

Bangladesh's strategic crossroads in 2025 and beyond



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Amid global geopolitical shifts, there is a fascinating parallel between modern developments and ancient end-time prophecies. Islamic eschatology—which foresees an alliance between the Muslim world and the Roman Empire (current Christian world or its subset) against a common adversary—offers a thought-provoking lens through which we can look at the shifting alliances between East and West today. Whether this ally or adversary is symbolised by Orthodox Russia or the Catholic/Protestant West (EU/US), the essence of these historical and eschatological narratives alludes to a deep, enduring alliance between Muslims and Eastern/Western powers. As power dynamics in the global arena continue to evolve, Bangladesh stands at a crucial juncture in the emerging contest between the US/EU-led West and the Russia/China-led East, as both vie for closer ties with the Islamic world. In this new geopolitical order, Bangladesh, with its rising economic clout, strategic location, and cultural connections, is uniquely positioned to play an important role both as a leader in the Muslim-majority world and as a mediator between East and West.

This potential harks back to the transformation seen in the US-Japan relationship following World War II. Once bitter enemies—marked by Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and the US's atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the two nations forged one of the strongest alliances of the 20th century. This remarkable reconciliation was driven by mutual recognition of shared interests and pragmatic cooperation, particularly in the areas of economic growth and security. The US-Japan alliance thus emerged as a cornerstone of stability in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, Bangladesh, despite its historical tensions with Pakistan and regional challenges, has the opportunity to transcend past conflicts and build new alliances that emphasise mutual benefits, particularly in trade, security, and energy. Just as the US and Japan rose from the ashes of war to become strong allies, Bangladesh, along with its promising neighbours, could forge partnerships that not only promote regional stability but also enhance the country's global standing.

To that end, Bangladesh's policy in

2025 and beyond must be one of strategic pragmatism, recalibrating alliances to safeguard its interests and promote long-term prosperity. It should engage in a multi-faceted approach, strengthening its relationships with regional neighbours like Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. These countries, often overlooked in traditional discussions on South Asia's geopolitical landscape, hold immense potential for mutually beneficial partnerships that can enhance Bangladesh's regional influence.

For example, Nepal and Bhutan offer untapped opportunities in the energy sector. With Bhutan's vast hydropower resources and Nepal's potential for renewable energy, Bangladesh can diversify its energy sources through collaborative initiatives that provide sustainable solutions for all parties. Already, Bangladesh's role in providing educational opportunities to Nepali students, particularly in medicine, has quietly fostered deeper ties, with these graduates addressing healthcare shortages in Nepal and serving as cultural and professional bridges between the two countries, thereby strengthening Bangladesh's soft power and bilateral relations.

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regional stability in South Asia.

Moreover, Bangladesh has a unique opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties with smaller neighbours like Sri Lanka and the Maldives by offering expertise in areas such as disaster management and climate change adaptation. Leveraging its experiences in managing the Rohingya crisis and the Delta Plan, Bangladesh can solidify its role as a regional strategic leader.

potential while safeguarding its sovereignty.

Beyond global partnerships, Bangladesh's role as a mediator between other regional powers could become one of its most significant geopolitical assets. Positioned as a neutral party, Bangladesh can facilitate dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran, two rivals whose tensions have long destabilised the Middle East. As a moderate and the third largest Muslim country in the world, Bangladesh can



VISUAL: MONOROM POLOK

security within the framework of international regulations much like the collaborations seen between historically adversarial states like India and the US in their landmark 2008 nuclear deal.

At the same time, Bangladesh's relationship with India, its largest and most influential neighbour, remains pivotal in shaping its regional strategy. Although this relationship has faced challenges following the fall of Awami League in August, the two countries share common security concerns and economic interests that necessitate collaboration. Longstanding issues over water sharing, border disputes, and trade imbalances should be addressed through sustained diplomatic engagement. As I have noted in a recent column, India cannot afford to undermine Bangladesh. Fostering a balanced partnership is vital not only for our bilateral well-being but also for broader

On the global stage, Bangladesh must maintain and even expand its relationships with powers such as the US, EU, Russia, and China while avoiding over-reliance on any single power or market. The US and EU remain vital trade partners, especially for Bangladesh's garment industry, with the EU's GSP facility playing a crucial role in its growth. However, as global competition for influence intensifies, Bangladesh must diversify its diplomatic and economic ties, engaging with both Western and Eastern blocs while preserving its autonomy and flexibility. While China's investments through the BRI initiative are significant, Bangladesh must learn from the experiences of other countries burdened by Chinese debt and avoid excessive dependence. A balanced approach to these relationships will enable Bangladesh to navigate its way through an increasingly complex geopolitical environment, and maximise its economic

leverage its diplomatic relationships with both nations to foster greater unity in the Muslim world, thus positioning itself as a unifying force. Through active participation in organisations like the OIC and the D-8, Bangladesh can also advocate for greater economic cooperation, climate resilience, and solidarity on issues such as Palestine, enhancing its influence within the Islamic world and beyond.

This realignment would elevate Bangladesh's standing in global discussions on justice, peace, and sustainable development. As both the West and East seek closer ties with the Islamic world, Bangladesh, with its growing influence and strategic importance, stands at the crossroads of this emerging shift. By positioning itself as a diplomatic bridge between the Islamic world and both Western and Eastern blocs, it can catalyse cooperation and assert its influence in shaping the evolving global order.

BEYOND GREEN FACTORIES

Prioritising worker well-being in a climate crisis



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FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Heat stress due to climate change can lead to increased absences and lower productivity, as workers may have to cut down their working hours.

Bangladesh has the world's highest number of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified "green" factories. While this may attract foreign buyers, does this pathway safeguard the health and well-being of Bangladeshi workers confronting the climate crisis?

The International Labour Organization recently reported that 71 percent of the global workforce is exposed to excessive heat due to climate change, resulting in 22.85 million occupational injuries and 18,970 deaths annually. This is not a distant, dystopian future—it is happening now.

In Bangladesh, one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, people are grappling with record-breaking temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius, longer periods of warmer months and unprecedented flooding that threatened the livelihoods of nearly six million in 2024.

Combination of extreme heat and humidity can cause dehydration, heat stroke, and even death. It increases the risks of reproductive complications, organ damage and other chronic health issues. This translates to increased absences, lower productivity, fewer working hours—even during peak production months—and an estimated loss of \$26.5 billion in potential garment export earnings by 2030.

As a country still heavily reliant on the RMG sector, climate change poses serious challenges to the country's prospects unless adequate measures are taken to adapt to, and mitigate against, climate risks.

A great deal of the initiative in this direction comes from outside. There is increasing pressure on garment manufacturers to meet the recently legislated human rights and

cannot ensure the health and well-being of workers.

LEED certification primarily focuses on energy and water efficiency and waste management. It does not require measures to address extreme heat stress such as providing frequent cooling and water breaks during heatwaves and maintaining adequate workplace temperatures. Nor can LEED certification address workers' health, if they

certified factories, show that international brands continue to capture the largest share of profits from garment value chains and refuse to acknowledge the true cost of their business practices. And of course, their exploitative practices are abetted locally by the fact that Bangladesh has one of the lowest minimum wages for garment workers (Tk 12,500, around \$105), lower than key competitors like Cambodia, India, Pakistan and Vietnam.

When I asked Kalpona Akter, former child worker and the executive director of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity, about the most important priority of workers in light of climate crisis, her response was simple: *"Living wages."* There is an abundance of evidence that the recently increased minimum wage falls far short of meeting workers' basic needs, let alone paying for the additional climate-related health and livelihood risks that endanger workers as well as their children and families. These people are the least responsible for climate change yet they face its worst consequences.

The short- and long-term consequences of climate risks represent not only an occupational health and safety concern but also a public health crisis for Bangladesh. It is necessary to widen the focus beyond a handful of garment factories that can afford LEED certifications. The Global North has to wake up to the fact that its prosperity has been built on a long history of extracting value from the people and environment of the world's poorer countries. Climate justice demands that it assumes responsibility for the costs of reparation that is proportionate to the loss and damage it has inflicted.

But we should not wait for them to wake up. We can also take responsibility ourselves. We can mount a concerted effort to pool resources and expertise to ensure that existing labour protection policies and frameworks prioritise workers' well-being as part of a just transition to environmentally and socially equitable alternatives.

Moreover, implementation of worker protection beyond the RMG sector needs to be prioritised. While the RMG sector contributes the largest share of export earnings, it employs only a fraction of the country's

approximately 71 million-strong labour force. Over 80 percent of the workforce is engaged in highly vulnerable informal work, such as agriculture, where many workers are self-employed women in low-paid seasonal jobs.

A risk-based evaluation of key employment sectors, and jobs within those sectors at high risk from climate change, is essential. Establishing sectoral funds to assist with evidence-based adaptation and mitigation efforts that are cost-effective and locally tailored is equally important. Workers and their communities should be empowered through collective forms of representation and grievance channels to foster institutional accountability.

Lessons learned from successful community-based climate adaptation solutions such as BRAC's community health clinic model, could support preventative measures and awareness-raising campaigns. Such initiatives could effectively reach vulnerable groups, particularly women, whose double burden of work and household duties leaves little time to recover from extreme heat stress.

A recently drafted white paper prepared by a committee of eminent local scholars, also warns against over-reliance on LEED certification as an industry strategy. Instead, it recommends developing a local framework and certification alternatives to build local capacity, save foreign exchange and create jobs.

Under the current interim government, a labour reform commission has been tasked with proposing reforms to ensure labour rights and improve worker welfare. This presents an opportunity to innovate and imagine beyond "green" certifications and GDP growth at the expense of our people and the environment.

After all, ensuring dignified livelihoods for all citizens is fundamental to upholding the values of "anti-discrimination" that inspired the students and workers who led the July uprising. It is also enshrined in our founding constitution. We must strive towards this aim, even though the scale of compounding challenges is colossal. And we must start with vulnerable sections of the country's working people.

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