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GLOBAL POWER PLAY IN BANGLADESH’S ELECTIONS

‘The US will have to bypass India’s concern to ensure free and fair elections’

Anu Anwar, non-resident associate at Harvard University and PhD candidate at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star about the changing geopolitical stakes in Bangladesh.

Can you explain the logic behind US foreign policy in Bangladesh and the significance of the measures taken before the election?

Under the Biden administration’s latest Indo-Pacific strategy, published in February 2022, “free and open Indo-Pacific” is one of the five key pillars that envisions strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, and accountable democratic governance across the region. Bangladesh clearly falls short in these democratic and accountability metrics. Bangladesh’s last two national elections were anything but fair! No institutions are left to check the government and balance the domestic power dynamic. This vacuum enabled the government to tamper with the election and get away with it in 2014 and 2018.

Recent developments suggest the government could resort to the playbook of the past two elections. From Washington’s perspective, these run counter to the objectives of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Thus, the US has embarked on a series of punitive and incentive measures aiming to yield benefits in restoring democracy in Bangladesh. Last year, a sanction was imposed on RAB on the grounds of human rights violation, and now the visa restrictions.

The US’s effort appears as the only effective mechanism that stands between vote rigging and the government. Many government officials and politicians have assets in the US, and their family members live in the US. If their visa is rejected, they will not only be unable to travel to the US. This might also affect their travel to other Western countries, such as Five Eyes, that share intelligence exclusively among the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This may create a deterrence effect on those officials not to engage in obstructions of free, fair elections. So, it may create a deterrence effect from engaging in undemocratic actions, but it’s insufficient.

What impact can US foreign policy have on Bangladesh’s upcoming elections, if any?

In my opinion, the visa policy can create a marginal effect on the upcoming election. Those who were rampant in the last two elections in vote rigging might give a second thought if they plan to visit the US. However, over the last 15 years of malpractice, many officials and politicians reached a point of no return in terms of their corruption and vengeance toward the opposition. They might fear that losing power will cost them more than obtaining a US visa. So, for their own sake, they will do all they can to keep the government in power.

But the visa policy is just one of the components of the overall US policy towards Bangladesh. The US, as a superpower, has many tools in its toolkit. It remains to be seen how far Washington is willing to go.

What’s at stake for the US regarding the elections in Bangladesh? What makes Bangladesh significant in the US’ current foreign policy?

The US is showing relatively much more interest in this election than in 2014, or 2018, when they largely sided with India’s stand. We did not see US efforts on this scale. Three things make this election different: changing geopolitics, the Biden administration, and public sentiment in Bangladesh.

First, the world is gradually transitioning to a bipolar world where the China and Russia axis persistently challenge US primacy and they complement each other for regional influence. When it comes to the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific, Bangladesh is strategically well-positioned due to its proximity to the Bay of Bengal and China-India-Myanmar. As the world’s eighth largest country by population and the second-largest economy in South Asia,

If in 2018, when ties were relatively weaker, the US considered India’s position, I would think the US would consider India’s position with much greater importance in the current South Asia policy. Frankly, if the US is committed to ensuring a free-fair election, it would require to bypass India’s concern, but I am unsure if the US is willing to go that far. Especially, given the strong Indian lobby in Washington and US willingness to accommodate India almost unquestionably.



Anu Anwar

Bangladesh has become a regional player.

The Biden administration, unlike Trump, prioritises value-based foreign policy for which Washington intends to play a role in Bangladesh’s democratisation process. Third, the US is capitalising on the majority of the Bangladeshis’ aspiration for the right to vote, which is good for US public diplomacy but also for Bangladesh itself.

What are the implications of Bangladesh’s participation in BRI and bilateral ties with China in the current geopolitical context?

Bangladesh’s BRI participation brought new investment, increased trade volume, and enhanced bilateral ties with China. China is also an opportunity for the government to diversify its international partners and harness infrastructure and economic development with Chinese assistance. Since other great powers showed little interest in Bangladesh, India exploited Bangladesh’s isolation for decades towards Delhi’s end. China-Bangladesh relations help Dhaka to balance out India’s hegemonic dictum over Bangladesh.

In recent years, BRI has come under criticism. In particular, US’s skepticism about the BRI warranted the Bangladesh government to enhance its scrutinisation of the BRI projects. But Bangladesh’s highest loan is to the World Bank (36 percent), Japan (19 percent), and ADB (23 percent); China accounts for less than seven percent of Bangladesh’s total loan. So, if the government keeps this cautionary measure in place, Bangladesh will remain in the safe zone.

I think the real problem is the party-to-party connection between Awami League and the Chinese Communist Party, as recent developments in Bangladesh would suggest the former is keen to emulate the latter’s many elements of a one-party state. This complicates geopolitics for

Bangladesh as, at least rhetorically, the Biden administration defined the world as autocracy vs democracy. The incumbent government falls under the autocratic bloc, which is why Bangladesh was not even invited to any of the two US-led democratic summits.

Does the current India-US relationship have any strategic implications for Bangladesh and the upcoming elections?

One of the main problems with the US policy towards Bangladesh has historically been Washington’s approach to seeing Bangladesh through the eyes of other regional countries. In the past, it was Pakistan, but since 9/11, the US has started outsourcing its Bangladesh policy to India. This undermined US-Bangladesh relations and put an obstacle to the US policy towards Bangladesh.

US-India relations are warmer now than in 2018. So, if in 2018, when ties were relatively weaker, the US considered India’s position, I would think the US would consider India’s position with much greater importance in the current South Asia policy. Frankly, if the US is committed to ensuring a free-fair election, it would require bypassing India’s concern, but I am unsure if the US is willing to go that far. Especially, given the strong Indian lobby in Washington and US willingness to accommodate India almost unquestionably. Besides, two competing elements of the US foreign policy – “realpolitik” and “value” constantly clash, and there is no precedence where “value” wins over “realpolitik.”

The US defines its relations with India under a realpolitik framework, whereas its only value is Bangladesh. The change the US might want to see in Bangladesh is just a component of its border security policy regarding India. So, in this current geopolitical context, I do not see a prospect of a US policy that would run counter to US-India relations. That being said, we should be mindful of the constantly changing nature of the geopolitical landscape in which nothing is impossible.

How can Bangladesh strategically leverage its relations with China, India, and the US?

Bangladesh would need to be realistic in its strategic positioning vis-à-vis China-India and the US. On the economic front, it is undeniable that China is a far better opportunity than India, but the US is indispensable. Not only is the US the largest export market and investor in Bangladesh, but the US has greater leverage over the international financial system through the US dollar, SWIFT code, and many other means. Thus, Bangladesh cannot afford to lose the benefit of the “system effect” by alienating the US.

On the security and strategic front, the calculation is much more complex. If Bangladesh decides to ally either with India or China fully, that will create a regional security dilemma as aligning entirely with one will be perceived by the other as a threat. India itself is struggling to halt China’s border encroachment, not to mention two fronts of threats vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. On the other hand, China has the capacity, but there is no precedent that China extended its security umbrella to any country. Besides, in the current geopolitical calculation, China favours Myanmar and Pakistan over Bangladesh regarding its Southern Asia strategy. That leaves the US as Bangladesh’s only option, but the US will never prioritise Bangladesh over nuclear power India.

Therefore, Bangladesh’s strategic posturing should be centered on enhancing its own capacity to achieve an equilibrium in regional power dynamics. The status of strategic parity will provide Bangladesh a unique leverage at the bargaining table – based on which Dhaka could engage with China, India, and the US as suits its national interest.

Bangladesh elections and China-India rivalry



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The recent presidential election in the Maldives reflected a theatre for India-China competition, with the president-elect, Mohamed Muiz, making “India out” a central theme in his campaign. We also witnessed the two major powers jockeying for influence in the Nepalese election in 2022. While the political landscape in Bangladesh differs from that of its two South Asian neighbours, the India-China contest remains a crucial factor. Over the course of the past 15 years, both countries have deepened their stakes in Bangladesh, which is clearly evident in the growing geopolitical tension surrounding the upcoming election.

China is now Bangladesh’s largest trade partner, with bilateral trade currently valued at \$25 billion. Since joining China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016, China has committed over \$38 billion in investments to Bangladesh. The country is second among all sources of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, during the current regime’s tenure, China-Bangladesh defence cooperation has reached unprecedented levels. China has maintained its position as the chief supplier of light weapons to Bangladesh since the 1970s, with over 70 percent of Bangladesh’s weapons procurement between 2015 and 2022 originating from China, according to SIPRI. Notably, China has been instrumental in the construction of Bangladesh’s first submarine base, the BNS Sheikh Hasina, with a total investment of \$1.2 billion, located in Pekua within Cox’s Bazaar.

China’s approach to Bangladesh during the ruling Awami League’s regime can be summarised as bolstering economic ties while refraining from criticising democratic backsliding in the country. China was the first country to welcome the AL government after the one-sided 2014 elections, and it didn’t hesitate to congratulate them on their big win in the equally controversial 2018 elections.

Furthermore, unlike economic aid from the US and Europe, Chinese investments in Bangladesh’s infrastructure come without conditions related to human rights, good governance, or democracy. As a result, this has allowed the AL government to lessen its dependence on Western donors.

Regarding the forthcoming election, China has consistently adhered to a stance that aligns with its overarching strategy, as aptly articulated by Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Yao Wen, who stated, “Our policy always remains the same. China never intervenes in other country’s internal issues. I can say the election is the internal affairs of Bangladesh. It has to be decided by the Bangladesh people.”

China also opposes any external pressure exerted by the United States concerning the election. This stance is endorsed at the highest level of Chinese leadership. On August 23, 2023, during a meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on the sidelines of the BRICS summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated, according to a readout from China’s foreign ministry, that China supports Bangladesh in “opposing external interference” and that Beijing will collaborate with Dhaka to mutually support their core interests.

In the upcoming election, if the ruling party emerges victorious, Chinese influence may strengthen even further. Conversely, if the AL

loses, and the opposition BNP comes to power, there is relatively minimal risk for China to lose its stake, given the historically favourable relations between BNP and China.

Now, let’s delve deeper into India’s interests in Bangladesh’s upcoming election. As its largest neighbour, India undeniably holds a substantial stake in the electoral proceedings. The increasing asymmetrical power dynamics between these two nations have brought this influence into sharper focus.

In his book titled “1971-2021: Bangladesh-Bharat Shomporker Ponchash Bochor” (1971-2021: 50 years of Bangladesh-India relations), former Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary Tuhid Hossain has shed light on the nature of the deepening political reliance on India. He articulates, “It is widely believed that no one can ascend to the throne of Bangladesh without India’s approval. Statements supporting this notion have emanated from senior political figures on occasion. Many believe that India’s consent is a prerequisite for appointments to key positions within Bangladesh. India’s direct involvement in legitimising the 2014 election is well-documented. It was so apparent that even the leaders of the political party (the BNP), whose political foundation is rooted in anti-Indianism, had to reach out to India in an attempt to gain favour ahead of the 2018 election, although their

expressed interest in ensuring violence-free and democratic national elections in Bangladesh, aligning with the US stance. Recent discussions between Indian and US security establishments suggest, according to Hazra, a potential collaborative effort on election issues. This marks a departure from the 2018 elections when India and the US held divergent views. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Modi’s swift congratulations to Prime Minister Hasina for her victory helped alleviate international criticism of the election’s conduct.

Yet it is worth noting that India has refrained from publicly responding to the growing pressure exerted by the United States on Bangladesh, including visa measures, aimed at ensuring a free, fair, and participatory election.

Professor Ali Riaz offers three possible explanations for India’s deliberate silence: “Firstly, India may be comfortable with the existing political status quo, as demonstrated by its tacit support for Prime Minister Hasina amid US concerns about democratic erosion. Secondly, India might not oppose US pressure on Bangladesh, recognising that it could make Hasina more dependent on India as a mediator between her government and the United States. Lastly, India seems to acknowledge its diminishing role in Bangladeshi politics amid the US-China geopolitical rivalry, making it a secondary external actor in the region.”

Regardless of the reasons behind India’s muted response, it’s evident that the US has shifted its perspective away from viewing the Bangladesh issue solely through the Indian lens. Instead, its emphasis on promoting democracy in Bangladesh, primarily driven by the aim to counteract China’s growing influence in the country, will significantly influence



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endeavours ultimately yielded no success.”

India’s growing influence has fostered stronger bilateral ties with the AL-led Bangladesh government, characterised by terms like “very special relationship,” “golden chapter,” and “model for the entire region.” The AL government has addressed India’s security concerns, particularly access to northeastern India, through connectivity projects and action against anti-India insurgent groups. In return, India has steadfastly supported the AL government, overlooking democratic setbacks in Bangladesh. As regards the upcoming election, a significant portion of the Indian media and think tanks continue to advocate support for the current regime.

Nevertheless, some experts believe that India has adopted a different stance towards the 2024 elections.

Indicating this changed position, Indian columnist Arkoprabho Hazra wrote in *The Diplomat*, “India is taking a much more inclusive approach toward the 2024 Bangladesh national elections, rather than putting all its bets on the Awami League as seen in the past.”

He emphasised that India has

India’s stance on the 2024 elections in Bangladesh.

India finds itself in a complex and delicate position. There is unease over Bangladesh’s growing reliance on China for economic aid and infrastructure development, at times straining the India-Bangladesh relationship. Additionally, there is apprehension that excessive pressure from the US on election-related matters could lead Bangladesh closer to China.

However, Michael Kugelman, director of the Wilson Centre’s South Asia Institute, suggested in an interview with *Prothom Alo* that the US believes India, by leveraging its influence over Bangladesh, can steer it away from such an alignment. Furthermore, the current regime in Bangladesh expects India to advocate for Sheikh Hasina’s government with the Biden administration.

India’s response to these competing interests will be a pivotal factor in the upcoming elections, the outcome of which carries significant implications not only for Bangladesh but also for the Bay of Bengal region, a critical component of the global geopolitical hotspot, the Indo-Pacific.

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