



(L) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina greets Chinese President Xi Jinping with a bouquet of flowers on his arrival at her office on October 15, 2016. Photo: BSS (M) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi wave after the latter reached Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on a two-day visit to Dhaka on June 6, 2015. Photo: PMO (R) Bangladesh's regular participation in the UN peacekeeping missions originates from her constitutional obligations to maintain peace, freedom and justice across the world. PHOTO: MONUSCO/ABEL KAVANAGH

BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY

COMPULSIONS, CONSTRAINTS AND CHOICES

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Policies are ethereal. Instead of a specific set of instructions, it is a general sense of being and a spatial sense of direction as to where we might be heading as a country, an institution, a society and an individual. Foreign policy sits at the heart of the art of statecraft. Its evolution is non-linear. Foreign Policy deals both with the vernacular and the elite and everything that falls in between.

The birth of modern foreign policy and the international legal regime underwriting it started with the Treaty of Westphalia. The Treaty gave shape to the jurisdiction of a very peculiar form of governance never seen before in the world: The Republic. This was the first time the world was experiencing governance based on mutual recognition amongst established status quos and the sovereign universality of law. The jurisprudence of international law, and thus the formulation of "foreign policy" as a definitive subject of governance further evolved and entrenched itself as subjects of public scrutiny and debate as Hugo Grotius adopted the concept of *jus gentium* directly as "international law" and Emer de Vattel articulated the *droits des gens* as benchmarks for interactions at state levels.

Foreign policy is a vast area almost as complex as human psychology. Foreign policy is closely related to the vortex of power – another mercurial construct. It is always a constant struggle to gain and retain power and to be accepted as powerful. All forms of security, sustenance, wealth and wellbeing can be connected to a form of power. A deep understanding of the history, culture and ethnic identities of the human societies – coupled with an ever-increasing understanding of the evolution of the political, economic, social, cultural, technological, environmental and legal nature of the tangible structures that these societies uphold – under the prying eyes of both the mainstream and social media and above all – the people – is what is necessary for contextualising the foreign policy of any country at any given point in time.

leadership. The country's economy has been growing at a sustained rate of more than six percent per annum for the last four decades, and had it not been stifled by the sudden onslaught of the COVID-19 paradox, it would have been lifted to an eight percent paradigm starting 2020. Even after nearly two years of COVID-19-induced constrictions, Bangladesh's economy grew an astonishing 5.2 percent in 2021.

The astute foreign policy dimension of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina not only complements but also acts as a primary vortex for international connectivity, fiscal stability and economic growth. As a sovereign, independent nation-state, Bangladesh is formulating its foreign policy goals and objectives to advance its legitimate national interests based on the core dictum of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, "Friendship to All, Malice to None".

Bangladesh is located at the cusp of the vast North Indian landscape, particularly of Bengal and the Indian seven sisters, i.e., the North-eastern region, coasting on the frontiers of the

for the cause of the liberation war. Bangabandhu believed that without peace and stability, no country could develop or prosper and therefore, he wanted Bangladesh to be an "Island of Peace". Bangabandhu agreed to join the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit held in Lahore in February 1974, and much before that, he joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Bangabandhu's vision was far-reaching. His address at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1974 called for the sharing of technology and resources on a global scale so that the human race could begin to enjoy at least the minimal conditions of a decent life. Till now, Bangladesh's foreign policy centres on the sharing and leveraging of resources in a symbiotic and synergistic manner to create a better future for all of humanity – avoiding confrontations and provocations. To date, Bangladesh is sheltering 1.1 million Rohingyas from Myanmar despite its own constraints of resources – for not only guaranteeing their safe and sustainable return but also to ensure justice and accountability – so that the atrocities which they suffered,

millennia-old value chains of the Indian sub-continent. We have given port access to our land-locked neighbours like Nepal and Bhutan, and we have allowed others to use our communication channels for transporting heavy equipment and aid. We have invited China, Japan and Korea to be our preferred development, trade and technology partners. Our regional and sub-regional organisations and processes, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative, Bangladesh, India and Nepal (BIN) initiative, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM), etc., both overlap and complement each other for creating a space for understanding and negotiation which can transcend national "thought boundaries". So long as the purpose is development and the aim is a legitimate civilian objective, we are fully prepared to allow everyone to join hands with us.

active in all United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) led negotiations. As one of the most vulnerable countries, Bangladesh has been at the forefront to create comprehensive global action to adhere to climate accords. Bangladesh is leading the Climate Vulnerability Forum (CVF) – an organisation of more than one billion people of the world's most vulnerable countries – for the second time.

In the last two years, we have launched two specific programmes from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We have consolidated economic diplomacy as a foreign policy vertical, and we have launched public diplomacy as a priority project.

We envisage our engagements with the complex political theatre of the world in the thematic framework of technology, markets, and organisations which encapsulates the common threads of economy and ecology to secure governance priorities. To multiply the outcome of the economic diplomacy, Bangladesh is designing "systems" with flexible and adaptable designs; building "infrastructures" with the capacity to host multi-level networks; and developing "capabilities" to create and sustain superior technological efficiency. Two of the core areas of our economic diplomacy focus are: (a) the ICT sector – inspired by the ICT Advisor to the Prime Minister Sajeeb Wazed Joy, and (b) the Blue Economy sector.

To support and project the achievements of Bangladesh foreign policy goals, enhance national security and advance national interest, the Foreign Office has adopted a policy of "public diplomacy" outreach through the foreign office and its missions across the world. Amidst the growing global threat of terrorism and violent extremism, and an ever-expanding horizon for economic opportunities, various public diplomacy tools will gradually be installed to propagate the secular values of the country emanating from our glorious war of liberation and our continued struggle for democracy, justice and development.

The world should have been perfect, but it is not. We do not expect it to be, either. But there needs to be a way to deal with the constraints – like our positioning in the Ease of doing business index or the ratings from international agencies. Let me borrow a term from the marketing textbooks here: the Aspirational Sub-Class! We have referent groups and natural groups of countries, but where we wish to belong is our aspirational group. If not AAA, we wish to be a BBB+ at the least – because our productive capabilities say so. More than sixty percent of a manufactured good's value lies in its brand equity – which is always underwritten by research and innovation. The whole of the design space in ICT is equity. More labs and investments are needed in the design space so that our youth know how to huddle. I believe that the days of remaining constrained with purchased technology are over.

Bangladesh Foreign Policy is now at a critical juncture in time. Choices abound, and not all are optimised for the attainment of our national priorities. We must awaken ourselves to understand that a new era has already begun. We will see an AI-driven world order within a very short period – possibly in our own lifetime. What ought to be our preferred behaviour for attaining what we desire would be calculated in numbers and percentiles. Despite these dire shifts in our thought processing capabilities, I wish to give empathy, love and other positive human emotions a chance. Our enemies are hunger, disease, malnutrition, ignorance, intolerance and hatred. I would like to see a world where tanks and guns would give way to the roses. It is a beautiful world. Let us all see with open eyes and warm hearts. Joy Bangla. Joy Bangabandhu.

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Bangabandhu at OIC Summit in Lahore, 1974.

Bay of Bengal funnel and touching the northwest tip of the troubled Myanmar territories. Its geo-spatial triangulations make it strategically important for invariably all major powers of the world. Apart from its regional development partners and neighbours, global warming and a rising sea level, Bangladesh also hosts two intersecting strategic "constructs" crossing their tactical pathways across the cone of the Bay of Bengal – and the landmass that is Bangladesh, i.e., the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI). On top, we are blessed with more than 160 million upwardly mobile and highly ambitious men and women whose median age is 27.6 years. As state-level functionaries and government operators, we are continually challenged with finding the right mix of both the head and the heart to keep this population engaged – a part of them globally.

Bangladesh as a country was conceived from the highest ideals imaginable by humans – ideas of freedom, democracy, equality, justice and inclusivity. Amongst these, the concept of democracy was the primary driving force even for the very sovereignty and independence of the country. For a war-ravaged country, the first challenge was to achieve recognition from the international community and rebuild the economy to feed 75 million people. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman manoeuvred his foreign policy to forge a bipartisan position in matters related to international politics. Safeguarding the national interest and sovereignty of the country was his first and foremost concern. While strengthening ties with his trusted friend India and Indira Gandhi, and the erstwhile USSR – which vouchsafed the birth of the country itself with its United Nations Security Council (UNSC) veto power, Bangabandhu reached out to both the USA and China despite their institutionalised opposition

just like those sustained by the Bengalis in 1971, never happen again, anywhere. Bangladesh's foreign policy priorities emanate from a deep-rooted wish for synchronising our efforts with all our neighbours and partners in the geosphere that we share. True to the election manifesto of 2008, Bangladesh has already reached the financial strength of a stable lower middle-income country. We aspire to become a developed country by 2041, and we are working on the Delta Plan for 2100. Pragmatism, peace and stability, humanitarian responsibilities, innovation, and alliance building are some of our instruments of choice.

Bangladesh, under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, pursues a value-based foreign policy. Despite the resource constraints, the foreign policy and the Foreign Office have stood up to the challenge. For decades, the Foreign Ministry was a rehab for the assassins of the Father of the Nation, but no more. With zero tolerance for terrorism, stabilising the economy and poverty alleviation remain our foremost priority. Our foreign policy priorities intend to complement this objective with a greater depth in external trading – coupled with a greater inflow of foreign remittance. During the next few years, we expect to gain: (a) equitable market access, (b) expansion of our export basket, (c) transfer of critical technologies, and (d) employment of our professionals and workers in foreign economies. We have expanded our global footprint 1.4 times in the last ten years, and now we have 78 odd missions and expanding!

Our priority is our immediate neighbourhood. We have resolved the seven-decade-old land boundary issues with India. We have delimited our maritime boundary with both India and Myanmar by means of arbitration and application of the principles of law. We have embarked on reviving the land and river routes that connected the



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressing the United Nations in October, 1974.

Bangladesh started with scorched earth, three million dead bodies and two hundred thousand women who were raped. On 16 December 1971, there was nothing but an indomitable resolve to survive the harsh winters of December. Fifty years have passed since then, and what some "foreign policy" pundits once referred to as a basket case with no hope of survival has now evolved into a "development miracle" and a "land of opportunity" under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the able daughter of the assassinated Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Thanks to a strong agricultural sector; a rapidly expanding RMG-led production and export; an unbroken remittance inflow – coupled with robust structural reforms – expanding and reconfiguring public sector investments into the formation of infrastructure assets; diversification of exports – to higher-value brands and integration of essentially middleware design and software components, have contributed to Bangladesh's journey in becoming an epic saga of determined and charismatic