

ROUNDTABLE ON FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY

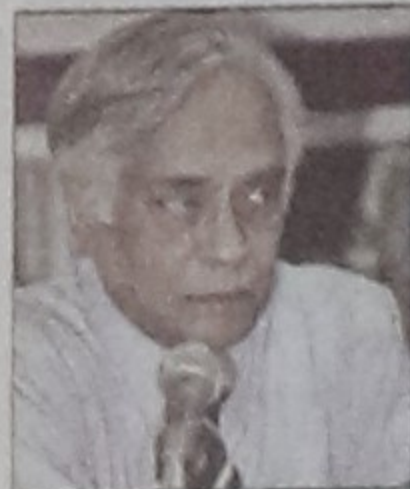
12 DHAKA TUESDAY DECEMBER 23, 2008

The Daily Star

The second round of discussion on, "Future Directions of Bangladesh Foreign Policy" was organised by The Daily Star in collaboration with the Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies, on 22 Nov 2008, at The Daily Star conference room. The roundtable was attended by academics and former Foreign Service officers. Excerpts of the proceedings is published below.

-- Editor

Ambassador Ashfaqur Rahman Chairman



Exactly six and a half months back, in the first roundtable on, "Future directions of Bangladesh Foreign Policy," we had discussed the subject under three main heads:

1. Formulation of Bangladesh foreign policy
2. Implementation of the foreign policy, the obstacles
3. The way forward

Our discussions at that time identified how foreign policies are crafted in Bangladesh. We also identified some major obstacles, and remedial measures were also suggested. We were made aware that the following key questions are now shaping the international system in the 21st century.

1. Globalisation
2. Technology proliferation
3. The rise of non-state actors
4. Environmental stresses
5. Population growth

Bangladesh needs to urgently design a new architecture for foreign relations. It needs to spell out new strategies that it requires to conduct foreign policy. These strategies should be in the realm of security, international relations, economic co-operation, image-building and migration. The classical idea that foreign policy is the exclusive preserve of the head of government and the ministry of foreign affairs is eroding. So also is the idea that a committee in parliament has the function of overseeing foreign policies. There cannot be any disconnect between those who make these policies and those who have a stake in them. Everyone who is involved in, or who is affected by these policies, must be heard. Its final character must be representative of all the voices heard. The Daily Star and The Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies are again jointly hosting this dialogue to help narrow this gap. It is our intention to place all the recommendations which we receive from you and the previous round-table before the government of the day. In the process we hope to sensitize all those who are interested in the subject of foreign policy.

To start with Professor Imtiaz Ahmed, Department of IR, Dhaka University, will give us a short presentation on "Future Directions of Bangladesh Foreign Policy".

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed



I was commissioned to write a short paper on Future Directions of Bangladesh Foreign Policy, with the subtitle 'Dreams or Nightmare.' One could go either way at this particular period of time.

In the age of globalization, the modernist principle that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy has practically lost its relevance. Today, the foreign is less an external identity, while the domestic is hardly fully internal. Tagore alluded to this problem in his novel 'Ghore Baire,' arguing how the foreign, or more precisely the European bred discourse on nationalism has come to impress and impact upon the minds of the Indians, albeit to their detriment. But then, few had the wisdom to understand his warnings, and formulate policies accordingly. The genocidal partition of India can surely be viewed as our collective failure to distinguish the internal from the external, succeeding in overwhelming the internal and creating structures of divisiveness in the minds of the people. The 1971 genocide too was no less a consequence of that. But as we speak today, globalization provides us with an opportunity to re-conceptualize issues like foreign and domestic, or internal and external, or for that matter presents and futures too, beyond the

banal discourses of linearity, dualism and dichotomies. A good starting point would be to consider the changing nature of Westphalian states, including post-colonial states. The meaning of Bangladesh, for example, is no longer limited to the territoriality of 55, 126 square miles, but rather has come to include hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis living abroad - from Canada to Canberra, and Jeddah to Japan. This is as much an issue of economics, as it is an issue of technology. It is true that the greater part of the state gets reproduced by the constant flow of remittance from unskilled and semi-skilled workers of the Bangladeshi Diaspora, but then the current forms of technology-cell-phones, internet, air transport-all ensure that the latter is in constant touch with the motherland, a feature that sets the old and new diasporas miles apart. This invites freshness of thoughts; it also remains susceptible to the transfer of ideas and culture that could sow the seeds of discord at home.

Post-territorial, or demographic Bangladesh, needs further explication in the era of globalization. The future direction of Bangladesh foreign policies are to be framed, and policy initiatives requiring their fulfillment are to be pursued to support the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people; and the conceptualization of Bangladesh as a small-state has to be erased forever. How can a country with 150 million people, the eighth largest in the world, be called small? Or for that matter, how can the Bengalis, the sixth largest linguistic community in the world, be dwarfed and territorialized into smallness? A certain politics, however, pervaded when scholars and policy makers first began calling Bangladesh a small state. In fact, there existed element of indo-centrism, when the idea was first mooted. I am reminded of a seminar at the BIIS in August 1979 titled 'Securities of Small States in the World.'

(The article in full has been placed at <http://ambassadorseraj.blogspot.com/>)

Ambassador CM Shafi Sami



The most important point made by Professor Imtiaz is that foreign policy of any country is the product of its history, its experience, its compulsions and challenges. It is the conscious preference for action of that country to secure influence.

The debate whether Bangladesh is big or small is very important for Bangladesh - a country which is economically at a disadvantage, to develop foreign policy.

The economic meltdown and the global energy crisis is an important area for foreign policy considerations in Bangladesh. Instead of oil and coal, renewable energy should constitute a very important area for foreign policy makers. The energy crisis is far from over, and will not be solved without alternate energy resources. For developing friendly and cooperative relations in South Asia, its abundant energy resources, particularly of the renewable type should be tapped; a subject that could constitute a very important element of Bangladesh foreign policy.

Bangladesh is likely to face a rise in militancy. The fight against terrorism is likely to assume increasing importance internationally. Bangladesh will attract attention by fighting the rise of militancy. Micro-credit, and Professor Yunus's achievements should become exportable items and international peace-keeping efforts should be pursued with renewed zeal.

National interest is easy to identify and define; developing national consensus is very difficult. It is very important for us to devise means to insulate foreign policy development from overplay of domestic politics. Migration, development of manpower export and exploitation of various maritime zones should be foreign policy objectives.



We must forge regional cooperation and consider the need for strengthening of the government infrastructure and developing energy resources.

Ambassador Harun ur Rashid



Globalization has affected the world. The global financial crisis, which started in USA, has affected even Iceland, and Bangladesh cannot escape the effects.

Westphalian concept of nation-state is fast disappearing. The state boundaries no more define business requirements or consumer traits.

Some authors have defined small states as weak powers. The Commonwealth Consultative Group has adopted 1 million people or less as the benchmark of a small state. Other criteria involve physical size, gross domestic product, military power, availability of natural and unskilled human resources. Just on the basis of these criteria, you may have to conclude whether Bangladesh is a small state or not.

Professor Imtiaz has talked about globalization. However, apart from economic globalization, he has not talked about the popular globalization although indirectly he referred to it by mentioning organizations like Amnesty International, Greenpeace etc. Global civil society has emerged, and we have noted at the IMF and World Bank meetings that the protests are being made by the global civil society of all countries and of all people. What Professor Imtiaz has also not referred to is the Public Order globalization, which refers to governments working together on common problems, such as combating disease, environment pollution etc.

Professor Imtiaz did not focus on Bangladesh's geopolitical location and its advantages in furthering its foreign policy goals. He also missed out on how Bangladesh, as a moderate, tolerant, multi-religious, multi-ethnic country can mobilize global opinion to address national interests in global warming, energy, security, water security, environment security and human security areas.

Ambassador Kazi Anwarul Masud



The partition of India was not a result of genocide. 1971 was definitely genocide. Then, the debate over small and large countries ignores the critical point as to

how Bangladesh should interact in the present world system that basically is and will be dominated by a dozen economies in the foreseeable future. Besides, no yardstick has been provided to measure how big or small a country is. The UN classification is generally based on stages of economic development.

I differ with Dr. Imtiaz on the question of optimism regarding the surplus in disposable income resulting from Barack Obama's tax cut plan, because

it ignores the price and demand elasticity of the exports of Bangladesh to USA. I agree with Barrister Harun-ur-Rashid that in conditions of melt-down, it is more likely that the middle-class Americans will hold on to the cash in hand.

Then, Dr. Imtiaz's analysis of the relative insulation of the Bangladesh economy from the global meltdown and also increased competitiveness vis-à-vis India and China, is based on 'cheap labor.' But as we all know, it is not cheap labour, but labor productivity per unit which determines the ultimate cost of a commodity, which is of most importance to the importer. Then I would like to differ with his point about the global energy crisis. It is not a crisis when you have price volatility. The price of oil used to be 158 dollars per barrel, and now it is down to 46 dollars. Therefore, we have price volatility, and we do not know where this price is going to end. So, there is no crisis as such. And the current price of 46 dollars would not encourage the exploration of alternative resources of energy. In the ultimate analysis, the business people are going to compute which is cheaper. If oil becomes cheaper, then they won't explore for other sources of energy.

Strangely, Islamic militancy has not been dealt by the paper at all, though it is of central concern, barring the economic meltdown, to the west and no less to the east, including the Islamic world. Equally I expected non-traditional threats, to be dealt in the paper, which is facing the world in the shape of adverse impacts of climate change, which is compounded by population explosion or increased population, as in the case of Bangladesh, and lack of assurance of food security, which is integral to the economic development of Bangladesh. I also do not see how we can achieve a 10% growth rate.

Also the trans-national health hazards and elimination of communicable diseases could have been highlighted. I am not aware that ministry of foreign affairs of different countries are forming a network of think tanks, as mentioned in page 7. Language and specialized training, for example in the Law of the Sea, have been given to officers. As Ambassador Shafi Sami pointed out, we have India and Myanmar to deal with.

Ambassador M Zamir



Professor Imtiaz's paper has opened up areas for interesting discussions. I will mention only one aspect of the discussions. Dr. Imtiaz has mentioned about Saudi Arabia, and the onibashi, probashi Bangladeshis and the needs of the foreign affairs ministry, which is presently also looking after expatriate welfare, to look into the affair more seriously.

One of the recommendations that I hope will go out of this meeting is that, in addition to imparting training in languages at all levels as in French, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, which is not being done as regularly as it used to be done earlier in the ministry

of foreign affairs it is also important to include Nepali, Bhutanese and Burmese. It is important for us to know our neighbor's languages. It is not a question of teaching someone Arabic and then posting him in New York. I would suggest that this meeting should recommend the need to specialize in foreign languages and to expand and broaden it - because we have many missions in the Middle East - to many junior officers who have to do consular work to learn Arabic and Persian in particular. So, if you have to attest certificates, if you have to look out for the welfare of our expatriates in confinement, you should know the language.

Dr Mustafizur Rahman, Executive Director CPD



I would like to thank Dr. Imtiaz for highlighting many issues that will come to define Bangladesh's foreign policy in the coming days.

First of all, I would like to comment on some of the points on which I take issue.

I think the part on the new administration should be more nuanced. The new Partnership for Development Act, which is now in the US Congress - in terms of providing zero-tariff access to Bangladeshi products including the apparels in the US market - will be in a more challenging situation once the new administration comes. So this is a very important issue for Bangladesh and will have important implications for the foreign policy development also. The Obama Administration will be much more averse to providing zero-tariff access to Bangladeshi apparels. I do not say that they will not be providing zero-tariff access, or they will not be considering it. There will be a number of conditions attached.

Secondly, the US has allocation in the Millennium Challenge Fund and the aid for trade in the WTO. If a large chunk of the US taxpayer money will be going for the bail-out, the money for the aid will be lesser. It is a challenge for us.

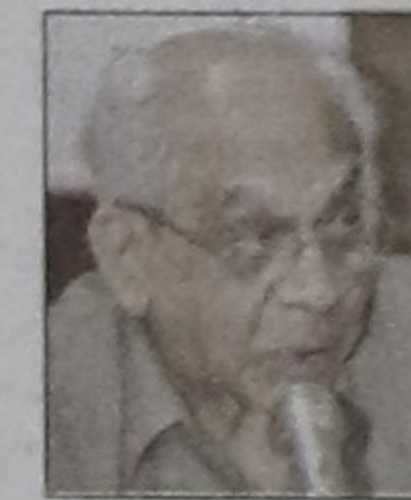
Also, when we talk about globalization, for many of the low-income countries, it is mostly north-south. I think an important aspect that should be considered is how to expand south-south trade. For many middle income countries, south-south trade is expanding at a very high rate, even double the rate of global trade. Here also, another challenge exists for Bangladesh. Some of the speakers have also talked about how to take advantage of our geographical position in respect to China and India. So it is not only regionalism, but conscious regionalism that will constitute an important element of foreign policy development of Bangladesh.

The next point pertains to territorialisation. Off-shore drilling, carbon trading all these new emerging issues will bring the issue of territoriality in a new light. It's not only globalization, but also a renewed focus on territorial aspects of our nation that need to be considered.

Fourthly, you talked about the necessity of developing nuclear energy, which will also have important implications in foreign policies of our country. You cannot have nuclear energy

today. You need global bodies like IAEA to support your cause. That should also be considered in developing foreign policies.

Ambassador Anwar Hashem



Globalization has featured prominently in the paper as well as during the discussions. Dr. Imtiaz has dealt at length with globalization in many forms and manifestations.

Ambassador Harun-Ur-Rashid has made some interesting and thoughtful additions to the discussion. But all said and done, to cut the long story very short, I would like to request all of you to accept the objective reality. The objective reality is that globalization is an on-going process, and it is going to stay on. What we exactly need to do is try to devise ways and means to reduce the negative impact of globalization and take advantages of whatever little opportunities that globalization offers. It is in this context that we should also consider how we can take advantage of our leadership of the LDC group. I consider it to be very important. I do not want to indulge in the debate as to whether we should be in the LDC group or not. When I am dictated by my heart, I think that we should get out of it. We do not need the stigma of being the fakir of all fakirs. But when I try to think objectively, I think we should continue in the LDC group because there are certain advantages in the international arena.

Dr. Imtiaz has made many thought-provoking comments. Let me comment on one. On page 4, he has said that non-governmental initiatives for developing foreign policies are no less important than governmental initiatives. I would like to put special accent on each. The foreign policies in the future should be the foreign policies of Bangladesh, and not of this ruling party or that. We need to bear this in mind. There is an imperative need for a partnership between state actors and all relevant non-state actors. Of course, here a prescription has been given by Dr. Imtiaz. He has said that the government should take the input (from non-state actors), think about it, analyze it, and if necessary, discard it. Ambassador Harun has mentioned about the geo-political reality of foreign politics. Let me mention some other factors. Let us not forget, of the seven declared nuclear states, two are located in South Asia. Another reality is that, apart from the presence of two mighty neighbors, Bangladesh has another neighbor, the lone superpower, that has become everybody's neighbor. We should take these factors in consideration. When we think about the global scenario, we used to talk about the East-West divide. But now we are talking about the aggravation or intensification of the North-South divide, and also the emergence of religious divide. These are the things we should take into account.

Finally, in any discussions on the future directions of Bangladesh foreign policy, there is a need for identification

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