

Contemporary Geopolitics: A Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract: Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign country on December 16, 1971 after nine months long brutal war with Pakistan. The thriving South Asian state, once labeled as the ‘bottomless basket’, has transformed itself as a ‘development miracle’. Its geographical proximity and strategic location aided by remarkable economic boom has renewed its geopolitical relevance both within and outside the region. In a changing regional and global geopolitical landscape, Bangladesh faces a number of geopolitical challenges mitigation of which requires cautious endeavors. But Bangladesh as a modern geopolitical entity lacks an astute geopolitical doctrine which can guide itself to neutralize those challenges. This research paper offers the design of a cohesive and relevant geopolitical doctrine that can navigate its geopolitical graduation as a Smart Power and deal with contemporary geopolitical challenges in the coming days.

Key words: Bangladesh; Geopolitical Challenges; Geopolitical Doctrine; Geopolitical Space; Diplomatic Engagements; Image Geography; Smart Power Potential.

Introduction

Five decades ago, Bangladesh declared her emergence as a sovereign state in global arena by defeating Pakistan in a brutal war. Only a few people believed that the newly born state would survive, let alone progress towards development. During the initial few decades after its independence, Bangladesh was plagued with various problems such as political instability, natural disasters, military coups, political violence, corruption etc. However, Bangladesh has survived those initial setbacks. It not only survived them but also wrote an Asian miracle story of development through sustained economic growth and social development. Though the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 could not catch much attention, today as it celebrates her golden jubilee, the economic development and social advancement has been praised globally. As the economic boom has continued for last few years, the geopolitical significance of the country has grown too. Being born during the tensed era of the Cold War, Bangladesh has always been entangled in geopolitics. In her history, there is no time when Bangladesh has not been caught between animosity of major powers- be it the endless rivalry between India and Pakistan, be it the conflict between the US and the former Soviet Union of Cold war era, and be it the Sino-Western or Sino-Indian rivalry of present world. The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has also changed in recent years due to renewed interest of the major global powers in this region. China and India, two nuclear powers of South Asian region, are endeavoring continuously on multiple plans and intentions to change the geopolitical order of this region in their favor. In addition, decaying Superpower America has shifted its geopolitical focus to Indo-Pacific region for countering China’s rise in this region. So, the regional geopolitics is getting competitive day by day. Bangladesh has caught the attention of these powerful states due to its geographical proximity and strategic position. So growing presence of China in this region, shifting geopolitical focus of USA, and deliberate efforts of India to

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sustain its regional dominance all together have initiated a ‘New Great Game of Geopolitics’ in South Asian landscape where Bangladesh now finds greater relevance and significance due to its geographical potential (Riaz and Parvez, 2021). But in this world of ever evolving geopolitical scenario, the geopolitical space of Bangladesh is not limited within South Asia. Rather it stretches from the Bay of Bengal to South Asia, from Middle East to Africa, and from Europe to even global arena. Bangladesh is now at a geopolitical crossroads from where it should act tactfully to settle geopolitical issues with neighbors, make balancing relations with major powers, extend its geopolitical space beyond South Asia by fostering diplomatic engagements, convert its physical geography into image geography by reinstating democratic values and human right principles, and play significant role in dealing with non-traditional security issues such as climate change, transnational terrorism, religious extremism and proliferation of drugs within and around its border. However, the absence of a shrewd geopolitical doctrine casts doubts over the potential rise of Bangladesh as a proactive player both in regional and global arena. Since emergence as a sovereign state, Bangladesh has failed to design an effective geopolitical doctrine because of foreign policy fluctuations along with the change of political regime. But now with booming economy aiding the geographical proximity, and ever evolving regional and global geopolitics, Bangladesh faces serious challenges of balancing major powers, and fostering diplomatic engagements to safeguard its national interests along with the enhancement of the defense and military capabilities. This research paper outlines a cohesive geopolitical doctrine for Bangladesh by combining both hard power and soft power elements to ensure its geopolitical graduation as a smart power which shall effectively guide itself to tackle all the geopolitical challenges in the coming days.

Methodology

Numerous methodologies are available for Social Science research. Since this research paper aims to design a cohesive geopolitical doctrine for Bangladesh that would enable itself to face the geopolitical challenges emerged from the changing regional and global geopolitical atmosphere, it mainly depends on the scholarly views and writings. Qualitative method is used in this research to collect both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected through in depth interview of the scholars, academicians, researchers in the fields relevant to the topic. Secondary data are collected through analysis of relevant journal articles, newspapers, and website articles.

Results and Discussion

Geopolitical Doctrine for Bangladesh

‘Geopolitics’ as a term was first coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén and its use gained currency across Europe during the period between two World Wars (Deudney, 2013). According to Cambridge Dictionary, Geopolitics refers to the study of the way how the size, position, etc. of a state influences its power and its relationships with other countries of the world (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). To make it more concise, it can be defined as the study of the influence of geographical factors over inter-state relations. There are two contrasting schools of geopolitics, namely Classical school and critical school. Classical school of geopolitics propagates the idea that the state can only enhance its power by the enlargement of its territory through the use of military force. Contrasting to the Classical School, Critical Geopolitics disseminates that rather than enlargement of territory through the use of military power, intellectual statecrafts, cultural artifacts, organizational processes, and diplomatic endeavors etc. shapes the spatiality of a state (Ahmed, 2017). Turning to the circumstance of Bangladesh, it has become evident that the geopolitical doctrine of Bangladesh must be efficient enough to handle the simultaneous tasks of protecting territorial sovereignty and extend its functional space to South Asia and beyond. For designing such a proactive and enabling geopolitical doctrine, Bangladesh must combine the elements of both Classical and Critical school of geopolitics so that it can navigate its survival in all kinds of geopolitical weather.

Geopolitical Doctrine for Bangladesh			
Design	Objectives	Instruments	Power Dimensions
Combination of the elements of both Classical and Critical school of Geopolitics	Protection of Territorial Sovereignty and Extension of Functional space to South Asia and Beyond	Military Capacity Building, Intellectual Statecrafts, Cultural artifacts, Diplomatic Endeavors, Geo-economics, etc.	Integration of Hard Power and Soft power capabilities to make Bangladesh a 'Smart Power'

**Table: Geopolitical Doctrine for Bangladesh prepared by the Author
Geography Cuts both ways**

Bangladesh's geographic position acts as the most important factor which provides both advantages and disadvantages in its geopolitical play. Except a little border with Myanmar, Bangladesh is landlocked by India from three sides other than the South. It puts Bangladesh in a geopolitically disadvantageous position by making it a prisoner of geography. Because when a small country like Bangladesh is landlocked by a giant powerful state and regional pivot like India from all three sides except one, it becomes a geopolitical burden (Uddin, 2016). However, perception has changed in recent years as Dhaka now sees itself as land linked rather than land locked. Because geography provides Bangladesh the opportunity to become the linking state that connects South Asia with South East Asia. So, to make happen any cooperative effort between these two dominant regional blockscannot exclude Bangladesh. So geography provides Bangladesh an inspiring role to become the hub of regional connectivity for realizing its geographic potential fully (Rahman, 2021). Another advantage that geography has blessed Bangladesh with is its balanced share of land and sea. It offers Bangladesh the opportunity of both land transport with the neighboring states, and navigation through the Bay of Bengal along with the opportunity of exploring the benefits of untapped blue economy (Paul, 2015).

Geopolitics with the Bordering States

Geopolitics of Bangladesh with the bordering states involves India and Myanmar as it shares border with these two countries. Bangladesh shares 4,096km of its border with India which is the fifth-largest land border in the contemporary world. Both countries celebrated the golden jubilee of their relations that began with India's recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign state on December 6, 1971. From Sheikh Mujib's first civilian regime to the current regime, the relationship of the two neighboring states has traversed a long path with stability other than some abrupt fluctuations. The relationship between two neighboring states has been built on centuries of shared history, heritage, culture, and ethno-linguistic roots. It was strengthened when India unconditionally supported Bangladesh during Liberation war of 1971 by providing military support and sheltering 10 million refugees. Over the decades, this bond has been further blossomed by the mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. In recent years, both the countries have resolved their long-sustained land and maritime disputes in a peaceful manner that symbolizes the depth of the inter-state relations between the two countries. The two neighboring states also sealed two defense agreements in recent years. Further to that, India recently extended defense related Line of Credit (LOC) to US \$500 million for Bangladesh's procurement of defenseequipment (Shazzad, 2021). However, there are issues such as massive trade imbalance, illegal migrations, border killing, sharing of water of common rivers which irritates the fabric of a congenial relationship between the two countries. Moreover, India's failure to support Bangladesh in Rohingya issue and non-fulfillment of the promise of delivering agreed doses of

vaccine generated public resentment in Bangladesh. Bangladesh cannot ignore the presence of its mighty neighbor India as it surrounds Bangladesh from three sides. Similarly, India cannot neglect the significance of a healthy relationship with Bangladesh as it holds an important position in India's geostrategic calculus. Both the countries must redefine their relationship comprehensively to resolve bilateral issues and foster mutual cooperation (Yasmin, 2021). Another next-door neighbor with whom Bangladesh shares 271 kilometers of its border is Myanmar. The bilateral relation between the two states was initiated by Myanmar when it recognized Bangladesh in January 13, 1972. However there exists a strained relationship between the two neighboring nations due to various issues such as Rohingya crisis, and cartographic propaganda maneuvered against Bangladesh by Myanmar. Besides, the economic relation between two countries is plagued with trade deficits even though Myanmar can be a potential market for Bangladeshi exports such as pharmaceuticals, leather goods, vegetables, textile and Readymade Garments (RMG) (Ahmed, 2017). As Bangladesh cannot wage war against India and Myanmar due to its disadvantageous location, it must design a neighborhood policy by which bilateral contentious issues can be resolved mutually, and cooperation can be fostered.

Navigating Survival in Changing South Asian Landscape

The rise of the continent of Asia is critically linked to the global system through South Asia. South Asia, home to one fourth of the global humanity, is one of the fastest growing regions of the world with an average GDP growth of 7.1%. This region is called the engine of growth for future Asia as 40% of its population falls within the Youth category (The Daily Star, 2019). However, this is one of the most volatile regions of the world due to deteriorating inter-state relationship, lack of effective regional mechanism, and unending rivalry between two nuclear powers India and Pakistan. The geopolitical landscape has become more complicated due to growing presence of China, Indian endeavors for regional dominance, Sino-Indian rivalry for becoming the regional pivot, and shifting focus of USA to Indo-Pacific region for containing China. In such a turbulent geopolitical scenario, Bangladesh has been caught in the Sino-American and Sino-Indian rivalry. As extra-regional players like USA and China are involved in this great game of geopolitics along with regional pivot India, Bangladesh is playing its role with balancing act. For Bangladesh, it should strictly follow and sustain its policy of nonalignment to get better economic packages and increase its bargaining power as the primary goal for a developing country like Bangladesh is rather economic than geopolitical (Ahmed, 2022).

Playing with the Rising Dragon

In the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia, China has emerged as one of the major players. Though it is not a South Asian state, it is making relentless efforts for last few years to increase its influence by participating in the development activities of countries of this region through economic diplomacy. China also plans to resort to vaccine diplomacy by which it aims to provide emergency Corona virus vaccines to countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Haque and Hasan, 2022). Like some other South Asian states, Bangladesh is immensely important in China's geostrategic calculus because of its central location to realize the Chinese dream of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In addition, Bay of Bengal is strategically valuable to China as it can offer port facilities and alternative access to the Indian Ocean. Reciprocally, China is also recognized as an important strategic partner of Bangladesh as it is the largest arms supplier and trading partner to Bangladesh. In recent years, it has also geared up its investment in Bangladesh for making various development projects implemented swiftly. However, China has always sided with Myanmar in Rohingya issue which dashed the hope of prompt repatriation of the Rohingyas. Bangladesh should also remain tactful so that it does not fall into Chinese debt trap. Besides, the government of Bangladesh should keep China reserved as a countervailing strategic partner if relations with the western countries deteriorate due to the issues of human rights abuse and democratic decay (Riaz and Parvez, 2021).

Decaying Great Power Inclining to deepen ties

The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and USA was marked by ups and downs since inception. Historically the relationship was never cordial because of strict opposition of USA to the liberation struggle of Bangladesh, and subsequent joining of Bangladesh in Soviet bloc after its emergence. Washington also used to see Bangladesh through the eyes of Delhi for many years. But American experts now have opined that dependence on India to contain China will negatively impact the US credibility in Bangladesh (Riaz and Parvez, 2021). Rather their scholars have called for deepening bilateral ties with Bangladesh which can boost American interest in the Indo-Pacific region. With United States beginning to end its strategic indifference, Bangladesh can also get benefitted from the deeper bilateral ties with US as such partnership would decrease its leaning and dependence on India and China (Mohan, 2021).

Geopolitical Space beyond South Asia

With greater geopolitical significance and interest from global community, the geopolitical space of Bangladesh has extended beyond South Asia. For instance- The European Union (EU) is one of the largest partners of Bangladesh in terms of trade relations, and the same entity provides around 40% of the total foreign aid received by Bangladesh. Though relations between EU and Bangladesh centers around trade and foreign aid, experts believe that Bangladesh should ask EU for support in the issue of Rohingya repatriation, access to Covid-19 vaccines, and GSP+ status for the duty-free access to the European market with the changing political stance of EU on the cards due to reshaping of global order (Rahman, 2021). Bangladesh also enjoys congenial relationship with the Middle-Eastern Muslim states as majority of the population in Bangladesh are subscribers of the religion Islam making it a predominantly Muslim country. Middle-East remains the largest market for the Bangladeshi labor force that enables Bangladesh in earning remittances to sustain the recent economic boom. In addition, Bangladesh has also won the organizational space in various global and regional forums in recent years by subscribing active membership and taking leadership role.

Managing the New Great Game in the Bay of Bengal

Recent strategic importance of Bangladesh to the major regional and global powers is critically linked to the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal, being located at the meeting point of South Asia and South East Asia, has become a new theatre of Great Power rivalry due to increasing demand of energy sources and uninterrupted Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) (Kabir and Ahmad, 2015). Bangladesh now faces the challenge of dealing with both littoral and extra-littoral players like China, India, USA, Japan and Australia who are rivaling each other with various strategic groupings like the QUAD, the AUKUS, the BIMSTEC and the BRI to safeguard their own interest in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh should not tilt towards any of these grouping because any act of alignment may become strategic burden in the long run (Shovon, 2022).

Playing Cards through Greater Engagement

During the early days of pandemic, most countries faced disastrous conditions in their economic and health sectors. Inspired by the foreign policy designed by the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh sought to foster mutual cooperation with the neighboring states and beyond during that period when Bangladesh sent Covid-19 aid and assistance to India, announced \$200 million swapping of currency to favor Sri Lanka in easing its debt burden, and granted another \$200 million loan to Maldives. Besides, recent visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in France created suitable ground for greater bilateral engagement in defense, trade and climate change matters. These kinds of diplomatic engagement can be instrumental for Bangladesh to exert influence in South Asia and beyond. So Bangladesh must continue these engagement efforts to amplify its influence in South Asia and around the globe (Shovon, 2022).

Greater emphasis on Image Geography

In recent years, Bangladesh has been immensely successful in converting its Physical geography to image geography. Once notoriously known for political instability, military coups, natural disasters and corruptions has become a champion of sustained economic growth, achieving SDGs, establishing peace and security around the world through UN Peacekeeping missions, uprooting terrorism and religious militancy from the land, tackling natural disasters and climate vulnerabilities, and creating a secular and tolerant society in a predominantly Muslim country. However, Bangladesh has also been suffering from image crisis due to allegations of human rights violations, shrinking public sphere, electoral anomalies, and democratic decay. The government of Bangladesh should take pivotal role in restoring the good image of the state through prompt action aimed for rectification of these issues.

Future Looks Bright, Yet Challenges Wait

The growing relevance in a changing regional and global geopolitical landscape supported by recent economic and developmental success has boosted Bangladesh's opportunity to play a proactive role both in South Asia and global sphere. Even so, Bangladesh is now condemned for its recent democratic setbacks and poor human rights governance. In addition, the most critical geopolitical drawback that Bangladesh suffers from is the absence of a sound geopolitical doctrine. The contemporary geopolitics offers the suggestion to combine both hard power capabilities with soft power applications for both, ensuring survival of the state and securing national interests. Bangladesh, being located under the nose of South Asian giant India and adjacent to the politically instable Myanmar, must remember that neither it can wage war against its neighbors nor forget about its military preparedness. Besides, it must craft mutual cooperation and diplomatic engagements with other states to aid its peaceful rise. So, Bangladesh must look forward to combining efforts of developing hard power capabilities along with soft power measures to get a better geopolitical posture.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has recently celebrated 50th anniversary of its emergence as a sovereign state. Even after 50 years of its independence, Bangladesh lacks an astute geopolitical doctrine which can offer itself the guiding light to navigate its survival in an ever evolving regional and global geopolitical environment. However, such lacking can affect Bangladesh's potential rise as a proactive player, and plummet its ability to exert geopolitical influence in the coming days. As a growing state, Bangladesh now faces the simultaneous task of both enhancing military preparedness to protect its territory from any external aggression, and occupying the functional space both in the regional and global sphere through greater diplomatic engagements. This is because Bangladesh, as a thriving state, can neither ignore the necessity of the enhancement of its military capabilities nor it can forget about realizing its soft power potential to get a proactive role in theregional and global arena. So, Bangladesh must combine the elements of both hard and soft power to design a smarter geopolitical doctrine which can realize its potential of becoming a Smart Power, and safeguard its geopolitical interests all over the globe.

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