EXPLORING THE FUTURE OF BANGLADESH IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUTH ASIAN DYNAMICS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Bangladesh, being a country in South Asia and becoming a key player in the Bay of Bengal region, holds strategic significance at both regional and global levels. The article aims to delve into how Bangladesh has been salient to major powers, and therefore its future is largely shaped by the intricate regional geopolitical dynamics. This study looks at how domestic, regional and extra-regional political, economic and security factors affect the country`s opportunities and create certain challenges. It does so by analyzing scholarly literature, news articles and reports on South Asian affairs, especially those that focus on Bangladesh, and conducting in-depth expert interviews. The study found that Bangladesh has enormous avenues to get engaged not only with neighbouring countries, organizations and forums, but also with the regional and extra-regional ones, while the existing and forthcoming hurdles cannot be undermined. The study posits that while Bangladesh's strategic location and its hedging foreign relations strategies with major powers have opened doors to prosperity, especially in terms of economic development and security cooperation, its weakness to deeply engage with other neighbouring smaller nations and resolve disputes through dialogues and negotiations using diplomatic channels, as well as its inability to create strong leverage among major powers, could lead to a geopolitical trap in the near future. Ultimately, this situation may compel Bangladesh to align with a major power or a bloc, maintain a position of neutrality or opt for strategic autonomy in its foreign relations, depending on the evolving domestic, regional and global political, economic and security dynamics.

Keywords: Bangladesh, South Asia, geopolitics, domestic politics, regional politics, extra-regional politics, hedging in foreign relations.

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INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's birth at the height of the Cold War, along with the changing regional political dynamics and growing geopolitical competition in the South Asia region, has transformed the country into a prominent center for major powers [1; 2]. Admitting its strategic salience and geographical location, dominant powers have been working for years to strengthen their active engagement with Bangladesh, resulting in increasing influence in domestic and foreign affairs in recent years [3]. Additionally, as a littoral country of the Bay of Bengal – a major trade route of great powers – Bangladesh has emerged as a notable regional hub for political, economic and military activities among key players [4].

Geographically, Bangladesh is landlocked on three sides by India, necessitating the maintenance of a robust relationship with this regional giant [5]. Conversely, China views Bangladesh as a crucial hub for trade and commerce, positioning it as a significant corridor for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [6; 7]. Consequently, competition between China and India in Bangladesh has intensified in recent years [8]. Amidst this Sino-Indian rivalry, the United States – Bangladesh's largest trade partner – has begun to pay greater attention to the country than ever before due to its broader interests in the Indo-Pacific region. While Russia's historical presence in Bangladesh has been minimal [9], recent collaborations between Dhaka and Moscow mark the beginning of a new chapter in their development [10].

Bangladesh's growing significance to major powers necessitates a focus on maintaining regional peace, stability, security, integration and cooperation, as well as contributing to global peace and stability [11; 12]. Although Bangladesh pursues a hedging strategy in foreign relations, it finds itself in a complex situation due to the critical geopolitical landscape of South Asia, which presents both opportunities and challenges. If the overall situation – both regional and extra-regional – deteriorates, should Bangladesh continue its current hedging approach, align itself with a specific bloc, or maintain a neutral stance? This question poses significant implications for Bangladesh's future course of action.

The existing literature has not extensively addressed this issue, with many Bangladeshi experts arguing that it is too early to engage in such discussions. However, this study asserts the importance of developing long-term plans and strategies to anticipate potential risks or threats facing Bangladesh. It aims to contribute to the existing body of literature exploring these issues, thereby enriching the discourse in this field. The objective of this study is to examine Bangladesh's future within the context of complex South Asian regional dynamics while considering the potential challenges and significant opportunities that may arise.

Employing qualitative research methods with a particular focus on literature concerning smaller states in South Asia and conducting in-depth interviews, this study analyses how Bangladesh navigates its foreign policy strategies amid major power competition in the region's geopolitical dynamics. Through qualitative analysis techniques, it explores the intricate South Asian political landscape and international relations, along with their effects on Bangladesh.

The general outline of this article is delineated as follows: first, it provides a succinct overview of the historical background of Bangladesh, which is geographically located in South Asia. Next, it delves into an investigation of the geopolitical landscape within the South Asia region and elucidates how Bangladesh endeavours to navigate major power competition. Third, it discusses the opportunities that lie before the country and could be taken in the foreseeable future if South Asian nations persist in their efforts to enhance collaboration among themselves.

Fourth, it scrutinises both the current challenges facing Bangladesh and potential forthcoming obstacles that may arise in the near future. Finally, it concludes with a comprehensive illustration of key findings derived from this study, along with their possible implications.

GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN SOUTH ASIA AND BANGLADESH

A brief background on Bangladesh in South Asia

Bangladesh is one of eight nation-states in South Asia that emerged during the Cold War era, becoming a unique battleground for political manoeuvring [2]. Since then, Dhaka's foreign policy approaches have evolved from diplomacy of recognition to economic diplomacy and, more recently, to a hedging strategy in its international relations. Despite its small size, Bangladesh's geographical position renders it strategically significant not only to regional powers like India and China but also to extra-regional powers such as the USA and Russia [13]. Furthermore, the country's growing economic prosperity has garnered considerable attention from foreign investors, transforming its image from the 'Bottomless Basket' to the 'South Asian Miracle' [14; 15]. However, political turmoil, corruption and foreign influence often hinder the smooth progress of the country.

Since gaining independence, Bangladesh has experienced both military and democratic regimes, yet it has never achieved lasting political stability. The 'zero-sum' political game and 'winner-takes-all' mentality have deeply penetrated Bangladeshi politics. Consequently, political polarisation has become a significant concern, creating opportunities for foreign actors to meddle in domestic affairs, as noted by Dr. Nazrul Islam, a Professor of Political Studies at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology in Bangladesh.

The fragile political environment in Bangladesh significantly influences its internal and external policies and behaviours. Major political parties often prioritise regime interests over national interests in their foreign relations and policies, which provides hegemonic powers with an opportunity to engage in Bangladeshi domestic, regional and global affairs by supporting their preferred political parties and elites [10]. Thus, Bangladesh's foreign relations and policies are largely contingent upon which political parties are in power.

The ever-changing geopolitical and economic competition in the region intensifies challenges for smaller states in South Asia, compelling many of them to maintain balance in their collaboration with major powers [16]. Bangladesh's foreign policy aims primarily to maintain regional peace, stability, security, integration and cooperation while promoting global peace and stability. Although Bangladesh adheres to the basic principles of 'friendship towards all and malice towards none' and a policy of non-alignment [3], it has never been entirely neutral in its foreign relations or decision-making processes [10]. Rather, its foreign relations with other nations – especially major powers – largely depend on the ruling regime, according to Dr. Nazmul Islam, an Associate Professor of Political Science and a Head of Turkey, Asia and Indo-Pacific Studies at Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University in Turkey.

Regional and extra-regional politics in South Asia and Bangladesh

The very intricate South Asian regional dynamics has greatly influenced Bangladesh foreign policy decision-making process. To understand the regional geopolitical landscape and its impact on Bangladesh, it is essential to address some background history of South Asian politics and great powers' influence in the region. The enduring impact of British colonisation continues to shape post-independence societies in South Asia, thereby heavily influencing both regional and international politics and relations [17].

In South Asian attributes, the legacy of British colonisation lays the foundation for the region's complexities [18]. The partition of India and Pakistan based on religious identity, Pakistan's geography (West and East), leaving Kashmir undisputed, and then Bangladesh's creation and possession of nuclear power by New Delhi and Islamabad have perpetuated a sense of perpetual enmity [19]. Indian leaders and elites have historically envisioned (and continue to do so) regional and global dominance following British withdrawal, fuelling the

complex power dynamics between India and Pakistan and shaping a fragile South Asia. Following independence, New Delhi attempted to assert its influence in the neighbourhood [20]. New Delhi's policy approach in this regard derived from two key factors. First, from the beginning of independence (even before that), Indian political leaders believed that India was destined to be a great power. The country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, held such a view. Second, Indian political elites perceived that India was the successor state of British India and the country would undertake the predecessor's international treaty and other obligations. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in India in 2014 heralded a new Indian regional approach.

The South Asian giant has abundant reasons to aspire to become a regional and global power. When compared, India's population is over six times larger and its land area is four times greater than that of Pakistan. India's GDP is approximately seven times that of Pakistan, with a significantly higher current economic growth rate. Moreover, India's military expenditure surpasses Pakistan's by more than six times, and its military manpower is twice as large.

India's overall material power surpasses that of all other South Asian states combined, placing them at a disadvantage while engaging with India [21]. Consequently, India's foreign policy approach towards its neighbouring countries is a key driver of shaping regional international relations [22]. The responses and policy approaches of other states towards India, notably Pakistan's challenge to Indian power, have contributed to an enduring rivalry in South Asia. This enduring rivalry has profoundly influenced the region's international relations and economic integration, with weaker states often being caught in the crossfire [23].

Regarding Indo-Pakistan rivalry, it is important to assess how Bangladesh responds to their conflicts. India–Bangladesh–Pakistan relations have some implications for South Asia's regional international relations because of their very complex linkage. Bangladesh– Pakistan relations have seen ups and down over the decades depending on which political party was in power in Bangladesh. The military regimes in Bangladesh from 1975 to 1990 had built better relations with Pakistan, which meant a deterioration in the relationship with India. Other times, when an Awami League government was in power in Bangladesh, Bangladesh–Pakistan relations plummeted, but when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (in coalition with Jamaat-e-Islami) was installed in power, the opposite occurred. Since 2009, an AL government has been in power, which means a worsening of relations with Pakistan. It was manifested in 2016 when Bangladesh sided with India to boycott the 19th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Islamabad. In this context, Bangladesh–Pakistan relations are significant for SAARC, South Asian international relations and regionalism.

Out of South Asian attributes, the enduring influence of Cold War powers – the USA and Russia – has been a prominent feature in South Asian politics for years [24]. The both bipolar powers – the USA and the Soviet Union – tried to establish spheres of influence in the region where India gradually began to lean towards Soviet Russia and Pakistan to the USA which was also observed during the liberation war of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) – the USSR was in favour of Bangladesh's creation as an independent state while the United States took the opposite direction [17]. According to them [17], Russia's political and economic weakness kept it out of the balance-of-power game in South Asia, and the U.S.' role in the subcontinent stayed the same: it wasn't very deep or ongoing (pp. 95–96). Despite a decrease in Russia's significance in South Asian geopolitical dynamics after the Cold War, it began to regain importance under President Vladimir Putin's leadership, especially following the Ukrainian crisis [25], albeit at a slower pace. Conversely, some experts suggest that China is increasingly aligning itself with the U.S.-led international [26] and regional order [27]. Thus, China's expanded presence in South Asia, especially in the Bay of Bengal region under Xi Jinping's leadership, exemplified by its Belt and Road Initiative, has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of regional and international politics in South Asia [28]. The obvious result is that India, while facing challenges within the SAARC framework, actively seeks counter Chinese influence in the littoral Bay of Bengal countries through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), aligning with its Look East Policy and Neighbourhood First Policy [29].

Neorealists argue that in international politics, dominant powers do not easily tolerate emerging competitors. The United States views China as a significant threat, acknowledging that Beijing's actions have been eroding their influence and interests in the Indo-Pacific region [30]. As a result, China's rapid growth, with its GDP increasing nearly fivefold from $2.3 trillion (here and forward – U.S. dollar) in 2005 to $17.7 trillion in 2022, has fuelled neorealists' predictions of a potential hegemonic conflict between a 'rising' China and the 'ruling' United States [31]. Similarly, Indian policymakers perceive Beijing as their primary rival in comparison to Pakistan, China views Washington as a more significant adversary than New Delhi in the region [23]. These dynamics lead Indian elites and scholars to voice concerns about China's creeping presence in the region. As a result, India's international relations strategies towards Pakistan, China, the USA and Russia in South Asian regional affairs, as well as its engagement with weaker states, are critical in shaping regional dynamics.

Throughout history, the issues of stability and security in South Asia have often revolved around a complex interplay of internal and external factors [17]. Taking a broader perspective, the dynamics of security in South Asia encompass various levels, including the domestic, regional, interregional and global spheres. Factors such as national identity, cultural and religious diversity, turbulent and violent political landscapes, a tendency among political elites to prioritise personal gain over economic development, and a focus on regime maintenance rather than national interests have contributed to making South Asia a region marked by complexity when compared to its neighbouring regions like Southeast Asia.

In essence, Bangladesh's emergence during the Cold War era, amidst India and Pakistan's rivalry, the threat of nuclear war, and subsequent shifts in regional power dynamics, along with the involvement of external powers in South Asian social, political, economic and security matters, have led the country to adopt a policy of non-alignment and strategic hedging in its foreign relations. However, this study found that hegemonic powers are attempting to coerce Dhaka into choosing a single side, resulting in an unstable equilibrium and uneasy coexistence, and the process has already begun.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR BANGLADESH

Robust relationships with great powers

As a peace-loving country, Bangladesh continues to enjoy substantial opportunities for cultivating robust relationships with all superpowers and aspires to establish itself as a key player in the region while maintaining balanced relations with them [32]. With its economy booming and global power shifting eastward, Dhaka's role on the regional and global stage is becoming increasingly prominent day by day [14]. In the aftermath of the Cold War, it has become evident that any country that stands against the Western powers, particularly the United States, is bound to face unprecedented consequences. However, Bangladesh's neighbour, Myanmar, has managed to effectively deal with Western threats by fostering strong relations with regional (e.g., India, China) and extra-regional anti-Western powers (e.g., Russia). Naypyidaw has been able to create leverage and wield considerable bargaining power, especially in balancing its relations with two local rivals, India and China [33].

In contrast to Myanmar, Bangladesh enjoys a plethora of advantages because it has maintained positive relationships with all major powers both regionally and globally. While the United States is Bangladesh's largest trade and strategic partner, Russia is an important exporter of various military weapons and equipment to Dhaka [34]. Moreover, Bangladesh's relations with Muslim countries are very strong. Since its independence, the country has been a key supplier of surplus manpower to many oil-rich countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, as well as to Southeast Asia, including Malaysia. The country has also been an influential member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where Dhaka plays significant roles in the decision-making process for the betterment of the Muslim world. Hence, it is clear that Bangladesh has successfully forged robust and constructive ties with dominant powers across the globe while also conveying the imperative of a balanced relationship that caters to the interests of all stakeholders.

Natural link between South and Southeast Asia

The geographical positioning of a country or region holds significant sway over both regional and international politics and economy, and has long been recognised as a pivotal determinant of foreign policy [35]. Due to its geographical location, Bangladesh serves as a gateway between South and Southeast Asia [36]. Therefore, any regional coordination between ASEAN (Association of the Southeast Asian Nations) and SAARC (the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) must include Bangladesh [37]. As such, it holds immense potential to facilitate the harmonious coexistence and mutual prosperity of these neighbouring regions, according to Professor Nasir Uddin. However, to fully capitalize on this opportunity, Bangladesh must first prioritise safeguarding its borders, revising its internal and external policies, and forging collaborative partnerships with India and Myanmar. With its well-equipped ports and burgeoning maritime trade, Bangladesh is well-positioned to act as a bridge connecting South and Southeast Asia. Yet, to fulfil this vision, Bangladesh's policymakers must work closely with their counterparts in SAARC and ASEAN member states to ensure regional stability and security while fostering trade and commerce.

Trade opportunities with South Asian countries

South Asia made history by forming SAARC through Bangladesh's initiative in 1985 [20]. The organisation's primary goal was to foster mutual cooperation on issues of common interest, achieve collective self-reliance and promote regional unity [38]. However, little has changed over the years regarding regional integration and economic cooperation [39]; rather, most member countries still remain suspicious of each other's activities, which greatly impacts intra-regional trade[1]. At $23 billion, intra-regional trade in South Asia is well below the estimated potential of $67 billion, accounting for a mere 5 percent of the region's total trade[2]. Despite this, Bangladesh remains hopeful that SAARC can still play a crucial role in advancing bilateral relationships among the member states.

While SAARC shows slow progress [40], some countries have taken the initiative to form alternative multilateral associations, such as BIMSTEC, with their regional allies to promote cooperation and integration among the countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal, where Bangladesh is an influential member [41]. Additionally, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) have endeavoured to enhance road connectivity and facilitate electricity trade in recent years.

A tremendous trade opportunity lies in the closer economic integration and cooperation between SAARC and BIMSTEC members. Following the paths of ASEAN and the EU, South Asian countries, according to Ali Riaz, can achieve economic prosperity in the region and reduce dependency on external sources. To achieve the goals of SAARC, BIMSTEC and BBIN, leaders, diplomats and policymakers – particularly from smaller states – must work together to advance these associations for the betterment of the region.

CHALLENGES FOR BANGLADESH

In between hegemonic powers

Bangladesh's strategic location, rapidly developing economy, vast domestic market and natural resources have garnered significant attention from major powers [42]. However, the competition among both great and emerging powers for influence in the country has often led to unfavourable situations, hindering its ability to pursue independent domestic and foreign policies [43].

Since its inception, Bangladesh has maintained a complex relationship with India. Indian leaders consistently expect Dhaka to adhere to their guidelines regarding foreign relations and to avoid establishing strong bilateral ties with any country or power that New Delhi perceives as a threat. Any security cooperation between Bangladesh and China is viewed as

[1] Balachandran P.K. BIMSTEC Shows the Way to Regional Cooperation. *The New India Express*, 27.06.2015. Available at: https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2015/Jun/27/bimstec-shows-the-way-to-regional-cooperation-775471.html (accessed 26.01.2025).

[2] *Why One South Asia? Trade*. The World Bank. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/trade (accessed 20.02.2025).

a security threat by India. Indian leaders, policymakers and even academics frequently voice their concerns when Dhaka seeks to deepen its relationship with Beijing. Similarly, the United States attempts to limit Bangladesh's engagement with China, as evidenced by the frequent visits of high-ranking U.S. officials to the country over the past three years.

The growing apprehension of both the United States and India regarding China's increasing presence in Bangladesh and the broader region poses a significant challenge for the country [44]. These two powers closely monitor China's activities in Bangladesh, viewing them as threats to their security, influence and power. Whenever an agreement is reached between Bangladesh and China, Indian policymakers and media express concern, prompting Delhi to counteract through various means [8]. Singh P.S. [45] expresses worry about the shifting stance of China and its traditional allies, such as Pakistan, towards India's smaller neighbours, who were previously considered India's steadfast friends. He also asserts that Beijing's provision of 'conventional weapons' and other 'sensitive technologies' to Dhaka is not a positive development for New Delhi.

Despite India's concerns, Bangladesh's relations with China have reached their highest level in the last one and a half decades. Bangladesh and China share an annual bilateral trade turnover of $23 billion[3]. According to Professor Ali Riaz, 'China's significant trade and investment in Bangladesh, which surpasses that of both India and the United States, has alarmed these two major powers. They perceive Bangladesh's growing engagement with Beijing as a threat to their trade and security interests in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal region. Furthermore, Bangladesh's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative includes receiving $26 billion for BRI projects and $14 billion for joint venture projects, totalling a $40 billion package[4]. As of the end of 2023, China's investment stock in Bangladesh had increased to nearly $1.4 billion, and there were nearly 700 Chinese-funded companies in Bangladesh, creating more than 550,000 jobs [46]. However, Bangladesh's trade gap with China raises concerns about falling into a debt trap in the near future. According to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, China's exports to Bangladesh amounted to $22.95 billion during 2023, while its imports from Bangladesh were only $1.03 billion during the same year[5].

Bangladesh's relations with the Russian Federation began during its liberation war, with the Soviet Union providing active support for its independence. Bangladesh and the Soviet Union established diplomatic ties on January 25, 1972. Although both countries enjoy friendly relations, their bilateral ties have never reached the same level as those with countries like India, China and the USA.

The signing of the partnership agreement for the Rooppur Nuclear Power Project marks a new era in the alliance between Dhaka and Moscow. Russia and Bangladesh now have a $5 billion arms sale agreement. According to the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database (2023), Russia has been a major source of defence imports into Bangladesh, second only to China[6]. The two countries have cooperated in military and defence sectors; in 1999, they signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation, paving the way for a closer partnership in this area [47]. Bangladesh has been purchasing military equipment from Russia for many years, and Russia has been a reliable supplier of military hardware. The Russian-made MiG-29 fighter jets, T-72 tanks and other weapons systems are significant components of Bangladesh's defence arsenal. In 2013, Bangladesh and Russia signed a defence cooperation agreement that further strengthened their defence ties, which also include military training of personnel and joint exercises [48].

[3] Qi W. China, Bangladesh Elevate Ties, Broaden Cooperation. *Global Times*, 10.07.2024. Available at: https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1315808.shtml (accessed 28.10.2024).

[4] Belt and Road Initiative: Perspective from Bangladesh. *The Daily Star*, 07.08.2019. Available at: https://www.thedailystar.net/round-tables/news/belt-and-road-initiative-perspective-bangladesh-1782928 (accessed 28.10.2024).

[5] *China Exports to Bangladesh*. Trading Economics. Available at: https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/bangladesh# (accessed 28.10.2024).

[6] *SIPRI Arms Transfer Database*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Available at: https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers (accessed 28.10.2024).

Some Western countries express concern about the potential use of Russian military equipment by Bangladesh in human rights violations. The situation worsened after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine armed conflict, as many nations, including Bangladesh, faced pressure from Western powers to sever all types of relations with Russia. For example, Bangladesh was unable to purchase Russian oil and had to refuse entry to Russian shipments of materials for the nuclear power plant in Rooppur due to Western pressure and threats. Consequently, a temporary unfavourable situation arose following Moscow's summon of the Bangladesh ambassador in Russia. The six months of the current interim government's activities indicate that Dhaka is interested in maintaining positive relationships with the Cold War power.

Bilateral trade with South Asian nations

Bangladesh's bilateral trade with SAARC member states is at the lowest level, while there are huge opportunities to boost economic cooperation between South Asian nations, similar to that of ASEAN member states. The intra-regional trade among SAARC members accounts for about 5 percent of the total trade in the region, while intra-regional trade accounts for nearly 50 percent of the total trade in the East Asia and Pacific region and 22 percent of the total trade in the Sub-Saharan African region[7]. Mistrust and the lack of collaboration between states, along with limited free trade opportunities and trade liberalisation, makes South Asia one of the least economically integrated regions [38].

Bangladesh's initiatives towards founding SAARC, which aimed to boost economic cooperation among member states, have yet to be achieved [49]. No single South Asian nation has strong bilateral trade relations with others, except India. While Bangladesh has a substantial bilateral trade relationship with India, its trade deficit with New Delhi has reached the highest level in recent years. According to Bangladesh Export Promotion Bureau,[8] total export earnings of Bangladesh from the goods and service sector during fiscal year 2023-2024 amounted to $51114.15 million and the import payment for the same year was $72616.70 million with a trade deficit of $21502.55 million. The Bureau further reveals that among the top 20 exporting countries, only India, as a South Asian nation, imports the highest value of goods from Bangladesh, while Bangladesh's exports to Asian countries amounted to $5250.81 million, with ASEAN member countries accounting for $758.08 million and SAARC nations contributing $1756.72 million.

Among South Asian nations, India alone has received about 90% of Bangladesh's exports. While smaller states have been trying to boost trade among SAARC member countries, the reluctance of India and the long-standing animosity between India and Pakistan have hindered their efforts. Thus, without strong Indian participation and leadership in various initiatives and forums, achieving economic cooperation and success in South Asia will be considered a failed attempt [44]. Therefore, Bangladesh's success in enhancing bilateral trade with South Asian nations is heavily reliant on the activities of India and Pakistan within SAARC.

Rohingya issue and great powers' role

The Rohingya crisis in Myanmar has been a major challenge for Bangladesh both internally and externally. This issue has severely deteriorated the relationships between the two neighbouring countries [50; 51]. Additionally, the roles of regional and extra-regional powers in solving the Rohingya issues are unprecedented for Bangladesh [52], while there is a clear verdict from the International Criminal Court (ICC) to take the Rohingyas back as citizens of Myanmar. However, there has been almost no progress in this regard; rather, the situation has become even more complicated due to the civil war in Myanmar. According to Nasir Uddin, a professor in the Anthropology Department at Chittagong University and an expert on international migration and refugees, 'The contradictory behavior of the major powers and the anti-Muslim attitude among Myanmar's army and its religious leaders towards the Rohingya Muslims have complicated efforts to get them back'.

Domestically, the presence of more than a million Rohingyas in Bangladesh poses not only economic, social and demographic challenges but also a major security concern [53]. Recently, a

[7] Balachandran P.K. Op. cit.

[8] *Export Promotion Bureau, Bangladesh*. Available at: http://epb.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/epb.portal.gov.bd/miscellaneous_info/8405d990_9311_41c8_88df_19b340500b6c/2025-01-23-10-23-578dd7519e362c17af98614919255e7f.pdf (accessed 05.03.2025).

significant number of Rohingya people have been involved in various crimes, including killings, abductions, drug and human trafficking [54]. Moreover, there has been a growing mentality among some of them to take revenge and subsequently join resistance groups. As a result, Bangladesh now finds itself in a more critical situation than ever before. Dhaka sees no significant diplomatic solution to the crisis, mainly due to the failure of the international community to pressure Myanmar into repatriating the refugees. Rather, it has become evident that these major powers prioritise their own interests over resolving the Rohingya crisis.

A geopolitical competition between Sino-Indian and China–USA–Russia interests in the Bay of Bengal region, which makes the Rohingya crisis even more complicated [55]. The emerging powers, India and China, have significant interests in Myanmar, especially in Rakhine State, which prevent them from actively participating in resolving Rohingya issues [56]. China's support for Myanmar is critical because of its energy security, geostrategic considerations and economic development in the southeastern region, according to Professor Nasir Uddin. Myanmar's strategic location in the Bay of Bengal makes it an essential economic connecting hub and a potential military launching pad for China [57]. On the other hand, India prefers to remain silent on addressing the Rohingya issue due to its energy interests in Myanmar, access to the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia, political and ethnic upheavals in India's Northeast, and security concerns about Beijing's growing influence in the region.

The Cold War power Russia still has not played any significant role in resolving the crisis while Moscow maintains strong bilateral relationships with both Bangladesh and Myanmar. While Russia is a significant exporter of military equipment to both countries, Bangladesh's expectations from Moscow have been much higher than what the great power has provided since the crisis emerged. To date, the only positive success for Bangladesh has been receiving support from Western powers, especially the United States, though they have their own ideological interests in the region. Ultimately, it has become apparent that Bangladesh has only been receiving assurances of support and help from major powers, but their efforts have yielded minimal results so far.

Hedging in foreign relations with major powers

Since gaining its independence, Bangladesh's foreign policy principle has been to maintain a non-alignment strategy. At the same time, as regional and extra-regional powers have gradually vied for influence in Bangladesh, Dhaka has endeavoured to maintain a delicate balance with most of them to safeguard its sovereignty and national interests, particularly economic ones [58]. Experts such as Professor Nasir Uddin, Riaz Ali and Shahidul Alam widely regard Dhaka's astute decision to warmly embrace key powers – which attracted substantial investments for infrastructural development projects throughout the country – as a prudent move from Bangladesh. However, the sustainability of such a balanced approach remains in question. A number of politicians and academicians, including Colonel Oli Ahmed, Ali Riaz, Saidul Islam and Nazrul Islam, contend that Sheikh Hasina's government has significantly tilted Bangladesh towards India.

The recent mass protests against Hasina's government and her subsequent resignation and departure from the country have caused a dramatic change in Bangladesh's foreign relations [59]. It has become evident that the interim government must lean more toward Western powers – especially the USA – and ideologies as it focuses on democracy, human rights and freedom of speech. However, this does not mean that Dhaka will sever relations with other powers such as China, India and Russia. The policymakers of Bangladesh still intend to maintain good relationships with all major powers due to its bilateral relations with them.

As global power gradually shifts toward the East, BRICS is expanding and countering Western powers, while many regional associations like ASEAN are also growing. This raises the question of what would happen if the world reverted to a bipolar sphere, with the U.S. leading one bloc and BRICS leading the other. In such a scenario, should Bangladesh align itself with one of the blocs or continue balancing relations with all blocs?

In a broad sense, aligning itself with a power bloc might be difficult for Dhaka for a multitude of reasons. This predicament arises from the fact that Bangladesh's economy heavily

relies on foreign trade, investments, loans and aid. Notably, Western countries, particularly the USA, have been Bangladesh's largest trade partners. The United States and the EU collectively serve as the primary destinations for the majority of Bangladesh's garment products, resulting in the country's second most significant source of foreign earnings. Conversely, China has made substantial investments in Bangladesh, fostering bilateral relations that have reached an apex. Similarly, Russia plays a pivotal role as a major exporter of military weapons and equipment while also serving as a key development partner across various projects, including the nuclear power plant initiative. Given its reliance on major powers and bilateral trade with them, Bangladesh still needs time to align with a power bloc.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh's emergence as an independent state in the heart of South and Southeast Asia has altered the regional political, economic and security dynamics. The ever-changing power competition in the Indo-Pacific region has made the country a focal point for major powers. Moreover, its rapid economic development, access to the Bay of Bengal with two significant ports have attracted key players to boost their relationships with Bangladesh. While its strategic location and significance opened doors of opportunities, political instability, massive corruption and polarisation have created smooth paths of hegemonic powers to interfere in its domestic and international affairs.

Over time, Bangladesh has maintained good relationships with its neighbours, particularly with nations in South Asia. However, several factors – such as Indo-Pakistan rivalries, trade barriers, gaps and deficits, border disputes and killings, along with the Rohingya crisis – have impeded the smooth collaboration between states. Additionally, the British legacy of around 200 years of dominance, enduring influence of Cold War powers, especially the United States and Asia's two rising powers, China and India, have placed Bangladesh in a delicate position. While pursuing hedging in foreign relationships with major powers has been playing pivotal roles in Bangladesh's economy, questions remain about the sustainability of this balanced relations approach in the long run. Therefore, it is impossible to rule out the possibility of compelling Dhaka to take a side in the near future.

In order to maintain a positive course and successfully negotiate the complex terrain of geopolitics and geoeconomics in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the Bay of Bengal region, Bangladesh must ultimately carefully evaluate its current strategies and policies and work toward its long-term foreign policy approaches.

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