

Foreign Policy: Should not be 'foreign' to ordinary people

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FOREIGN policy is an umbrella term and covers the entire gamut of foreign relations in such areas as, security, trade, manpower export, foreign direct investment, foreign aid, monetary management, cultural matters, curbing terrorism, humanitarian, and environmental issues.

Foreign policy is not an esoteric subject of interest of a few but sweeping broad and complex phenomenon that produces manifold effects on ordinary citizens. In that sense foreign policy is not at all 'foreign' to ordinary people because it touches their day-to-day lives.

The myth that foreign policy does not affect ordinary people arises because foreign policy framers fail to make it known to common people the tangible effect of ramifications of foreign policy in their day-to-day lives.

Let me provide two examples of how foreign policy affects ordinary people.

First example, imagine two countries negotiating over fishing rights in the Bay of Bengal for their respective fishermen, or think about two countries sharing a common border and working out agreements on water-sharing, the migration of animals or trans-border drift of ash or chemical acid or pollution. These arrangements would directly affect ordinary people.

Second example, the outcome of global trade negotiations under the Doha Round would affect "bread and butter" issues of common people. The price at which our people would sell or buy a commodity or the price people pay for their food at a given time is affected by global trade policy. Global trade policy is an important component of foreign policy.

Ingredients of foreign policy

Foreign policy cannot be formulated in a vacuum. It has to take into

account country's strengths and weaknesses and these need to be dispassionately assessed.

Bangladesh's strength lies in having one language, homogeneity, resilience of people, expressive culture, access to the open sea, abundance of good soils, tropical climate (multicrops can be grown), plenty of rainfall and river flow and people's inherent dislike for autocratic rule. The country stands between two emerging giants China and India and constitutes a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia.

Bangladesh's weakness rests on having a small territory compared to the huge size of its population, landlessness of majority of people, massive unemployment, poverty, gender inequality, existence of orthodox Islamic conservative elements, and hardly any other natural resources except natural gas. Bangladesh has to import stones from India and Nepal/Bhutan.

Furthermore, rise of Islamic extremism is a big threat to the stability and peace of the country and the role of security forces has been evolved to deal with the new security threat. The purpose of armed forces is not only to defeat the enemy but also to rehabilitate them into the mainstream of the society.

Emerging forces during 21st Century

The world today is an exciting time for nations because the world is experiencing positive integrating forces. Good relation with another country is not an end itself as much as a means to the end of advancing Bangladesh's interests.

New forces are emerging to shape the political and economic contours of global powers. On economic side three forces have emerged: economic globalization, market forces, climate change.

An example of how globalization affects individuals is, for instance, the tragic death of Princess Diana in August 1997.

An English Princess with a Welsh title, Princess of Wales, leaves a French hotel with her Egyptian companion, on a German Mercedes car with a Dutch engine, driven by a Belgian chauffeur, drunk with Scottish whisky, chased by Italian paparazzi on Japanese motorcycles into a Swiss-built tunnel and crashed. A rescue is attempted by an American doctor using Brazilian medicine and the story is told by a Bangladeshi. This is globalization.

During the 21st century, Bangladesh has joined the parade of nations that seek to judge themselves according to standards of development compared quantitatively and internationally.

The criteria, according to eight Millennium Development Goals, include eradication of poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equality and empowering women, reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternal health, combating AIDS, malaria and other diseases and ensuring environment sustainability.

Two Pillars of Foreign Policy

As I see it Bangladesh foreign policy basically stands on two pillars: security and development.

Security includes not only state's security but also food security, energy security, water resources security, human security, and security from climate change.

Development means not only economic growth but also equitable distribution of national income with a view to reducing poverty in the country. We can measure development by asking three basic questions: what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality?

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen looks at development from a new dimension. In his book *Development as Freedom* (1999), he perceives it as a means of expanding real freedom in the

world and removing what he calls "major sources of unfreedom: poverty, tyranny, social deprivation, neglect of public facilities, intolerance and inactivity in repressive states."

Bangladesh foreign policy will include how Bangladesh should work to ensure greater regional and global security, how it should advance our economic and trade interests, how it should address the adverse effects of climate change, how it should respond to some of the issues of the new international agenda, food security, energy security, water resources security, and lastly, terrorism.

We talk about water-resources security. The construction of the Ganges Barrage at Pangscha, about 90 miles west of Dhaka, was conceived in 1963 to offset the adverse effects of Farakka Barrage. After independence it was revived in 1984 and feasibility studies were undertaken, and in 1997 the Joint Rivers Commission approved it.

Since then, I do not know whether any attempt has been taken to enlist the support of the World Bank and other friendly affluent nations to construct the barrage as Pakistan did for Tarbela and Mongla Dams.

We talk of energy security. It is believed that the demand is likely to grow almost fifty per cent in the next fifteen years and Bangladesh needs to increase the capacity to 8,000 MW by 2010, according to one estimate.

Today about 12,500 nuclear plants provide safe, clean and cheap energy to about 32 countries. Indonesia, Malaysia and Egypt are to develop nuclear energy. India is having build four nuclear reactors from Russia.

Before the independence of Bangladesh, the Roppur nuclear project of 300-500MW was selected and during the 36 years, we could not get any assistance to build it.

Currently, France, China and Russia are interested to provide assistance in building nuclear plant for peaceful uses in develop-



ing countries.

In my view, robust pro-active foreign policy is needed to revive these projects for implementation.

I would suggest foreign policy set a priority of a few issues of our national interests and air them in multilateral forums together with other like-minded countries. Furthermore Bangladesh could be the pioneer in advancing certain ideas across the globe.

For example: Malta in 1967 provided the concept of 'heritage of mankind' to be incorporated in exploiting resources of the sea and it became the philosophical basis of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of Seas. Bangladesh has provided the concept of micro-credit and many countries have replicated the system.

Implementation of foreign policy

To implement foreign policy needs a strong and effective Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). There is a

saying that Bangladesh has "thirty three Ministries of Foreign Affairs" because each ministry deals within its jurisdiction with foreign relations with a foreign country.

For example, in recent years, Board of Investment (BOI) agreed with Taiwan to open its trade office in Dhaka. The MFA was not consulted. When China protested, MFA had to deal to resolve this matter.

Some go to the extreme and say if the arrangement of presenting credentials and farewell calls to the President by Ambassadors accredited to Bangladesh could be managed by Bangabhaban or Prime Minister's Secretariat, the existing Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be totally abolished and no one would miss it.

It means that MFA is considered to be a vanishing point of functional ministry. It does not deal substantive matters with foreign countries, such as economic, trade and other burning issues of the day.

Therefore, MFA needs restructuring. Since economic diplomacy is one of the principal components of foreign policy, in my view, foreign trade and economic relations with foreign countries may be placed within the foreign ministry.

I know that the proposal is a big task but these two subjects cannot be separated from foreign policy. Without these two branches of government, foreign ministry appears to be a "toothless tiger".

In Australia, the Department of Foreign Affairs was restructured and amalgamated with Trade Department in 1988 and now it is re-designated as Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). In other countries, foreign ministry exercises a central role in determining content of foreign trade and economic relations with other states.

One primary question is whether the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs should become a ministry that directs all matters of foreign relations - trade, economic, and environment - or should it be confined only to diplomatic relations and leave all other relevant foreign related activities to others as currently exist.

As a nation, we should begin to ask, debate and answer these questions. It is commendable the Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies (CFAS) has commenced a dialogue jointly with The Daily Star on the direction of foreign policy.

The first dialogue took place on 7th May and it is understood that the second dialogue with stakeholders is likely to take place in June. Such dialogues will help formulate what kind of foreign policy Bangladesh needs to have if we are to successfully position ourselves and advance our national interests in the coming decades.

The author is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Cluster Bombs Ban text agreed after British move

The text of a landmark international convention to ban cluster bombs was agreed May 28 by delegates from more than 100 countries meeting in Dublin, an Irish foreign ministry spokeswoman told AFP.

After 10 days of often tense debate at Croke Park stadium in the Irish capital, diplomats agreed the wording of a wide-ranging pact that would completely end the use, production, transfer and stockpiling of cluster munitions by its signatories.

It also provides for the welfare of victims and the clearing of areas contaminated by unexploded cluster bombs.

The treaty requires the destruction of stockpiled munitions within eight years.

Britain was widely cited by campaigners as being at the forefront of a group of states seeking to water down the treaty.

But in a dramatic move May 28, Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced in London that Britain would withdraw all its cluster bombs from service in a bid to break the deadlock in the Dublin talks.

"We have decided we will take all our types of cluster bombs out of service," Brown said.

"I believe that is going to make a difference to the negotiations that are now taking place."

The draft treaty agreed in Dublin read: "Each state party undertakes never under any circumstances to: (a) Use cluster munitions; (b) Develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile, retain or transfer to anyone, directly or indirectly, cluster munitions; (c) Assist, encourage or induce anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a state party under this convention."

China, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia and the United States - all major producers and stockpilers - are absent from the Dublin talks.

Much of the wrangling at Croke Park focused on what signatories could and could not do in joint operations with states still using cluster bombs.

The draft text said signatories "may engage in military cooperation and operations".

But the Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC), an umbrella group of non-governmental organizations, hopes that the treaty will stigmatize the use of cluster munitions - as the similar Ottawa Treaty did for anti-personnel landmines - and stop countries from helping others to use them.

The CMC said the treaty was a compromise but nonetheless "incredibly strong".

"The treaty is going through," CMC co-chair Simon Conway told AFP.

"We're going to end up with a strong treaty that prohibits every cluster bomb that's ever been used, with no transition periods, with strong obligations on clearance and particularly strong obligations on victim assistance."

He welcomed Britain's "massive movement", saying it was giving up its cluster munitions "for all the right reasons."

"The people that have done the most compromising are the bad guys," he added.

"We've seen significant movement by countries that literally a week ago were saying there was no way they were going to give up these weapons."

"That will make a dramatic difference. They are giving up for all the right reasons, which is that they cause indiscriminate harm and kill civilians."

Brown told reporters at his Downing Street office: "We have decided, after a great deal of discussion, that we can help break the logjam so that we can get international agreement that would ban cluster bombs. I think this would be a big step forward to make the world a safer place," he said.

The cluster munitions ban process, started by Norway in February 2007, has taken the same path as the landmark 1997 Ottawa Treaty: going outside the United Nations to avoid vetoes and seal a swift pact. The Dublin gathering is aiming to thrash out a definitive agreement, to be signed in Oslo on December 2-3. Signatories would then need to ratify it.

Cluster munitions are among the weapons that pose the gravest dangers to civilians, especially in heavily bombed countries like Laos, Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Dropped from planes or fired from artillery, they explode in mid-air, randomly scattering bomblets. Countries are seeking a ban due to the risk of civilians being killed or maimed by their indiscriminate, wide area effect. They also pose a lasting threat to civilians as many bomblets fail to explode on impact.

S. Korea considers buying second hand US copters

South Korea is considering a US offer to sell second hand attack helicopters as part of its drive to upgrade military equipment, officials said May 27.

Defence officials said US troops here had offered to sell 36 AH-64 Apache helicopters. Two US Apache battalions are deployed in South Korea.

"It was only reviewed at the working level, but it is being reviewed very positively," Defence Ministry spokesman Won Tae-Jae told Yonhap news agency.

The ministry previously proposed a multibillion-dollar project to develop its own attack helicopters. But it has hit a snag for financial reasons.

"Nothing has been decided, but I do want to make it clear that this will not mean the scrapping of the attack helicopter development project," Won said.

Seoul and Washington have been military allies since the 1950-53 Korean War and about 28,000 US troops are stationed in the country to deter aggression by North Korea.

European SATCOM procurement cell on the way

A European Satellite Communication (SATCOM) procurement cell may be set up and running by 2010, European Defence Agency (EDA) officials said May 26. The idea is to harmonize military requirements and aggregate the growing defence demand for third-party SATCOM capacity through a single European point.

France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom will take the lead to demonstrate that pooling requirements and orders will lead to better offers by providers.

An ad hoc working group has been set up and is due to complete preliminary work in 2009, EDA Chief Executive Alexander Weiss said at a press conference. Polish Defence Minister Bogdan Klisch told Defense News that Poland strongly favours creation of the group, calling it the right tool to assess the need for the creation of a procurement cell.

"A procurement cell would be a good instrument for better coordination in this area," Klisch said, noting that some member states resisted the idea of quickly setting up the cell.

Shangri-la Dialogue set to begin in Singapore

The largest defence and security dialogue among Asian nations is set to begin this week in Singapore.

The London-based think tank International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) is sponsoring the 7th Shangri-la Dialogue to be convened in Singapore from May 30 to June 1 at the Shangri-la Hotel. The annual event is considered the key defence and security dialogue for defence ministers in the region.

Since the inaugural meeting in 2002, the dialogue has grown into a must-attend venue for defence ministers not just in Asia but for military and diplomatic leaders from Europe and the US.

This year, confirmed delegations attending include Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, China, East Timor, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, NATO, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States and Vietnam.

"US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates has confirmed his attendance and will be joined by many of his regional and international counterparts. In addition, US Senator Joe Lieberman will be attending. The Singaporean prime minister will deliver the keynote address," said Kathryn Floyd, dialogue press officer, Shangri-la Dialogue.

The event will be convened on the 50th anniversary of IISS. Founded in 1958, the IISS's early work centred on nuclear deterrence and arms control issues during the Cold War. Today, it sponsors a variety of conferences and seminars around the world, with the Shangri-la Dialogue considered to be its crown jewel.

"The dialogue also provides a forum for legislators, analysts, academics and business people to engage with senior officials in a manner that animates fresh policy thinking and innovative solutions to global challenges," stated an IISS press release.

This year's event will include six off-the-record plenary sessions and a variety of on-the-record press conferences. Plenary sessions include: Challenges to Stability in the Asia-Pacific; The Future of East Asian Security; Making Defence Policy in Uncertain Times; Securing Energy in the Asia-Pacific; Restoring Peace in Complex Emergencies; and Modes of Security Cooperation: Confidence-Building, Partnerships, Alliances.

The dialogue has had some successes in influencing regional security issues.

"In previous years, the Dialogue has seen proposals submitted for greater maritime security cooperation in the Malacca Straits, new bilateral relationships, and the establishment of a regional disaster and humanitarian relief centre," said an IISS press release.

The Prime Minister's Office: A critical reform area

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

THESE days we are talking of reforms in governance and institutions of governance and very rightly so. We hear of reform of the Public Service Commission, the Election Commission, Police administration, etc. Yet one office at the nerve centre of governance that attained a great deal of notoriety under elected governments and added significantly to the deterioration of governance, the Prime Minister's Office, or the PMO, has so far escaped attention. To bring the point home, this is what happened to the top PMO officials under Khaleda Zia's premiership. She sent her own secretary to jail. At present her principal secretary is accused for corruption; another secretary is in jail for corruption; one of her political advisers is also in jail while another has been convicted and at present a fugitive from justice.

A friend, former officer of the Pakistan Foreign Service cadre, was cleared for promotion to the rank of a Grade B Ambassador/Additional Secretary in 2003 by the SSB chaired by the cabinet secretary. Just after the conclusion of the meeting, a phone call came from a PMO official asking the cabinet secretary not to proceed with the promotions. The case was stuck for the next 3 months. When it was cleared, my friend had retired! Scores of such promotion cases duly cleared by SSB and sent routinely to the PMO for signature were by-passed by low functionaries at the PMO for political reasons.

Under the last BNP Government, a political adviser with his staff ran a parallel office at the PMO as an extension of the party office or the 'Hawa Bhavan' often rendering the principal secretary and PMO officers innocuous and silent spectators. We have read in newspaper reports about the principal secretary and a private secretary to a political adviser "fighting" over the latter's alleged corruption but unable to take action against this gentleman for his political linkage. The charge against this official was that he had acquired property illegally at Gulshan worth crores of taka.

The PMO was established in 1991 when Bangladesh adopted the parliamentary system. It replaced the President's Office where two Presidents with military background had created a very powerful secretariat. It was expected that with change of system, the PMO would lose a lot of power with Ministers sharing executive authority with the Prime Minister. That did not happen because the Prime Minister

assumed almost all the powers of the President, helped by the failure of the Parliament to evolve as a meaningful branch of Government. Also, unlike other parliamentary governments, Article 55 (2) of Bangladesh Constitution stated that "the executive power of the Republic shall, in accordance with this Constitution, be exercised by or on the authority of the Prime Minister" that in effect made the system Prime Ministerial instead of a truly parliamentary one where the Prime Minister is "the first among equals".

The Prime Minister's dominance was reflected in an un-heathy manner in the way the PMO became a government within the government, to the exclusion of the rest of the government. The Rules of Business were suitably amended to legalize the dominance that ran contrary to the parliamentary system and kept the ministers from playing their role in governance. Ministers were vying for attention of not the Prime Minister but bureaucrats at the PMO and were busy building their "power base" by closeness with those bureaucrats who found key posts at the PMO for political reasons as the elected governments politicized it.

In a parliamentary system, political parties play a crucial role in getting a government elected. However, once it is chosen, they are not expected to have any role in governance for once in government; the party in power has to appeal to the nation that has to include everybody, including the supporters of those it has defeated in the elections. In Bangladesh, this did not happen and the parties even when in power seldom overcame narrow party interests to appeal to the broader national constituency. This bipartisanship and consensus around national issues never evolved in our politics. At the PMO this play of narrow party interests over broader national interests was played out in the worst ways imaginable. Party officials were brought into governance as political advisers and given offices at the PMO to perform functions "relating to Political Affairs" as entrusted by the Allocations of Business. Career bureaucrats were brought to the PMO on political considerations rather than on merit. Between the political advisers and the bureaucrats, it was just not the PMO that was politicized; together they spread the virus to the entire administration. In the last BNP era, the political advisers with the politicized bureaucrats helped the party

take over the PMO and through the PMO, the entire government. Ministers were spending more time to get attention of one political adviser in particular and the "political" bureaucrats there who worked as the party's men at the PMO. The Prime Minister's son at the party office or the Hawa Bhavan encouraged the nexus and the PMO became the front for the party. This nexus became the real power at the PMO leading the ministers to seek the attention of this political staffer more than their secretariat adviser including the principal secretary because the blessings of Hawa Bhavan decided most crucial issues of governance. During the last BNP government, a private secretary was the PM's nephew that helped him gain influence way out of proportion to what he deserved and helped in the PMO to evolve as an obstacle to good governance.

During the AL Government, when the PMO had not fallen to such low depths, a senior retired CSP officer who was entrusted to review the administration had called for dismantling it. In a BBC talk show a few years ago, the editor of TDS had said something extremely valuable. While acknowledging that Bangladesh had made good strides towards democracy he felt that for further evolution down the road of democracy Bangladesh would have to find ways to make the Prime Minister accountable in between the elections. That would need a lot of things falling into place, like making the parliament truly functional. If we are seeking to restrain our Prime Ministers from assuming dictatorial powers, as they have done, we could also look into whether we can amend Article 55 (2) of the Constitution and reinvest executive powers in the cabinet. Those issues notwithstanding, the reform of the PMO has become essential and critical for achieving good governance of future elected governments.

The reform of the PMO must start by addressing a major issue, drawing a line between the party and the government. The Prime Minister's role as party leader and his/her need to lead it is undoubtedly very important. But that function must be performed at the party office and not at the PMO. ROB should then be amended and the PMO should be relieved from its role in dealing with political affairs. That would not allow the political advisers to sit at the PMO and free it from party interference. The provisions under schedule V of the Allocations of Business that sets aside cases that ministries must refer to the Prime

Minister should also be trimmed so as not to burden the PMO with cases that are routine. As an example, cases of promotion of Deputy Secretary should not be referred by the Establishment Division to the PMO. In trimming schedule V, the spirit should be to free the Prime Minister to concentrate on more serious affairs of the state at the policy level and correspondingly allow the Ministers to play their proper role in governance. The personnel at the PMO must be chosen strictly on merit and the chain of command there under the principal secretary should not be broken by outside interference. On the conflict of interest issue, no close relative of future PMs should be appointed to any post at the PMO.

The most important objective of reform of the PMO must be to free it from political interference and bring professionalism to it. Towards the end of the BNP Government, public confidence in government was all but shattered because of the unholy nexus between the PMO and the Hawa Bhavan. That nexus should not be allowed in the next elected government. The reforms would create that environment but whether the nexus would not be repeated would depend to a large extent upon the next Prime Minister who we hope would come reformed as a consequence of developments in our politics since 1/11. While the PM's choice would be made by the election, the principal secretary would be selected. That selection should be made with great care keeping in mind that he would be the individual on whose personality and leadership qualities a reformed and professional PMO would like to make a new beginning where it would be the cause of removal of people's sufferings instead of being the cause of it.

Bangladesh's potentials are immense; we are the envy of our neighbours because of our history and our homogeneity. Yet we are languishing, hovering between hopes and despair because we have failed to establish bipartisanship in our politics. The PMO is not a party office, and by re-establishing that through the reforms suggested, Bangladesh could make a long awaited start towards bipartisan politics whose impact on the country could be the beginning of the realization of the dreams for which we had established Bangladesh through immense sacrifices.

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