh should take proper step to increase its power for gaining maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean as well as Bay of Bengal. The measures that increase the geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh are as follows:

First, Bangladesh faces the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal. For Bangladesh access to the oceans via Bay of Bengal is of utmost strategic importance. The recent development in Myanmar is a matter of concern for Bangladesh. The spat with Yangon in November 2008 over a rig placed by Myanmar for exploration purposes in territorial waters claimed by Bangladesh was a "wake up call" for Dhaka. The media has reported the Bangladesh navy as having a ten year plan to upgrade itself into a "three dimensional force", which is very logical. The Myanmar navy has grown enormously since 1988. Now it seeks blue water capability. Further mobilization is only a matter of time. In this context Bangladesh must seriously assess and develop its own maritime capability to match the reality. The rapidly evolving strategic scenario in the Indian Ocean region is something that Bangladesh should take into serious consideration. In Bangladesh, there is a surprising lack of research in maritime issues. We can not defend our national interest vis-a- vis maritime boundary and exploration of oceanic resources unless we know the ocean well.²²

²¹. The Daily Prothom Alo, 5 November 2009.

²². The Daily Star, August 29, 2009.

Second, due to asymmetry in size as well as economic and military power, India, no doubt, poses a significant threat to Bangladesh's physical security. At the same time, it presents enormous opportunities for us. Some of our neighbors are already taking advantage of India's strengths and reaping both economic and political benefits. Even Pakistan is making a deliberate effort to improve its relations with India. For this reason, given geopolitical realities, Bangladesh can not view its security and development aggressively or by seeking to isolate itself from India; rather, it has to pursue a path of cooperation with it. Therefore, Bangladesh should reach a national consensus and work out a long term strategy for engaging India.

Third, the growing US interests and involvement in the region makes it clear that a stable South Asia with booming economy is in the interest of US as well as the South Asian nations themselves. Due to impending interests, the US is eager to exert its influence in the region in the form of developing strategic and economic partnership with key South Asian nations. Most of our geo-strategists feel that gradual integration of US in South Asian geopolitics will create a favorable environment for the small countries of the region that are looking out for practical solutions to security issues. It will provide Bangladesh some space for maneuver and additional leverage to engage India and Myanmar in resolving bilateral security issues. In particular, it will help Bangladesh and other smaller nations overcome undesired Indian domination and other geo-strategic limitations. Bangladesh must take effective measures and maintain constant check against terrorism and the rise of religious fundamentalism. Bangladesh should also sincerely cooperate with the US whole-heartedly and become her effective ally in the global war on terror.²³

Fourth, in the South Asian geopolitical equation, Bangladesh's relationship with China provides it some leverage to escape Indian predominance. Hence, developing a close relationship with China is vital for the foreign policy interest of Bangladesh. As doorway to the Indian Ocean and India's turbulent north-eastern region, including the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh to which China lays territorial claims, Bangladesh is also important for China. Keeping ties in view, security analysts feel that Bangladesh may benefit from the convergence of strategic and economic interests of a nuclear power like China. However,

23. Rahman, Md. Shafiqur, "United States interests in South Asia and geo-strategic option for Bangladesh", in NDC Journal, A Professional Journal of National Defense College, vol.6, op. cit., p. 167-72.

the complexities and sensitivities of regional geopolitics suggest that Bangladesh-China relations should be maintained without 'acceptable bounds' i.e. neither too warm, nor too cool, without raising any suspicion in our own immediate neighborhood.²⁴

Fifth, Myanmar shares a common boundary with Bangladesh of about 176 miles. This traditionally friendly neighbor has demonstrated its military preparedness in the recent past on the Rohingya refugee issue and may pose a military threat to Bangladesh in the not- too distant future. Myanmar's location provides it a strategic advantage, since it serves as a 'Land Bridge' between the sub- regions of South-east and South-Asia. Actions taken by the military regime there have twice led to the exodus of over quarter million minorities, known as Rohingyas, who live in the borders of Bangladesh. The brutality the enemy had faced was unveiled on 21 December 1991 when there was a sudden attack on the Rijipara border outpost of Bangladesh threatening its sovereignty. The hostile act of the Nasakas of Myanmar also indicates that Bangladesh faces threats from Myanmar as far as its national security is concerned.²⁵ It is crying need for Bangladesh to arbitrate the existing bilateral problems with Myanmar. It would help Bangladesh to make bilateral relations with Myanmar in general and strengthen her maritime supremacy in the sea without facing any hindrance.

With the limited geo-political and strategic realities and facing some internal problems like a small territory compared to the huge size of its population, landlessness of majority of people, massive unemployment, poverty, gender inequality, existence of orthodox Islamic conservative elements, and hardly any other natural resources except natural gas, there is no way for Bangladesh to avoid the foregoing options. If Bangladesh follows the above options, geopolitics would be an important constituent part that helps Bangladesh to make dynamic relationship with other states.

²⁴. Ruksana Kibria, "Strategic Implications of Bangladesh- China Relations", Article published in *The Daily Star*, 19 February 2006.

²⁵. Mohammad, Saber,s "National Security of Bangladesh: Challenges and Options" in *NDC Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, June 2008, p. 10-11.

Conclusion:

In the light of the foregoing analysis it can be decided that geopolitics determines a country's status in world politics and conditions, policies of other nations, especially super powers, towards it. A significant aspect of the subcontinent's including Bangladesh's, physical location is sea frontage. Very few nations can overlook the significance of a border with oceans. If we look at the strategic situation of Bangladesh, the country stands between two emerging giants China and India and constitutes a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. Besides, Bangladesh's position on a trade route between Europe and Far East via the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca provides favorable commercial connection with the rest of the world. The importance could be attached to the global air route. Besides, the enhanced importance of the Bay of Bengal and the perceived triangular contest for geo-political advantage there involving India, China and the USA made Bangladesh strategically important. In fine, it can be stated that as an important element of national power, geopolitics can provide Bangladesh an enormous opportunity to formulate a dynamic foreign policy with other states.

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