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Foreign policy quandary for Bangladesh: 'Umbilical' or 'geopolitical'?

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Bangladesh's foreign inclinations increasingly sway between "umbilical" and "geopolitical" poles, as principles, policies and preferences compete for priority. Their triggers become "umbilical" if, for example, they drove the country's independence (the

TUSSLING TERRITORY: SWAYING OVER THE BAY

Even embryonic Bangladesh faced both power rivalry and economic developmental pressures. "Geopolitics" riddled the Bay of Bengal during December 1971, when Task Force 74 (TF74) was redeployed by the US Seventh Fleet to monitor Soviet ships (it was



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Furious Cold War vibes greeted Bangladesh's birth.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

country's first four principles) or reflect values (joining the Muslim ummah); or embrace "geopolitics" if they rebound off regional/global power contests. Whether "internal" or "external", only with experience can these catalysers thrive. How, then, has Bangladesh jostled between them over 52 years?

first invoked in 1944 to mobilise what became today's AUKUS group: Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States). Both fleets carried guided and gun destroyers, and included a nuclear-fitted submarine. They were not there because China left the Soviet camp and joined the United States, but today the

Bay is monitored in case China's competition with the United States may flare up. Whereas China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) links Asia with Africa and Europe over land and sea seeking regional integration, trade, and growth, the United States has at least two fronts: the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), targeting peace, stability, and deterrence in a free and open but militarily secured Indo Pacific, and its Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) promoting fair trade but probing security-laden supply-chains, infrastructure, and clean energy and de-carbonisation.

Furious Cold War vibes greeted Bangladesh's birth. From an Atlantic/European platform highlighted by creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, the "West's" outward spread produced the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Baghdad Pact in 1955 (the latter becoming the Central Treaty Organization, or CENTO in 1959). Both Indian and Pacific oceans fell within the Seventh Fleet jurisdiction, just as establishing its Indian Ocean base in Diego Garcia complicated Bangladesh's neighbourhood early in the 1970s.

"Eastern" Cold War interests tip-toed the "Western". The Soviet Union's "20 year friendship treaty" with China in April 1950 was institutionalised through the Warsaw Pact in

1955, before being extended to India in August 1971 (compromising India's non-alignment identity). Tensions prevailed on another front. China Soviet skirmishes over the Ussuri River in 1969 allowed US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger the opportunity to divide communism. Using "ping-pong" diplomacy from April 1971, this German-born, realpolitik-laced statesman cuddled China so much as to camouflage Bangladesh's plight. Complementing the "carrot" of Soviet "20 year friendship treaties" was a Soviet "stick". This was the Brezhnev Doctrine, formulated to thwart Czech dissidents in 1968, it infamously justified Afghanistan's invasion in 1978. Bangladesh's "umbilical" urgencies (consequences of 1970 cyclone, utter poverty, famine, and war destruction), left it as only a "geopolitics" spectator.

WINDS OF CHANGE

Three change agents threatened Bangladesh's "umbilical" credentials, that is, the four founding principles (democracy, nationalism, secularity, and socialism, in alphabetical order). The most dramatic of them assassinated Founding Father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975. A *volte face* of loyalty followed: democracy was nipped by 15 odd years of military intervention; nationalism became more rhetorical than functional

(for reasons discussed below); secularism was replaced, through Article 2A of the June 1978 constitutional amendment, by an "Islamic republic" (to be restored, alongside Islam, as a constitutional tenet by the Supreme Court in 2010); and socialism was swallowed by two independent and community-based change-agents.

Both change-agents carried multilateral or international dimensions. One was microfinance. Its seeds were sown, not in metropolises, where modern change-agents typically begin, but across a sprawling countryside supplying four-fifths of both the country's population and export income (through jute). Whereas famine gripped male-dominated farming, women emerged as change-harbingers. Microfinance made them socioeconomic catalysers due to the contributions of Fazle Hasan Abed and Muhammad Yunus.

The other change-agent reflected a World Bank worry independently solved by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The worry: how could jute exports of the world's first "basket-case" country be salvaged from plastic? The unwitting solution: the 1974 Multi Fiber Agreement (MFA), a measure helping less developed countries expand RMG (ready-made garment)

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setting standards



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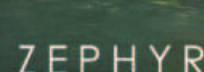
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