



Bangladesh Foreign Policy: A few thoughts on Victory Day

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DURING the thirty year period of our independence, there appears to be three distinct phases of direction of foreign policy: the first one was related to consolidation of political independence, the second one was perceived by others to be locked unintentionally into the Soviet-Indo axis through the 1972 Friendship Treaty with India and the third one was to broaden its foreign relations to pursue what was called "a balanced and pragmatic policy". It seems that the basic thrust of foreign policy remains largely the same, only a variation in its emphasis on relations with some countries had occurred during the tenure of different governments.

Bangladesh's options for foreign policy appear to be limited because of its smallness of size, its geographical location, lack of natural resources (except gas) and dependence on foreign aid. Bangladesh is situated almost between two Asia's giants-China and India. China's border is only 100km from Bangladesh in the north over the Himalayas and India's land borders touch Bangladesh on three sides (north, east and west). While India and China is not at the best of their relations, India and Pakistan are at loggerheads because of Kashmir territorial dispute. The economic environment has changed during this period and globalisation has led to economic integration through trade and investment. Given the scenario, the conduct of foreign relations appears not to be easy for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is one of the UN-classified Least Developed Countries (LDC). A country is ordinarily categorised as LDC by the UN on the

basis of criteria of the size of Gross Domestic Product, per capita GDP share of manufacturing in total GDP, the economic diversification index, the adult literacy rate, population size and the augmented quality of life index. The LDC status demonstrates that the economic and social indicators of Bangladesh are not as high as those exist in other non-LDC countries in South Asia, such as, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Economic security appears to be a top priority agenda for the government of the day. This is because unless there is an acceptable level of economic welfare for the people of the country, it may lead to tension in the society and in the long run the security of the country may become vulnerable.

On the occasion of the Victory Day, it seems an appropriate time to examine briefly Bangladesh's foreign policy and its national interests.

Successes and failures

During the last thirty years, Bangladesh has attained a respectable position in regional and international community. Since its entry into the UN in 1974, Bangladesh has been elected twice as a non-permanent member of the prestigious 15-member UN body of Security Council. This demonstrates the country's standing was credible and reliable in the international community. In the South Asian region, Bangladesh launched the idea of regional co-operation which came into a reality in 1985 as South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). Bangladesh is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement. Very few countries are members of all three bodies. In the multilateral forums, Bangladesh has been able to build a coal-

ition of moderate countries that often emerge as a "third force" to achieve a holistic outcome on many global issues.

Although we may cite a good record of achievements in foreign relations there are some failures as well. We have not been able to put on trial the Pakistani armed personnel accused of crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes in Bangladesh in 1971. Furthermore, it is only after 15 August, 1975 Saudi Arabia and China recognised Bangladesh. Although Pakistan recognised the country in 1974, it established diplomatic relations with Dhaka only after August 1975. The issues, such as the division of assets between Bangladesh and Pakistan and the repatriation of "Beharis" to Pakistan, remain unresolved. During this period, Bangladesh contested to obtain highest elected positions in EAO, the Commonwealth and the OIC but failed. Some argue that the failures are due to misreading of the country's position vis a vis the elected posts. The bottom line for us is how other countries perceive the strength and standing of Bangladesh. It is not what we think about ourselves but it is what others think about us.

Ingredients of foreign policy

Foreign policy is largely formulated on the basis of careful and objective assessment of country's strengths and weaknesses. It is a tool to accelerate the economic progress of the country. That is why foreign policy is often described as the extension of domestic policy. Domestic policy and foreign policy are the two sides of the "same coin". One side cannot be separated from the other as the sunrise cannot be split from the sun.

There appears to be a misconception in some sections of the community that foreign policy confines itself to only political and diplomatic relations with other countries. In fact, foreign policy is much broader than that. It encompasses the entire gamut of foreign relations of Bangladesh including areas of trade, foreign aid and investment, overseas employment opportunities, migration, water resources development and environment. Although various Ministries/Divisions of the government are directly involved in these areas, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a very important coordinating role in the pursuit of vigorous economic diplomacy through the Missions abroad.

Foreign policy takes years to develop through measured action and therefore its implementation is a gradual process. It involves an exercise in which interaction with other countries is progressively developed so that other countries may be aware of what a particular country stands for. Consistency is an important element in foreign policy and therefore ordinarily it does not shift with the change of government in a democratic country. Some aspects of it may only be fine-tuned or adjusted by a government of the day.

It is not uncommon for a political party to have some commitments to a new direction of foreign policy on the basis of its ideology and when elected to power it attempts to change the direction of the policy. Although the government of the day is fully competent to change it, it is important to articulate the reasons why direction of the policy has been changed. It is the responsibility of the principal actors of foreign policy

to express in explicit terms in what it supports, in what it opposes so that other nations understand what the new government stands for.

Although ordinary people appear not to be concerned with foreign policy, it is important that they must be made aware of the reasons why certain policies in foreign relations are being pursued by the government of the day. The nature and content of relations, in particular with neighbours, are not something which ordinary people may ignore because any change of foreign policy will have a direct or indirect impact on them.

National Interests

Often we talk about our "national interests" but to an average person the meaning of this term remains unclear and vague. The meaning of the term "national interests" varies from country to country depending on national aspirations. Hardly there appears to be an opportunity to discuss or debate what constitutes "national interests" in our parliament or outside. What is considered a matter of national interest today may not remain the same as situations change globally or regionally. (For instance there has been a seismic shift of Pakistan's policy towards the Taliban regime when it decided to support the US attack in Afghanistan).

What constitutes "national interests" is to be determined by engaging broad sections of the community or civil society in constructive debates. Thereafter the issues may further be debated in the parliament or in the parliamentary committee of foreign relations. Once the perimeters of "national interests" are identified by national consensus, foreign policy will have an appropriate direction and focus.

Although perception of "national interests" of Bangladesh can vary at different times, in my view a minimum notion of what constitutes 'national interests' exists. Let me briefly discuss them.

First, the overriding national interest is the preservation and defence of political independence and territorial integrity of the country. In essence it is the physical survival of Bangladesh as a nation-state. The threat to sovereignty may emanate from regional or global events. Furthermore, Bangladesh is not and cannot be immune from regional or global phenomena. What takes place beyond the borders of Bangladesh will have a bearing sooner or later on Bangladesh. Therefore Bangladesh has a stake that peace prevails not only in South Asia but also globally. Bangladesh has a vital interest to ensure that destabilising factors, particularly in South Asia, should be eliminated through peaceful means as envisaged in Article 93 of the UN Charter.

Second, one important goal is to ensure that no country should be unfriendly or pose a threat to Bangladesh. If there is any cause for any country having such an attitude, it is imperative to sit down and resolve the irritants peacefully. Bangladesh need to anticipate likely events as opposed to sitting on and waiting for events to happen. In this connection it is desirable to set up full-fledged two separate Divisions--Research and Legal, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as has been the case in most of the countries including India and Pakistan. They will regularly submit intelligent appreciation of current and likely events and their possible

ramifications including legal impact on the country. The reports will be able to put on notice the government to the likely events for which it will be prepared to respond if need arises.

Third, maintenance of friendly relations with neighbours and near neighbours, Islamic countries and donor nations is one of the priorities so as to advance the political and economic interests of Bangladesh. Bangladesh needs to take into account in its economic diplomatic efforts that global environment is now characterised by liberalisation of national and international markets, a massive increase in international financial transactions, the globalisation of manufacturing industries symbolised by a massive growth in the activities of multinational business corporations. Therefore Bangladesh has to adjust its policies to maximise its opportunities and benefits from such globalised economic environment. In this context close interaction between government and national private sectors is required so that the market realities on ground are fully recognised.

Fourth, it is imperative for Bangladesh to choose dependable friends on the basis of mutual trust, friendship and interests. To maintain good and stable relations with other countries, it needs constant interaction, much like a nurturing a growing plant. A delicate balance between what Bangladesh may give and what it may receive has to be thought out carefully.

Fifth, I would argue that it is not in Bangladesh's interest to see any country dominate the region. The bottom line is that all countries-big and small- should be treated with respect on the basis of equality and should be able to decide a policy on the basis of its own interests. Dominance of a country may create imbalance in power play and inject tensions in the region. It is important to ensure that Bangladesh should not become hostage to policy of other countries.

Finally, it is important for Bangladesh to have the capacity to look at the way it is perceived by other countries. Bangladesh has to distinguish what is ideal and what is achievable given the regional and global environment. Bangladesh should not advance an over-ambitious foreign policy that it may not be able to sustain. The foreign policy actors need to weigh nation's capacity, clout and strength prior to initiating a programme or action particularly in regional or multi-lateral forums.

Conclusion: In my view, Bangladesh's foreign policy is based, among others, on three core elements: friendship, trust and reciprocity. Diplomacy is the art of possible. This implies that adjustment of its policy seems to be inevitable from time to time. However, there are certain principles for which the people of Bangladesh fought and sacrificed in 1971 and it is to these Bangladesh has stood in the past and will stand firm in future, come what may. Furthermore domestic political situation has a flow-down effect on foreign policy. The bottom line is that national interests can only be achieved if the country remains politically stable and peaceful.

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Liberation War and role of expatriate Bangladeshis in UK

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IT has been long 40 years. A series of events of high significance have taken place during this period. For a Bangladeshi, the episode that remains ever bright as an unforgettable landmark in his memory lane is that of the turbulent days of fear, anxiety and uncertainty during the liberation war of 1971. As those nine months represented the worst experience of life for the people, who were counting fear-some days inside Bangladesh, so did this period portray deep agony for hundreds of thousands of people of Bangladeshi origin living abroad and scattered all over the world. Their mental anguish was not so much for their own welfare but for the safety and well-being of their kith and kin, friends and compatriots passing through the most horrid days of their life inside Bangladesh.

The largest concentration of Bangladeshis living abroad was in the UK, which had traditionally been a safe haven, for a long time, for our adventurous people, especially from Sylhet. They played a unique role in bringing to the notice of the international community the inhuman atrocities perpetrated in Bangladesh, in projecting the cause of liberation of our people and securing diplomatic support of Britain and the rest of Europe for independence of our country.

The wave of political currents and cross-currents in the country always had its due impact on the conscious Bangladeshi community in UK, USA and Europe. This was more acutely felt by the Bangladeshi student community in the UK and expatriate Bangladeshi professionals in the USA. The general mass of our people in UK largely comprised of restaurateurs, odd job holders and their dependents. With the military crackdown in the black night of 25 March 1971, the entire Bangladeshi community resolved all their differences and put up a united front against the continued occupation of their homeland by marauding Pakistani soldiers. Almost spontaneously sprang up Action Committees on Bangladesh in every nook and corner wherever existed even a handful of Bangladeshis.

The first centralized organization coordinating over a hundred of such Action Groups took place at a Convention in the town of Coventry on 24 April 1971. The purpose of this conference was to co-ordinate and direct activities of all such groups. The central figure of the conference was the late Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, a former Judge of the Dhaka High Court and acting Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, who happened to be in London on that fateful black night. The report of brutal murder of his students at the University shocked and mortified him to no end. He readily got persuaded by the Bangladeshi community to take up leadership of the Bangladesh movement.

The meeting at Coventry was presided over by another great Bangladeshi soul, the late Mrs. Lulu Bilquis Banu. Mrs Banu had been Principal of Dhaka's Vigarunissa Noon College. She had endeared herself among the Bangladeshi community in greater London with her pleasant personality and ever readiness to help people in need. She was unanimously chosen to preside over the conference. A Central Steering Committee of Action Committees formed all over the United Kingdom was constituted and headed by 5 eminent persons representing various

regions of the country. Another additional major objective of the Committee was collection of funds to aid liberation war efforts. Justice Chowdhury for the time being chose to remain aside but was the sheet anchor of the movement and guided it any way. It was from 28 August when an unofficial Bangladeshi Mission was set up, supplanting the Central Steering Committee, that he assumed more prominently the public leadership of the movement. The Mujibnagar government had earlier appointed him as its Special Overseas Representative and placed with him leadership of the movement in all countries abroad, including UK, USA and Europe.

The student community of Bangladesh origin played a yeoman's role in the movement for securing the legitimate rights of their people long before commencement of the liberation war.

informers and agents.

One of the important functions that was carried out in London outside the notice of almost everyone was procurement of some additional arms and ammunition for the liberation Army. A number of lists of requirements were personally carried by the Archivist of Mujibnagar government, now a noted journalist, and were handed over to Justice Chowdhury as Head of Mission. The lists came from various Sector Commanders, duly signed by them, and were quite ambitious, to say the least. I still have those as my treasured possession and I plan to hand them over to the authorities concerned. Justice Chowdhury, whose Deputy I was then, called me and entrusted me with the responsibility of carrying out this highly sensitive, difficult and clandestine job, without knowledge of anyone else. That is why my



The author (then acting envoy of Bangladesh) hoisting the national flag at the London mission after recognition by Britain

They held meetings, took out processions, staged demonstrations in front of the residence of British Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street and organized numerous protest rallies in front of the Pakistan High Commission. They went so far as to once having forcibly occupied the hostel of Pakistani students in order to give vent to their frustrated feelings. They were a conscious lot and their contributions to the propagation of our cause in the United Kingdom and Europe will forever be remembered by our people.

They were the ones, who took upon themselves the primary responsibility of writing to and visiting British Ministers, legislators, journalists and elites. The highlights of their activities included fasting in front of British Prime Minister's residence and burning of Pakistani flag before the Pakistan High Commission. One of the letters addressed to British Parliamentarians soliciting their vociferous intervention at the Westminster was drafted in my flat by some erstwhile students, who now hold high position in the Bangladesh society, such as, judge, barrister, industrialist, journalist and progressive woman worker. At the initial stage, we used to use code names to address each other in order to evade possible

colleagues were surprised and sometimes curious about my unaccounted for absence from the Mission from time to time.

I still recall how many shades of places I had to visit to negotiate with arms dealers and to arrange for chartered flights. Of course, clearance of the British government would have been needed, but that was at the final stage. We proceeded satisfactorily with the first two stages. The suppliers were chosen and chartering of Czechoslovak Airline's aircraft was about to be finalized. The process took more than two months. Justice Chowdhury, wearing two hats also as Leader of unofficial Bangladesh delegation to the United Nations, often used to visit New York. He always inquired from me from New York and feel happy with the progress of his favourite assignment. But the war of liberation was soon won and our onerous task terminated. While distributing sweets and taking part in the spontaneous festivities in London as Acting Head of Bangladesh Mission on the joyous day of 16 December 1971, I must admit I did feel a pinch of the sense of fulfillment in some corner of my heart on account of the incomplete task.



Thirty years on... The smile of victory

The role of valiant naval sector in the Liberation War

COMMANDO MD. KHALILUR RAHMAN

THE activities of Freedom Fighters at the initial stage were limited to the detection of associates of the occupying army, destruction of bridges and culverts and attacking the Pakistani troops on their diverse routes. Though the land routes were not absolutely safe for the Pakistani army, waterways were to remain safe for some time. After the swearing in of the acting Bangladesh government on 17th April '71, General MAG Osmani was entrusted with the responsibilities of the Commander-in-Chief of the Freedom Fighting Forces. With a view to making the war extensive and forceful, Gen. Osmani divided the whole of the war field into eleven sectors. To the exclusion of Sector No. 10 all other sectors were placed under the command of persons who were designated as Majors after having joined the war deserting from the Pakistani army.

All the water-ways, coastal areas and the sea ports of Chittagong and Chittagong comprised Sector No. 10. It was then known as the Naval Sector.

The prime objective of the formation of this sector was to disrupt the communication system of the occupying army through the waterways. The incentive to serve the purpose first came from 8 submariners. These submariners were in the Pakistani submarine "PNS MANGRO" which was in a dockyard near TOLON in France for the training of the submariners. Having finished the training when the MANGRO was about to sail for Pakistan, the Bangladeshi submariners unexpectedly came to learn about the genocide enacted by the Pakistani soldiers in Bangladesh in the mid-night of 25th March and on the following day. They also learnt about the declaration of Liberation War from the "SHADHIN BANGLA BETER KENDRA" through the BBC. The submariners then and there decided to join the War of Liberation by escaping from the Pakistani submarine. But there arose a problem about their legal documents of travelling passports were locked under the care of the captain of the ship. It was a very difficult task to recover the passports. But the young adventurous submariner Chowdhury took the risk of taking

out the passports from the locker of the Captain. Having been successful there they along with seven other co-submariners started for India. After a very troublesome journey they reached Delhi on the 9th of April '71.

It was very difficult to resist the easy movement of the occupying forces through our waterways. Because, there were neither a considerable number of naval personnel nor any gunboat at the disposal of the Freedom Fighters. Under these circumstances, Gen MAG Osmani with consultation of Tajuddin Ahmed, took the decision of forming a force of Naval Commandos. In response to his proposal the Indian Naval command sent two teams to select personnel for Naval Commandos from the different training camps for Freedom Fighters located in Assam, Tripura and West Bengal. They selected 357 freedom fighters for the purpose and sent them for training to Palashi along the bank of the river Vagiri in the district of Nadia. This is the very Palashi where the bright sun of our independence had set through the defeat of Nawab Sirajuddowla in the hands of British

Rulers in 1757.

The training began of the first batch of Naval Commandos consisting of 8 submariners, 357 freedom fighters and 8 naval persons who had escaped from the Pakistan Navy. In the inaugural function of Naval Commando training at the monumental square of Palashi, Indian Naval Commando Officer Lt Cdr. GM Marish delivered a speech welcoming the Commandos in English. In consideration of the significance of the role of Naval commandos they were then addressed as "Suicidal squad." Inspired with the psychological influence of the monument of Palashi, the vast history of the war-field, and above all, with patriotism in their hearts, the Naval Commandos that day signed up to the suicidal bond.

How hard and tiresome that training proved to be! The trainees had to undergo rigorous eighteen hours per day. Unarmed combat, throwing of hand grenades, explosive demolition, use of Sten Gun and Limpet mine and swimming with the help of pins, were included on the training programme. It was, as if to finish a training of ten years in ten

days. It was a dark and deep night, there was silence all around. The sentries were half asleep or dozing on the deck of ships or vessels. The current of rivers was in its usual flow. At such a moment of the nature, each of the Commandos plunged into the rivers simultaneously fastening a LIMPET MINE with their chests, and at risk to their own lives, they stuck the MINES with the targeted ships and then swam away to a safe distance. In the small hours of the 15th August, the MINES began to burst destroying the enemy ships with a thunderous din. As a result, MV 'AL-ABBAS, MV HORMUZ, MV BURMA JADE, MV SAPTADINGA, MV USS LIGHTNING, ORIENTAL BARGE NO. 6, MV 'ORAM, MV 'MAHTAB JABED, MV 'MORTOJA' MV 'ISSUEURK' and some other big and small ships sank in the river one by one.

The operations of the Naval Commandos were so effectively crushing that the Pak government-owned "Dainik Purbadesh," was bound to flash the news admitting the heavy losses sustained by the destructive operations of the commandos. The news of this operation

was published as head lines on the front pages of almost all the distinguished newspapers of the west. With this, the struggling people of Bangladesh, specially the Freedom Fighters, became more inspired to fight on. They became sure of their success within a short time. On the contrary, the morale of the barbarous hordes and their associates broke down. The War of Liberation entered a new phase.

In this context, Major Rafique, Biruttom, (Commander, Sector No. 1), remarked in his esteemed book 'A tale of millions' that the world communities were not quite aware of our War of Liberation till June/July '71. The operation "JACKPOT" carried out by the Naval Commandos in the small hours of 15th August had a very persuasive effect on the world community in recognising the mettle of Bangladeshi fighters. Immediately after that there came a revolutionary change in our War of Liberation. The late hero, Major Zallil (Commander, Sector No. 9), also praised the good work of the Naval Commandos in one of his books.



The valiant freedom fighters