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and prioritization of the areas of interest. This is just not about relations with a country, or group of countries, or blocs, but is also about issues. Whether globalization should come first, or environment, or energy security needs to be considered. We should think objectively and dispassionately about our achievements during the last thirty years, and out lack of success. Perhaps we can build on our successes, and rectify ourselves from our mistakes.

Ambassador Shafiqul Islam



We have only two neighbors India and Myanmar. In the coming days we should focus all our attention to these countries as no issues are being solved with these neighbours.

The foreign ministry should encourage their officials to attend regularly seminars, dialogue held by the civil society, research centers in Dhaka, to help them to formulate foreign policies.

The mainstream political parties should be discouraged to have overseas branches as they do not help the cause of Bangladesh. They fight among themselves and create a bad image. They should be joined by the political parties in the host countries and lobby for Bangladesh.

Ambassador Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury



We are a small state but a large nation; a new country, but an old race. It is extremely vital that Bangladesh focuses on energy security as much as on food security because we are

dependent on non-renewable and imported sources of energy. It is time that we develop new sources of energy, and I certainly agree that the nuclear option should not be ruled out.

Now, there has been an understandable euphoria about Barack Obama's victory, and his imminent assumption of office. But I think that there will be far greater challenges for Bangladesh in the area of trade. Democrats, who are now going to control the White House, Senate and the House of Representatives, i.e. the entire executive and legislature, are ideologically and inherently protectionist. They focus very heavily on issues like labor rights. So, the challenge for Bangladesh is going to be much greater.

The next issue that I would like to touch on is regarding the development of cultural diplomacy. Already, it has been mentioned that food habit in Europe has undergone a change because of the impact of Bangladeshi cuisine in London.

The other issue is ensuring the rights and welfare of Bangladeshis working abroad. Remittance income is critical for Bangladesh's economy. It has a 100% value addition. It generates income and jobs. I also agree with Dr. Imtiaz that there should be changes in the ways that foreign policies are developed and executed. It should not be the domain of one particular institution. It should be done by an inclusive bunch of professionals, a gathering of talents. This would enrich the input in foreign policy-making and also help in its execution. Training and creating educated and informed foreign policy makers with linguistic expertise has been touched upon by many already.

The last point is regarding the role of the Diaspora. The Diaspora has become increasingly important, relevant and more-and-more a direct player in how you project Bangladesh to the outside world as a moderate country seeking to find a place for itself in the globalised world. We should be able to demonstrate our ability as a responsible partner in the global community. And here, the role of the Diaspora is extremely critical.

Ambassador Ashfaqur Rahman then introduced the following pointers for more focused discussions.

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

Ambassador Farooq Sobhan



One point we have constantly talked about, and is more important today than ever before, is the need to forge a national consensus on foreign policy in three or four key areas.

One is, to understand and appreciate the importance of foreign policy and foreign relations and the need to have an effective foreign ministry. I would particularly like to focus on the need for national consensus on relations with India, on economic integration both within South Asia and with Asia at large, and on other economic challenges that we face.

What we need to do is to try and engage many more actors and stake-

holders to build national consensus. The fact that the Foreign Ministry and missions abroad has to work under enormous constraints for lack of national consensus on foreign policy issues has been overlooked.

National consensus is critical to meet a number of key challenges. One is in the area of economic policies, regarding market access to the US, migration and employment abroad. We have to recognize that by 2015 the population of Bangladesh will cross 200 million and will be close to 220 million. Where are we going to find jobs for all these people at home? The reality is that we have to look for employment opportunities for these people abroad. We need to start training our workforce. We need to seek greater market access for our workforce. We need to attract FDI but impact of the global financial crisis will make it that more difficult for high-risk countries like Bangladesh.

To improve relations with India on a win-win situation, and moving forward on the whole South Asian economic integration agenda, including Nepal, Bhutan and the Indian North-East in our own interests is a major foreign policy challenge. Improving the image of Bangladesh and re-branding Bangladesh is another for the new government. For this, the foreign office and Foreign Service cadre must be strengthened. At present the best talents are not joining government service. Pay must be enhanced to attract the best talents to the Foreign Ministry.

Growing threat of terrorism and demarcating the maritime boundary are other key challenges. No foreign policy can be developed without a minimum degree of coordination and coherence. Unfortunately, the role of the foreign ministry has been progressively undermined and diluted in Bangladesh, and we need to find ways to reestablish the pivotal role of the foreign office.

We need to leverage the strength of the Diaspora for re-branding Bangladesh and for their remittance. Second and third generation Bangladeshis who are well positioned in USA can help in the area of getting market access by their political leverage and strength.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Our location impacts our internal activity between India, North-East India and Myanmar. We can take opportunity of our geographical location by opening transit and interconnectivity to our neighboring countries. Economically, it will be easier. We know that China has opened a railway from Beijing to Lhasa. They are now bringing it to Nepal. So, if we have connectivity with India and Nepal, we can link up economically with China. Secondly, we need to have integration of economy. The North-Eastern states are now land-locked. Here, we can use the transit card. Thirdly, we need national consensus on global warming because 33 million people will be directly affected, as some say, by the sea rise in the south in the coastal lands.

To maintain good relations with India and Myanmar is another major challenge. Myanmar thinks Bangladesh exploited them before 1947. We need to deal with it to establish good relations with her.

I also agree that we must invest in the Diaspora. Recently, I was in Sydney, and I saw that there is a network of NRBs. They have established a Bangladesh environmental network. They hold seminars, and they bring members of the parliament and even some of the junior ministers, to highlight how to combat the effects of global warming and how Australia could help Bangladesh to adapt to the effects of global warming. So, they are doing good work. But, as we have said earlier, our energies are split up there with 2-3 political parties. But look at the Indian-born Bobby Jindal, who is the governor of Louisiana. And he is also one of the aspirants for the presidential nomination in 2012. Bangladesh also needs to see how to join one of the parties, either the Democrats or the Republicans, to influence some of the events we are suffering from, like lobbying market access, and other kind of activities that will help Bangladesh. There is no internal lobby of the Diaspora through which the voice of Bangladesh can be heard.

The other challenge is that terrorism has over-arched everything as 88% of the people is Muslim. But very few know that we have forty-five ethnic groups in Bangladesh. We are multi-religious, with more Buddhists here than in India. This, we have not been able to highlight. We are also multi-lingual. We must give recognition to the dialects of our tribal people that will project an enhanced and enriched Bangladesh's image to the world.

There is no consensus or bipartisanship in the formulation of our foreign policy. No heads of the government, except President Zia, were interested in foreign policy. Foreign policy, sometimes, is decided by a small core cabinet, like kitchen cabinet, where the foreign minister is absent. Stalwarts of parties become foreign advisors. The prime-ministerial secretariat is another hurdle. Whatever recommendation the foreign secre-

tary or foreign minister gives in their own wisdom is undermined by the PM's secretariat, or they sometimes put forward new recommendations, which sometimes go against the interest of Bangladesh. Therefore, the rules of business on part of the government must be changed, so that the foreign office, like any other country, has a pre-dominant say on any matter touching on foreign relations. We are the only country where trade relations with Taiwan was opened without consulting the foreign office. And then the foreign office had to address the difficult issue with China. Therefore, I feel that the restructuring of the foreign office is necessary, apart from the emphasis on resources and competencies.

The research and evaluation division in the foreign office is a must. Director Generals in the foreign office are occupied with day-to-day administration. Therefore, the strategy should be that this research and evaluation division should plan a 5-year, 10-year, and 25-year strategy, and what we expect to achieve in this time. We must not be carried away by emotions. Sometimes, I have seen that we waste our resources on something that is not achievable. So, we must be realistic, and pragmatic. We must not run with all the issues of the UN. As was said before, we need to prioritize our issues. There may be 121 issues in the UN General Assembly. Therefore, let us concentrate on 5-6 issues and run with it with determination, persistence, with our ideas, and with like-minded countries. Our strength lies in establishing and building groups of like-minded countries to advance our national interest.

Mr. Jaglul Ahmed Chowdhury
MD & Chief Editor, BSS



I agree with Mr. Farooq Sobhan that on areas of foreign policy, there should be a national consensus. But at the same time, I think that a national consensus is a

kind of a misnomer. It is not possible, neither is it lacking. Only in key areas in a democratic dispensation, national consensus in foreign policy formulation is possible.

In India there is sharp divide on the very critical and important issue like civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with USA, with the Congress and BJP on opposite sides. In USA, in this presidential election the two sides were divided on the Iraq issue. National consensus is possible in only a few key areas because in democracies, different parties have different views.

National consensus is possible in key areas. But what are the key areas? We talk about national interest but we have not still been able to define our national interest. There should be a crystal-clear idea about our national interest where politicians have a major responsibility as policy makers. We must concentrate ourselves in the parameter of a democratic dispensation. Policy makers also include the members of the parliament. Unfortunately, we have seen during the rule of a democratic government that the standing committee on foreign affairs was made totally ineffective.

I also want to say something about matters in which the foreign office plays a central role. The office in Tophkana is seen by the public as a kind of a white elephant. I think that there is a paramount need for shattering some of the misconceptions about the foreign office in the mind of people. If there is any truth in my comments, it is not because of the foreign office diplomats, it is because of the politicians who govern the country. They need to bring the Foreign Service much closer to the people to the extent that they should find the reflections of their hopes and aspirations of their culture in the Foreign Service people, because they are our brethren, our people. So, this kind of seminar should address these issues to the politicians. They should conduct affairs in such a manner so that the foreign office is not seen as being totally segregated from the people.

Our foreign office should be expanded. One distinguished speaker mentioned about India very rightly. Why should we call ourselves small? This is a country of 15 million people. Pakistan, with a marginally bigger population has a much larger foreign office. I think that there is no dearth of confidence in our foreign office people. I also believe that the number of embassies should be increased. It is sometimes said that we are wasting our money on a large number of embassies, high-commissions etc. Now, if we have to survive with dignity, if we believe in interactions with the outside world, we must have embassies, diplomatic missions. In my view, the number should be increased with a fleet of efficient people, even taking them from economic backgrounds so that our economic diplomacy can be better protected. I think one important element of foreign office should be protection of the interest of the Diaspora. Quite often, they feel that their interest is not being protected. The government version is one-sided. Some time ago, we saw the situation in Kuwait, Saudi

Arabia. Thousands of people thronged the embassies. I think we need more efficient people and realistic policies, and also a certain degree of courage on part of our foreign policy makers. Because, a kind of subservient foreign policy as regards to any country, does not help the interest of our people.

Regional and sub-regional cooperation is very important for Bangladesh. Of late, we have seen two summits in quick succession. Here, certain issues are not coming in the manner they deserve. One is that Bangladesh is too vulnerable to natural calamities. We are now in the first anniversary of Sidr. We narrowly escaped the tsunami. Such issues like anti-disaster management should get top priority. 17% of our country is likely to go under water due to climate change, and a large number of people are vulnerable to losing their existence. It is so alarming that the newly elected president of Maldives was appealing to the world 'My country is going under water. We want a shelter anywhere in the world.' On the face of it, it may not be realistic, but is a very appealing cry. We are also not above such dangers. I believe that climate change, its effects and consequences, should occupy a very important portion of our foreign policy matters. And unless we do it, we will be lacking in our duties and responsibilities.

Foreign policy must have clarity. It must have balance. I don't think we can afford an aggressive or defensive policy. It should be balanced with respect to all countries, with special emphasis on our neighbors, because, we swim with them. There good is our good in many ways.

Last but not the least, involving the people should be the paramount consideration of the leadership. Leadership must not create a situation where foreign office is seen as an island. How we conduct ourselves domestically: do we have good governance, do we have a corruption-free society, do we have democratic dispensation; unless these are taken into consideration, you cannot talk loudly outside and protect your interests.

M Zamir

Should grow a habit in the ministry of foreign affairs, where the leader of the ministry should organize once every three months preferably an in-house discussion in the presence of political leadership who are assigned to looking after foreign affairs. There is the need to strengthen and consolidate the performance of the parliamentary sub-committee on foreign affairs. We hope that in the next parliament, this will be given special effort.

There is need for bi-partisan approach and an offer on a quid pro quo basis for a transit card. Our principal parties are not at all in unity regarding how to deal with India. We need to sit with our development partners and discuss issues like water management, environmental degradation, food security and how to increase power. We should go for nuclear and solar power development. We should also go into wind power. The foreign office needs to be brought on board to create a coordinating matrix with the line ministries. The foreign office sometimes is not even aware of what is being done in terms of projects.

Trade and investment are crucial for Bangladesh. In the ministry of foreign affairs, the legal division is a dumping ground. In today's world, legal competence is paramount but I was shocked to find out that some of the people who had come from the line ministries were not aware of some of the standards expected with regard to negotiating for better trade agreements. Officers sent to missions should be attached for considerable period in economic ministries/agencies to be able to speak intelligently on our economic and commercial interests.

We are talking here about strategic engagement. The point of neighbor's interest and protection should be classified as 'strategic interest' instead of 'just interest.' And similarly, 'protection' should be termed 'sovereignty.' Globalization, while effacing borders, is also creating the need for us to protect whatever we have.

Then there is a question of a new international system. We must understand that the print and electronic media is very important. We need to engage with them more constructively. This is not happening. We must ask someone from the foreign ministry to attend the next such meeting.

The next point is regarding resources. When it comes to resources, we must realize we have severe constraints. The entire budget of the foreign ministry is less than the budget of one of the army division located in Dhaka. The foreign office is the first line of defense. When we fail, the BDR or the army comes into the play. It is so poor that brighter people passing out of universities are not interested in joining the foreign ministry. The ambassador of Bangladesh in Brussels gets paid less than the first secretary of the Indian embassy in Brussels. Our ambassador in Katmandu has a lesser salary and allowances than the second secretary of the Indian embassy there. You cannot expect that the embassies will provide the necessary services without proper payment. There is a Plowden commissions report in 1927 in Oxford to determine the salary and salary structure of the British Empire in the Indian context. They determined that the starting salary for a civil ser-

vant would be 500 rupees, which is equivalent to approximately 12 tolas of gold at that time. Where are we now? The basic salary structure for the ministry of foreign affairs should be improved. I was shocked to find out that the persons in the press wing in the London embassy did not know anybody of the media. They could not afford to entertain anyone from the media. This is because they get the equivalent amount of dinner for five persons as entertainment allowance. If you don't pay enough, you cannot have your image projection. People cannot carry on research. At the level of Director General, we should be able to get not only the Time magazine and Newsweek, but also important newspapers like the International Herald Tribune every morning. I hope that you also invite someone from the National Defense College, the NDC. We should also invite people from the chambers as well.

Ambassador Shamim Ahmed



The parliament has an important influence, and can also spell our future directions of foreign policy. Foreign Ministry can be proactive in encouraging and enhancing the role of the

parliament by recognizing those members who take particular interest in foreign policy matters... it can closely interact with the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs, be proactive in taking interest in foreign policy matters for a more effective committee.

We need to be constantly engaged in looking for new sources of employment for the Bangladesh Diaspora. With oil prices plummeting as it is now and if there is any shrinkage in their economy, then we have to think about the repercussions we might have to face if tens of thousands of people come back home and put both social and economic pressure.

Ambassador Nasim Ferdous



The image of Bangladesh cannot improve significantly if it leaves behind 50% of its population. One of the critical areas where Bangladesh needs to concentrate is

gender balance. Very little is heard from women when policies are being discussed within the four walls of the foreign office, within the government. Yet, all the national policies that are debated across the country have an adverse effect on women, in some cases, more than men. The foreign office should make a concerted and conscious effort to include a large number of women at every level.

We talked about research/law wing as dumping ground. The foreign office can reorganize itself to create a pool of women. A separate pool of women can be created to support the legal wing of the foreign office. Similarly, there is no dearth of good women researchers either. Look at BISS, CPD for example. The foreign office has always been a domain exclusive of women. Justice is not meted out to the women in foreign office, as they are meted out to men. Also, an atmosphere to build a bridge across Tophkana road to the Bangladesh Secretariat is needed so that we can be a part of the secretariat as well.

A lot has been talked about the foreign office being short of resources. But it is a matter of competence as well. Here again, I bring in the question of gender balance. Whenever the government is approached for women, the response is: Where are the competent women? How many of the men are competent? These are the issues we must recognize at some point in time. Now is a better time than any, as this is the time for change.

Anwar Hashem

National consensus is desirable, but not practicable. We should make our utmost efforts to forge a broad consensus. This is what we should try to do. Mr. Jaglul Chowdhury has also referred to the plight of our workers in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. I am not holding a brief for the government. I do not need to. I also see in page 6 of Professor Imtiaz's paper that an incident that took place in the Dubai airport has been recorded. Well, I do not want to disagree with anybody. But very often, only one side of the story is projected. This calls for fairness and objectivity. Very often, what the embassy is doing, or what the mission is doing, or what the labor wing is doing, is not reflected while publicizing the matter. I have seen that in many of our missions abroad, our mission personnel are making very sincere efforts to look into the problems of our migrant workers, and they have a tremendous resource constraint. For example - a lot of things came out in the newspapers about Saudi Arab, Kuwait, and Malaysia before that. But very little was said about the way it was handled by our mission in Jordan. Our workers in Jordan violated the Jordanian law, and they went on strike. But it was the

mission which succeeded in pacifying them, took up the matter with the Jordanian authorities, and there was a reasonable solution to that problem. The workers did not get as much as they wanted, but through the efforts of the mission, they were able to strike a balance. So, the other side of the story should be projected.

In one context, capacity building has been referred to. I would like to mention it in another sense: market access. Simultaneously, we have to do our homework as well. Now, even if we get market access for 250 items in the Western world, or in our neighborhood, our purpose will not be served. Our exports are concentrated in a few items. So we need diversification, so that when market access is given, we can take advantage of that.

Now, ambassador Harun ur Rashid mentioned climate change. In this context, prioritization of issues is very important. For the Maldives, the sea level rise figures very prominently and perhaps at the top of their agenda. In all regional and global forums, they are very steadfast on it. Whenever the Nepalese speak in foreign forums abroad, they definitely try to highlight the fact that Nepal has serious structural disadvantage arising out of being a land-locked country. In our context, we should think of prioritization.

Shafiqul Islam

Although we are a democratic country, there is a strong military presence in handling foreign policy. The western nations do not want uniformed people as the head of our missions.

In the PSC, there is a strong Bangla bias against English-medium schools which eliminates many bright candidates from entering Foreign Service. There should be a reevaluation of the PSC exam system.

Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury

The Foreign Ministry has achieved a lot. In the early days of independence, it gained global recognition for Bangladesh; its entry to UN in 1974; election to the UN Security Council against Japan in 1979; developed a strategic relationship with China; became member of the Al Quds Committee; and was elected Chairman of the Group of 77. SAARC was formally launched in Dhaka in 1985, the year when we were elected the president of the UNGA. In 1991, we joined the US against Iraq to liberate Kuwait; became a member in the ASEAN Regional Forum and in 2000 was elected to the UN Security Council for the second time.

There is a great scope for improvement, especially in institutionalizing the implementation of foreign policy. I think this is where the issue of national consensus needs to come. Also, we need to focus more on regional diplomacy. Most of our unresolved issues are with the countries of the region, land boundary with India, maritime boundary with India and Myanmar, sharing of common rivers with India, stranded Pakistanis and the division of assets and liabilities. Success of much of these depends on how our neighbors want to address these issues. Some want to ignore them altogether, while others make preferences of which political force in the country to work with more closely than others. The bottom-line for all political parties should be to remember that success in foreign policy is measured more in finding appropriate solutions to our problems, and not in keeping them alive.

Ambassador Serajul Islam



Foreign policy formulation in Bangladesh is handled very unprofessionally. Foreign Ministry has been deliberately kept weak because of internal

conflicts within the civil bureaucracy. In an age of globalisation, this is suicidal for everywhere foreign affairs is a central focus of governance. There is also great coordination in formulation and implementation of foreign policy issues within the government where all stakeholders are brought into the loop so as to formulate foreign policy issues and implement it in a manner that reflects the best interests of the country.

In Bangladesh, there is need to bring all the stakeholders into the loop for the formulation of foreign policy, like the politicians, the business community, the civil society and the media so that their views are reflected in formulation of foreign policy. Within the Government, there is need for better coordination among the ministries and agencies and here the Foreign Ministry should be given the clear powers of leadership. There is also need for improving recruitment into the Foreign Service cadre for the present quality of Foreign Service cadre leaves a lot to be desired.

Concluding Remarks

Shah Hussain Imam, Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

I can see that you have concretised your concepts since the last roundtable. All this resonates very well with The Daily Star, which has been emphasising upon the urgent need for fine-tuning the foreign policy directions to the changing realities in the region and beyond. We at The Daily Star stand ready to extend our fullest cooperation to the CFAS in organising more such roundtable in the future.

Thank you all very much.