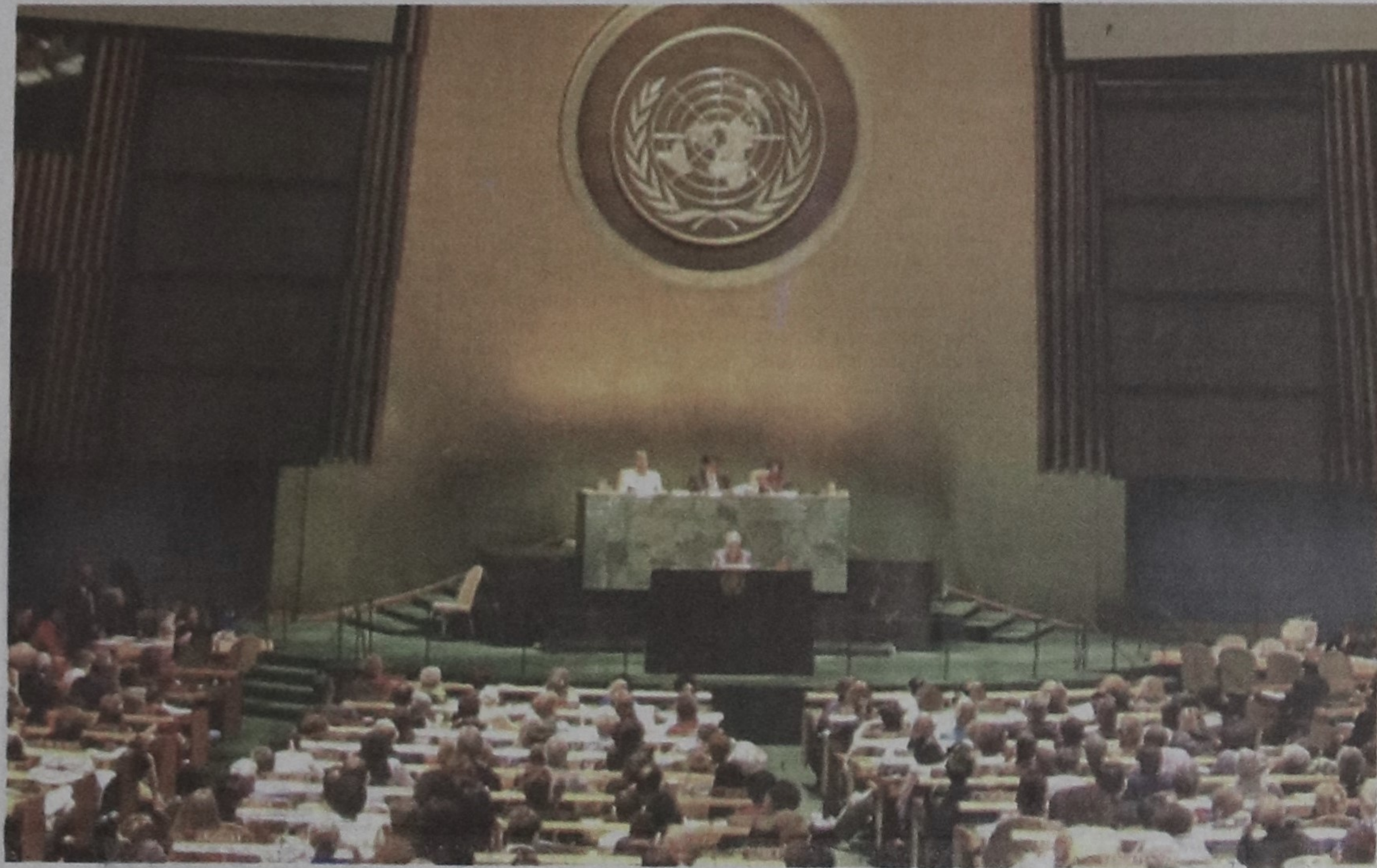


DHAKA MONDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2009

# The task of fine-tuning foreign policy



AMBASSADOR ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

**I**n the Awami League election manifesto 2008, foreign policy was not one of the five priority issues to be addressed once it was elected to form a government. Foreign policy was placed as the last item of the 23 item Block List of Doables. In fact it comes in after the party's policy on Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In the annexure outlining vision 2021 of the party, the authors under the sub-head 'Bangladesh in the Global Arena' in sub item 8(C) states that in 'International affairs, Bangladesh would follow the policy of friendship towards all and malice towards none!'

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in its 36 point election manifesto devotes Para 13 on what its foreign policy would be if it is swept to power. The item highlights various positions it would take to furthering Bangladesh's relations with other countries and International Organizations. It briefly touches on how it intends to take advantage of opportunities provided by global information flows and how it would face the challenge of global warming.

At a time when the people of Bangladesh are being sucked into the whirlpool of globalization and the future of the country is so much dependent on how the Government of the day manages this phenomenon, it is unfortunate that there is so little interest of our major political parties on threats and opportunities presented by the immense changes taking place around the globe. In major countries of the world foreign policy take precedence over many domestic policies and is given priority after the burning issues of the day. And Bangladesh with 150 million or more population is no minor country. A robust foreign policy encompassing all aspects of globalization can always carry forward the electoral vision of growth and economic development of a country. Ten years back, such an electoral posture could be understandable in Bangladesh. But in 2009, this could be akin to almost a political hari-kari.

Historically, Bangladesh foreign policy had always been left to its devices. After our Independence, major policy directive was to secure international recognition of Bangladesh as an independent state. Once this was attained, the policy

implementing apparatus had to work to bring international aid to her suffering masses. In between, the country secured a few positions through elections in International Organizations like a seat in the UN Security Council, a position in ILO Governing Body or a place in WHO executive body. But it never could leverage on its internal strengths. To secure in a coordinated manner an external posture that could achieve some of its foreign policy goals. A major breakthrough for Bangladesh in its external relations was the international acceptance and participation of Bangladesh Armed Forces and Police in UN Peace keeping. This was the result of a deliberate policy decision taken and vigorously followed up. Today the country is enjoying some international goodwill and our Armed Forces also had the opportunity to gain operational experience. The point being made here is that, once a policy is in place, we can swing into action and obtain divi-

dends in the medium and long run for the benefit of the nation.

The future of Bangladesh's foreign policy lies therefore in building on our unique advantages in a time of great change and uncertainty. So far, we have managed our foreign relations especially with our neighbors, in our vicinity and in the world at large. At times we had characterized such management as a 'Look East' policy, whenever we wanted to add credence to specific relations. In

effect by adopting such policies, we have narrowed our options, excluded our strengths and followed a trodden path. The foreign policy cliché: 'friendship with all and malice to none' was current way back in the 1960's almost 50 years ago. We need to now sit down and re-think our foreign policy priorities, enumerate our advantages and design a strategy to achieve specific goals.

Let me begin this exercise by suggesting that we need to first sketch an outline of what Bangladesh stands for. Our War of Liberation in 1971 is a pointer. The people of Bangladesh united then to:

I. Defeat obscurantist forces that dominated people and nation through falsehood and injustice.

II. Defeat the genocidal forces that went out to kill and maim a nation just to perpetuate and unjust system.

III. Defeat the enemy to establish democratic order, establish social justice, human rights and equality before law. It was also to emancipate the people from grinding poverty.

IV. To establish a modern, secular state that speaks on behalf of the marginalized, the disadvantaged and to take steps to restore their legiti-

Let us fast forward to the present time and see what are the changing global realities. The world in 2009 is hurtling towards a global regime that will be:

I. Secular;  
II. Democratic;  
III. Globalized and inter-connected;

IV. Secure from nuclear and non-conventional warfare but faced with military like interventions by non state actors;

V. Immersed in technological advances;

VI. Subject to severe effects of climate change;

VII. Hemmed in by a growing population young in age, educated and connected, who are looking for better opportunities and therefore involved in large scale migration.

It is in this evolving situation that Bangladesh needs to urgently design a new architecture of foreign relations. It needs to spell out strategies that will be used to address these global realities.

What then would be Bangladesh foreign policy goals. Indeed it is our elected parliament along with all foreign policy stake holders who need to design this edifice. Classically, the preservation of our

*But how is Bangladesh prepared to address the new paradigms of foreign policy? Firstly, do we have the leadership in various areas to take on these new challenges. It is too expensive and time demanding for the government to alone preside over these issues. Here we must invite the non-government sector to join hand to build capacities. The Bangladeshi Diaspora must also be co-opted and be a part of this effort.*

mate place in society.

V. To lay the foundation of a just and prosperous society.

If the above salient describes what Bangladesh stands for, then we have to construct our foreign policy which builds on all these elements and more. The image of the country must necessary align itself as much as practicable towards the ethos of our War of Liberation. Our foreign policy must adhere to these noble objectives of what we all represent.

sovereignty and territorial integrity would take precedence over all other goals. This would be followed by the oft repeated goal of pursuing good neighborliness to foster mutually beneficial relations. Advancing relations with major international powers as well as relations with Muslim majority countries and Least Developed Countries would be the next policy priority. Of course all this

CONTINUED ON PAGE 47

