

Trump 2.0 and the future of Bangladesh-US defence relations

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Two months away from his second inauguration, Donald Trump aspires to be more protectionist to “Make America Great Again” this time. In his previous term, Trump declared the Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2019, citing this region as “the single most consequential region for America’s future.”

With the recent change in the administration in Bangladesh and the upcoming change in the United States, there is a growing need for reassessing the Bangladesh-US defence relations from a critical perspective. In the forthcoming years, the Indo-Pacific Strategy will be a key cornerstone for the US in engaging with Indo-Pacific nations. Hence, it has become imperative to look into and analyse what kind of defence ties may evolve between the two countries and why Bangladesh may face a dilemma while hedging between the US and China to maintain the ties under the second Trump presidency.

Before deep diving into the defence dynamics, we must take a look at why

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Bangladesh is an inevitable player for the global powers in the region. Regarding the Indo-Pacific geopolitics, Bangladesh is deemed a strategic linchpin due to its crucial location that connects South Asia with Southeast Asia. Its geographic location in the heart of the Bay of Bengal region has turned it from a mere regional player to a vital strategic partner for major global powers—the US, the

unveiled in April 2023, echoes the country’s nuanced approach to regional politics. The country champions an all-inclusive approach, accentuating regional cooperation and stability over strategic competition. Bangladesh is also projected to become a trillion-dollar economy by 2040, sitting at the intersection of major global markets with massive potential. Yet, per the World Bank

worked on a wide array of security issues, including maritime security, border security, counterterrorism, peacekeeping, defence purchase, and defence capability building. In recent times, the countries have developed a trustworthy relationship that is founded on shared values regarding a free and open Indo-Pacific. According to the US Department of State, Bangladesh has received \$78.45 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and \$14.5 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) assistance since 2014. With the US’s assistance, Bangladesh has acquired patrol boats for its army, navy and coast guard, as well as mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles for international peacekeeping missions. In two phases, Bangladesh received 50 MRAPs under the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) programme in 2019 to provide additional safety to its peacekeeping troops in Mali. Additionally, the US Army delivered 46 additional MRAPs with 11 mine rollers to Bangladesh in 2021.

Bangladesh also received two Hamilton-class cutters previously owned by the US Coast Guard under the EDA programme in 2013 and 2015. These naval assets are playing a crucial role in providing security to Bangladesh’s maritime territory and ensuring safe passage for foreign vessels. In FY2021, the US approved the permanent export of over \$14 million in defence articles to Bangladesh under the Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) mechanism. The items include aircraft, assault rifles, military electronics, ground vehicles, and fire control, laser, imaging and guidance equipment for the military.

Under the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), the US has contributed nearly \$44 million since 2005 to support training and equipment upgrades to improve Bangladesh’s peacekeeping capabilities. Besides, the countries have been participating in security dialogues and joint exercises like Exercise Tiger Shark, CARAT, Exercise Shanti Doot, and Exercise Pacific Angel for years. These joint initiatives aim to expand partnerships in humanitarian and security aspects between the two countries and the region.

Despite numerous sectors of cooperation between Bangladesh and the US, there have been concerns regarding the former country’s state of democracy and human rights during the Sheikh Hasina regime. However,

Bangladesh has embarked on a new journey towards democracy and prosperity following the fall of the Hasina regime as the result of a student-led mass uprising in July 2024.

Conversely, the change in the US administration may corner Bangladesh to limit its military ties with China, which supplies most of its defence equipment. During Trump’s first tenure, the US tried to use defence diplomacy to “woo” Bangladesh away from China. The US Secretary of Defence at the time, Mark Esper phoned former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, proposing to help modernise Bangladesh’s military by 2030. The US offered Apache attack helicopters and missiles during that time. However, no major arms sales deal was formalised during Trump’s first tenure. Bangladesh abandoned arms purchases from the US due to its stringent policies attached to arms use under the ACSA and GSOMIA agreements.

There is a strong possibility of the revival of talks between the two countries during the second Trump presidency, possibly including the signing of these agreements. However, Bangladesh may not opt for expensive US defence equipment to avoid increasing the burden on its plunging foreign exchange reserves.

The acquisition of two Hamilton-class cutters in 2013 and 2015 and the authorisation of over \$14 million in defence articles to Bangladesh through DCS in FY2021 demonstrates the US’s commitment to the military modernisation of Bangladesh. Yet, in the context of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, this defence rapport is palpable to be more complex in the coming days. Bangladesh’s strategic hedging between the US and China has become increasingly precarious. Its hefty reliance on Chinese military equipment could be a ground of contention with the Trump administration, which is likely to be confrontational against China this time.

However, the success of future defence relations will widely depend on how these countries manage the competing priorities. For Bangladesh, upholding strategic autonomy while benefiting from US military cooperation without alienating China is going to be an arduous challenge. For the US, on the other hand, the challenge lies in offering attractive defence partnerships that acknowledge Bangladesh’s strategic concerns and economic constraints.

Why is Elon Musk all over US politics?



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If there’s one man who’s been everywhere in the news since Donald Trump won the election, it’s the business tycoon Elon Musk with a MAGA hat on his head, wearing the ecstatic smile of a man who just won his way into ultimate power. JD Vance, the actual vice president-elect, appears not nearly as close to Trump as Musk. As Trump watched himself win the elections in Mar-a-Lago, it was Musk sitting at his arm’s length.

Musk helped Trump win the White House by not only pumping the campaign with reportedly \$130 million but also dedicating his platform X as a MAGA megaphone. Offline, Musk funded advertising and get-out-the-vote operations, winning over conservative communities including even Amish groups in Pennsylvania. He’s the richest man in the world, and with the upcoming Trump presidency, he’s poised to win even more.

As the US president-elect announced his cabinet nominations, he made an expected announcement: Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy to lead a new department called the Department of Government Efficiency. It is an unusual appointment—no high profile billionaire like Musk has been so overtly involved in political decision-making—but Trump had vowed, during his campaign, to make Musk the head of a new “government efficiency commission” with the power to recommend wide-ranging cuts at federal agencies and changes to federal rules. Likewise, Musk attended rallies and has cast his plans to optimise government efficiency in ways never seen before, reiterating his hopes of colonising Mars one day. The questions that most political analysts and the media seem to be grappling with, is how and why Elon Musk has emerged as the second main figure in US politics since the elections. For his progressive pariahs, the explanation is quite simple, Musk is there for what he does best: business.

Elon Musk has a religious following of people who espouse his ideology, such as his belief that settling other planets is essential if humans are to avoid extinction through a large asteroid colliding with Earth. Many of his supporters, especially in the right-wing, have long believed in an extension of “manifest destiny” to outer space. Musk was perceived as a contrarian and odd foil to the political scene with the Democrats, but now with Donald Trump’s popular vote win, it is more likely that his view regarding the regulatory state being not only a threat to his business but also humanity, resonates with the masses in the US.

And the fact of the matter is that Musk has always been a powerful backer; he historically backed the Democrats. His companies have had contracts with the federal government. SpaceX dictates NASA’s rocket launch schedule, surpassing Boeing as a major contractor. The Department of Defence depends on him for satellites. The root cause of Musk’s rise to Trump’s biggest political ally lies in the fact that his backing of the incumbent president did not serve him. Musk voted for Joe Biden in 2020. Biden and Musk shared many policy objectives, specifically investment in green energy.

Then his takeover of Twitter in 2022 went through rounds of legal battles and Biden snubbed Tesla and backed unions. Biden even pushed for a bill to benefit EVs that are unionised, at the expense of those that are not: Tesla. At the time, in 2022, even *The New York Times*—which is generally critical of Musk—wrote, “Biden’s beef with Musk seems to be a big missed opportunity—politically.”

In December 2023, Federal Communications Commissions (FCC) had rejected \$886 million in subsidies to Starlink, the satellite internet services that oversees SpaceX. Musk increasingly grew frustrated with the government, and wrote on X, that SpaceX would reach Mars sooner,

“as long as it is not smothered by bureaucracy.” Beyond SpaceX, Musk has also had no shortage of run-ins with the US federal government’s regulatory agencies. Musk’s plan to turn Tesla into a producer of driverless vehicles, Autopilot—which Trump is a proponent of—has run into major regulatory obstacles after it was found that the driver-assisted version of Autopilot caused hundreds of crashes and dozens of fatalities.

But now Musk has a way out of his own regulatory headaches as he can influence who’s in charge of what in the government through DOGE, which is formed on that very premise of ending government bureaucracy; in other words, it helps Musk get what he wants, and get it faster. The fact that it’s not a government department but “advisory group” allows Musk to dodge the federal code’s primary conflict of interest law, which bans government employees from participating in government matters in which they have financial stakes. Elon Musk has said he plans to slash \$2 trillion from the federal budget to make it more effective, but by law, he doesn’t have the power to do that. But he can influence it as an “adviser.” And he’s been influencing quite a bit so far. On November 18, President-elect Trump nominated Brendan Carr—a

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Republican official who has been outspoken in his support of Elon Musk’s businesses to lead the FCC—suggesting he could get the financial benefits. Besides, Musk’s SpaceX already stands to gain billions from federal contracts in the coming years, and a new mission to Mars—which would be more easily approved under the Trump administration—would only make that federal piggy bank wider.

When campaigning for Trump, Musk had posted on X, “Vote for @donal trump if you want humanity to make it to Mars.”

Musk’s bet on Trump has already benefited him. Tesla’s share price has been up 50 percent since Trump’s win. According to Tesla’s SEC filings, Musk owns about 715 shares, so that itself, when combined with the rise

joined in a call Trump had with Turkey’s Erdogan, and his general involvement in it all, raises suspicions.

Another report by *The New York Times*, right after Trump’s win and before Musk’s appointment to DOGE, revealed that the SpaceX CEO wanted Trump to hire employees from his rocket company as top government officials, including at

Bessent for the role, to which he replied, that “Bessent is a business-as-usual choice, whereas (Lutnick) will actually enact change.” For context, Lutnick is more on board with Trump’s tariff policies than Bessent, who’s considered a moderate.

Trump’s proposed tariffs on China, where Tesla has the biggest factory, are likely to benefit Musk more than



Elon Musk at an event in support of Donald Trump at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center in Oaks, Pennsylvania, US on October 18, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

in share price, would amount to \$50 billion. So whether his poker move on Donald Trump works out in the long run or not, the vast sum he’s gained already covers not only what he spent on the President-elect, but also the \$44 billion that Musk and a group of investors poured into Twitter two years ago.

The world’s richest man’s side hustle as shadow vice president of the US is even extended to foreign policy as well. He has been a key player both in Ukraine’s war against Russia; Starlink satellites operated by Musk’s company SpaceX have provided internet connectivity to Ukraine’s war effort. But Musk has feuded with Zelensky after he suggested a controversial peace proposal where Russia retain control over Crimea, which it illegally annexed in 2014. He also suggested that Ukraine drop its bid to join NATO. It’s unclear how much political influence he would have on Trump’s policies regarding Russia and Ukraine, but Musk also

the Department of Defense. DOGE keeps Musk an outsider by law, but judging by the nature of his relationship with Trump, he will have a lot of inner political influence in the upcoming days—more than say, a member of Congress—but the breadth and longevity of that remains to be seen. Trump and Musk are both unpredictable and eccentric by nature. Last week, friction unraveled between Musk and Boris Ephshteyn—a top adviser who’s pushed for Cabinet picks that include the attorney general nominee, Matt Gaetz. Axios reported that the disagreement exploded at a dinner table at Mar-a-Lago and Musk accused Ephshteyn of leaking details of Trump’s transition—including personnel picks—to the media.

Musk is now reportedly throwing his weight behind Trump’s transition co-chair Howard Lutnick, the CEO of Wall Street firm Cantor Fitzgerald for Treasury secretary. On X, investor Kyle Bass wanted fund manager Scott

hurt him. It would bar cheaper EVs from China making it into the US, and Tesla, which makes cars in the US for the domestic market, stands to gain from it. But foreign policy over China, could create tensions in the bromance between Musk and Trump. Musk makes cars in Shanghai for the Chinese domestic market too. By 2022, China accounted for about 22 percent of Tesla’s total revenues. While many analysts believe that Musk’s role in Trump’s China policies would lead to an eventual fall-out, it could also be possible that Trump would want to keep Musk on the side—even if it means falling out with his security hawks in the foreign policy department—given the wealth of resources Musk has to denigrate an opponent.

The night Donald Trump won the election, he said, “We have to protect our geniuses. We don’t have any of them.” And Elon Musk is a genius because he managed to get his way at the end of the day.