



# Foreign policy and diplomacy: in search of new directions



Sheikh Mujib and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sharing a moment of bonhomie.

SHAHID ALAM

**F**OREIGN Affairs Adviser Iftakhar A. Chowdhury, in the course of speaking at the launching of a new think-tank, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies, had this to say: "Bangladesh's foreign policy apparatus has been traditionally focused on defensive interests and there is a need to change the paradigm.... We need to pursue our offensive interests more vigorously." And, later he elaborated on the modalities of this proposed paradigm shift while talking to The Daily Star: "We will first move aggressively to develop strategic and political relations with other countries, and then quickly move with issues like climate change, investment, commerce and manpower." On the face of it, the proposed foreign policy objectives should attract keen interest in the average foreign policy enthusiast, but one may also be reasonably cautious, or skeptical, about them, and categorise the declaration as a lot of bombast that will inevitably fizzle out in a whimper.

If Chowdhury's stated objective is the outcome of some serious soul-searching, which has come to the realisation of the necessity of at least a significant shift in direction in foreign policy that has meandered along, if not exactly aimlessly, then at least awkwardly, for the last thirty six years, it deserves to be given a second look, if only for its

innate novelty. Professor Alan K. Henrikson of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (USA) provides, in a totally different context, what could be taken to be a rationale for that pronounced shift. In an article entitled "Diplomacy's Possible Futures?", he has proposed a series of "projective visions" of what the practice of diplomacy might encounter, and entail, in future history (Fletcher News, Fall 2005). He has undertaken this mission because he feels that in a world characterized and transformed by the globalisation of economic activity, the practice of diplomacy is in danger of obsolescence unless it is transformed --- perhaps in quite radical ways. "Such conscious future projection is becoming more and more necessary," Henrikson believes, "because, with history accelerating as it is, national governments, international organisations, and those who represent them are called upon to make very rapid and precise decisions. The future is upon us much faster than it has been in the past. The exigencies of political decision-making in the world today put a premium on anticipation --- on insight and foresight, as well as on hindsight."

On the strength of Chowdhury's announcement, Bangladesh's foreign policy may be perceived to be moving with the times. One would hope so, because past experience shows that often the

response to the pertinent events by the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has either been knee-jerk, or to "let things happen", or to react ever so slowly, or simply to do nothing at all, even if the incident(s) demanded a reaction. One may, with justification, come to the conclusion that Bangladesh's foreign policy predicaments may be traced to its very constitutional definition. Or, more to the point, the two key declarations of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, soon after his release from a prison in Pakistan in 1972, which were adopted and adopted in the country's constitution. With noble intention, but with little regard to the reality of international politics, he declared that, "I would like (Bangladesh) to become the Switzerland of the East." He probably alluded to the European country's "neutral" status in the international community rather than its economic prosperity. But it took Switzerland a long time to become the "Switzerland", and that, too, after the major global powers decided at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 that it would suit them to grant the country its independence and guarantee its neutrality. No country, it may be noted, has guaranteed Bangladesh's neutrality, nor does it enjoy the luxury of being a convenient or attractive neutral territory for the major global players to consider giving it

that status. Certainly, its geopolitical location, surrounded on three sides by India, with its own ambition of being the premier power in South Asia, would preclude Dhaka from remaining "neutral" in that orbit even if it wished to.

Sheikh Mujib's second statement sealed Bangladesh's main principle of foreign policy in its Constitution: "We are a small country, we want friendship with all and malice towards none." Again, the intention is splendid, but the reality of the international system and the politics that goes within it, as well as the fluid nature of that system, would inevitably, at some point, force Dhaka to take sides on some issue or the other, as well as declare its hostility towards others, even if temporarily. Probably there is no adage truer in international politics than the one that there are no permanent friends or foes of any nation-state. After all, the international system is dominated by the concept of statism, with which political realism is usually associated, which stresses the centrality of sovereign states. And a nation-state would look to maximize its own interests first and foremost, and consider others' interests insofar as they do not hamper, as well as further, its own. Regarding the Constitution, which has enshrined friendship towards all and malice towards none as a state policy, S.A. Karim, in

making a more comprehensive judgment on it, concludes that "the Constitution was clearly an unrealistic document. The result of this well-meant but unsuitable Constitution was that amendment after amendment had to be introduced to deal with the realities of the situation in Bangladesh" (Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy).

Nonetheless, in pinpointing the flaw in the constitutional basic principle of foreign policy, one may be assigning too much importance to Bangladesh's status and role in the global system. The stark reality is that Bangladesh is well down the pecking order of nation-states in the international system, and, as such, does not have much of a role to play in important decisions affecting the stability of that system, except to acquiesce in the decisions reached by the decidedly major and influential player or group of actors, or to take part in essentially meaningless UN General Assembly debates on critical issues (where the decisions are arrived at by the big powers in, or outside of, the UN), or to send peacekeeping troops to global hotspots. While peacekeeping duties (in which, by the way, Bangladeshi soldiers have earned much international plaudit) are a component of a machinery designed to try and keep contesting sides apart from engaging in scopic armed conflict, they are not a part of the political decision-making process engaged in by the major global and regional powers to settle international conflicts. And Bangladesh is neither a global nor a regional power.

For Dhaka, therefore, for the near future, effective diplomacy to pursue its foreign policy objectives would be a more realistic quest than trying to be a major global, or even regional, player. In the words of a scholar, "The goal of diplomacy is to further the state's interests as dictated by geography, history, and economics. Safeguarding the state's independence, security, and integrity is of prime importance; preserving the widest possible freedom of action for the state is nearly as important. Beyond that, diplomacy seeks maximum national advantage without using force and preferably without causing resentment." And, how has Bangladesh fared in its diplomatic initiatives to advance its foreign policy objectives? Patchily, in general, and not the least because its foreign policy objectives were at times not very well defined. Sometimes it felt like they were a reflection of the doctrine of friendship towards all and malice towards none even when the realisation had dawned that this principle was a virtual chimera. It certainly affected the work of the professional diplomats. That is not to say that the diplomats in general could not be faulted for inertia, lack of initiative in failing to advance the country's cause, achievements, and positive image even during the days when a concerted international and local effort was on to present an image of Bangladesh in important foreign capitals as a failed state and infested with Islamic militants and Taliban ideologies. Sometimes the reaction of the MFA policymakers and policy implementers to half-truths

and downright untruths to malign the country seemed like that of terrified rabbits apparently paralyzed in the headlights of an oncoming car.

Nonetheless, certain realities will have to be considered in the pursuit of a more proactive, or even assertive, foreign policy. One, and probably the most crucial, is the presence of India on three sides. It is a presence that cannot be wished away. Bangladesh, inevitably, will have to live with it, and make the utmost effort to maximise its interests as a smaller, weaker state dealing with a large, more powerful neighbour. A host of outstanding contentious issues, ranging from water-related disaccord to accusation and counter-accusation of cross-border terrorism and illegal migration to territorial dispute to uneven economic trade have kept relations between Dhaka and New Delhi from developing into what they should be: stable, amicable, understanding, and mutually beneficial even as they pursue their own individual interests, generally along the lines of US-Canada ties.

Having said that, however, Bangladesh can advance its own legitimate interests in bilateral forums with judicious diplomacy. It is entirely possible that New Delhi might not listen to reason simply for displaying, or reasserting, its superior position in the hierarchy of nations, and while Dhaka might complain that it is infantile behaviour that probably contributes to worsening of relations, it really has little choice than to swallow that idiosyncratic behaviour, much in the way that smaller, weaker states do in relation to the policy choices of the powerful. There is no harm in trying, though, and persistence with shrewd diplomatic maneuvers might even pay rich dividends.

The other reality that Bangladesh will have to consider in designing and defining its foreign policy is that the United States is a global superpower with stupendous economic and military might, and the commensurate political influence in the international arena that their possession provides, and will remain so for the foreseeable future, although it will have to share some of that influence with China and Russia in the near future. Without compromising too easily and too readily on its vital national interests, it would not be a bad idea to be in Washington's good books. The imminent emergence of China as a truly global economic and military power, and its general proximity to Bangladesh should provide the right opportunity for Dhaka to cultivate and strengthen its economic, political, and military ties with Beijing. Such a move could be a key element in any future paradigm shift from defensive to the pursuit of offensive interests, which could include developing strategic and political relations as a viable counter-weight to any inordinate leaning on Dhaka by New Delhi. Should such a shift be contemplated and acted upon, it will necessitate some aggressive diplomacy. Several feathers will be ruffled, realignment of relations might very well result, but the MFA would have to stay the course through expected rumblings

from diverse interested quarters, and possibly even from within this country's borders, to realise its objective. The country's interest will have to come first and foremost, sometimes only, and, as the golden adage goes, one cannot please all the people all the time. That should be the bedrock on which proactive foreign policy pivots.

The new proposed direction of Bangladesh's foreign policy indicates that, in order to pursue its offensive interests more vigorously, the country will first develop strategic and political ties with other countries. These offensive interests have been identified by the Foreign Affairs Adviser as being environment, specifically climate change, investment, commerce and manpower. Theoretically, there can be little contention about these "low politics" issues as being priority foreign policy objectives for Bangladesh. While Dhaka proposes to depend on suitable countries for "high politics" in strategic and political issues, its interests in climate change, investment, commerce and manpower export have obvious and immediate relevance, and, to a certain extent, their pursuance would require the safety net of a credible "high politics" factor. However, if the fiasco of Bangladesh's manpower in Malaysia is anything to go by, any thought of aggressive quest for its interests would necessarily have to begin from a position of relative weakness. And, that definitely is not desirable, since a sizable chunk of its foreign exchange comes from remittances sent by its overseas workers. Both corrective measures at home and confidence-rebuilding measures in the countries of discontent by Bangladesh's diplomats would be necessary to restore a sense of normalcy.

This country has to aggressively project its concern over climate change. Like many other countries, it has fallen victim to the vagaries of nature, and those vagaries seem to be turning more and more unpredictable as well as destructive. Here, too, intense proactive diplomacy in bilateral, and, especially, multilateral forums to promote agendas to correct environmental imbalances brought about by human activities should complement precautionary and corrective measures at home to protect the ecosystem. Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change. Similarly, it needs foreign direct investment and increase in commercial activities favourable to its products to uplift its economy. Carefully-planned proactive diplomatic forays in important capitals would only emphasize a developing economy's need in a fiercely-competitive free market international system. To go back to the beginning of this essay, a change of direction from reactive to proactive foreign policy and its execution in clearly-defined areas has become an imperative. It remains to be seen whether the declared intent towards this end will be meaningful or turn out to be a lot of hot air.

The author is a writer, former diplomat, and currently Head, Media and Communication department, Independent University, Bangladesh.

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