

# Trump’s America First doctrine and its ripple effects on Bangladesh



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The potential return of Donald Trump to the White House for a second term has reignited discussions about the global implications of his policies, particularly on trade, defence, immigration, and geopolitics. For Bangladesh, a strategically located South Asian nation, these shifts demand careful analysis and a proactive approach to managing its bilateral relationship with the US. While Trump's first presidency (2017-2021) introduced a "transactional" approach to diplomacy under the "America First" doctrine, his potential comeback could exacerbate existing challenges and create new opportunities for Dhaka.

### Trade dependency and diversification

The US is Bangladesh's single largest export market, with the ready-made garment (RMG) sector accounting for over 80 percent of exports to the US. In 2022, Bangladesh exported \$10.41 billion worth of goods to the US, underscoring the importance of maintaining favourable trade relations. However, Trump's protectionist policies and potential demands for stricter compliance with labour standards or supply chain transparency could complicate this dynamic.

During his first term, Trump withdrew from multilateral trade agreements and emphasised bilateral deals, often using trade relations as leverage for broader political goals. This approach could have serious repercussions for Bangladesh, which relies on preferential trade agreements and access to foreign markets for its economic growth. The Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) programme for Bangladesh, suspended in 2013, might face further delays under another Trump administration.

Bangladesh must diversify its export markets beyond traditional partners, particularly in Europe and North America. Additionally, improving compliance with international labour and environmental standards is imperative. Efforts to upgrade worker safety and rights—initiated after the Rana Plaza tragedy—need renewed

vigour. Dhaka should also actively engage in economic diplomacy, presenting itself as a stable and reliable partner in an era of shifting global trade dynamics.

### Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific

Bangladesh's geographic position along the Bay of Bengal makes it a focal point in the growing US-China rivalry. Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy was a cornerstone of his foreign policy during his first term, aimed at countering China's growing influence through alliances and regional partnerships. Bangladesh, while maintaining close economic ties with China, also participates in regional security initiatives and dialogues with the US.

A more assertive Trump presidency could escalate the militarisation of the Indo-Pacific, compelling Bangladesh to make difficult choices. While the US would likely push for closer defence cooperation under the guise of countering Chinese influence, Bangladesh must balance this with its dependency on Chinese investment in infrastructure and technology. The country's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has already drawn scrutiny from Washington, making this balancing act even more delicate.

Bangladesh should prioritise its strategic autonomy, refraining from being drawn into the binary US-China competition. By advocating for a multipolar Indo-Pacific, Dhaka can position itself as a neutral, peace-promoting state. Moreover, targeted military and economic cooperation with the US, particularly in areas like maritime security and counterterrorism, can strengthen bilateral ties without alienating China.

The Rohingya crisis: Keeping the global focus alive

One of Bangladesh's most pressing humanitarian challenges is the Rohingya crisis. Hosting over one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, the country faces immense social, economic, and environmental pressures. Trump's first term was marked by limited engagement in

humanitarian crises, and a second term could see further withdrawal from multilateral efforts.

Bangladesh's appeals for international support, particularly for Rohingya repatriation, have been met with mixed responses. While the US has provided significant financial assistance, it has not taken a leadership role in addressing the root causes of the crisis. Trump's scepticism

by domestic political considerations and lobbying efforts. Statements that appeared dismissive of Bangladesh's progress and contributions not only strained bilateral relations but also reinforced negative stereotypes. Additionally, the Bangladeshi diaspora in the US, which plays a vital role in cultural and economic exchanges, remains an underutilised asset in countering such narratives.

opportunities in the US.

Bangladesh must advocate for the fair treatment of its nationals, emphasising their contributions to the US economy and society. Strengthening bilateral agreements on labour mobility and skills development can also mitigate the impact of restrictive immigration policies. Additionally, fostering educational and cultural exchanges can build bridges between the two nations.

One of Bangladesh's long-standing challenges is the limited capacity of its diplomatic apparatus to engage effectively with major global powers like the US. While its missions in Washington DC and New York have made strides in recent years, there remains a significant gap in expertise, resources, and strategic planning.

Dhaka should establish specialised units within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to monitor US policy developments and coordinate lobbying efforts. Enhancing the capabilities of its diplomatic missions—through training programmes, recruitment of subject matter experts, and increased funding—will be critical in navigating the complexities of Bangladesh-US relations. Collaboration with international think tanks and advocacy groups can also amplify Bangladesh's voice in Washington.

### Opportunities amid challenges

While Trump's presidency presents significant challenges, it also offers opportunities for Bangladesh to strengthen its partnership with the US. The Bay of Bengal's strategic importance and Bangladesh's growing role in regional geopolitics make it a valuable ally in Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Additionally, Trump's transactional approach to diplomacy provides an opening for Bangladesh to negotiate targeted agreements that align with its national priorities. Areas such as renewable energy, digital technology, and climate resilience offer potential avenues for collaboration.

### Crafting a resilient strategy

The prospect of a second Trump presidency underscores the need for Bangladesh to adopt a proactive, multifaceted approach to managing its relationship with the US. By prioritising economic diversification, strategic autonomy, and diplomatic engagement, Dhaka can navigate the uncertainties of this new era while safeguarding its national interests. In a world increasingly defined by competition and unpredictability, resilience and foresight are key to a brighter future for Bangladesh-US relations.



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

The prospect of a second Trump presidency underscores the need for Bangladesh to adopt a proactive, multifaceted approach to managing its relationship with the US.

of international institutions like the UN could undermine collective efforts to hold Myanmar accountable for its actions, leaving Bangladesh with fewer avenues for recourse.

To ensure continued support, Bangladesh must adopt a multi-pronged strategy. This includes engaging US lawmakers, think tanks, and advocacy groups to keep the Rohingya crisis on Washington's agenda. Simultaneously, Dhaka should explore partnerships with other countries and organisations to create a global coalition advocating for a durable solution. Highlighting the regional security implications of prolonged refugee displacement can also attract US attention, given its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific.

### Public diplomacy and countering negative perceptions

During his first term, Trump's rhetoric on Bangladesh was occasionally influenced

Bangladesh needs to invest in public diplomacy, showcasing its achievements in economic growth, poverty reduction, and climate resilience. Initiatives to engage the Bangladeshi diaspora—through cultural festivals, business forums, and academic collaborations—can create a positive narrative and build goodwill. Furthermore, the establishment of Bangladesh-focused programmes at US think tanks and universities can enhance the country's visibility and influence in US policymaking circles.

### Challenges for Bangladeshi migrants

Trump's hardline stance on immigration, including restrictions on H-1B visas and enhanced scrutiny of migrants from Muslim-majority countries, has created challenges for Bangladeshi nationals in the US. A second term could see the continuation or expansion of these policies, impacting both skilled professionals and students seeking

# Perils of Panthakunja Park



Naim Ul Hasan is coordinator of the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement.

NAIM UL HASAN

Champa (40) has been running a tea stall for the last 16 years beside the Kathalbagan wall of Panthakunja Park, under the shade of a banyan tree. It is the only surviving tree in the western part of the park. Once a lush green haven in the middle of the busiest spot in the city, the park is now being stripped of its greenery due to the construction of the elevated expressway extension project, which has been mired in controversy from the start. A Tk 19.2 crore project was undertaken for the "beautification" of the park in 2018, but it has since been halted. DSCC argued that the renovation work was stopped as the pillars of the expressway might fall within the park's area.

Building an elevated expressway was not a priority in the 2005 Strategic Transport Plan. Other infrastructure projects, such as commuter trains and Bus Rapid Transit, were at the top of the list. Still, the previous government initiated the elevated expressway project in 2011. The project was supposed to be completed by 2014, but it was extended to 2016 and finally to 2024. The main design for the expressway was changed multiple times due to a lack of coordination among different government entities, including both the north and south city corporations, RAJUK, and the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority. The main idea behind the expressway was to let people travel through Dhaka on a circular road, bypassing the already cursed city traffic. However, multiple design revisions resulted in placing the expressway ramps inside the city, which worsened the situation for city dwellers. It is incomprehensible why such a project was undertaken with foreign loans, as it may benefit only a small section of society while imposing economic, environmental,

and social burdens on the entire population.

The previous government filled up a waterbody in the metropolitan area, violating the Environment Conservation (Amendment) Act 2010, and built more than 30 pillars for the expressway project, ignoring widespread protests and warnings from experts and environmental activists. According to media reports, the filling up of parts of Hatirheel Lake, the delicate water retention system of the area, disrupted the



The elevated expressway project stripped the Panthakunja Park of its natural beauty.

PHOTO: PLABON AMIN

natural water flow and reduced the lake's capacity to absorb excess rainwater. As a result, waterlogging in the area has worsened, causing irreparable damage to biodiversity and aquatic life. Unfortunately, the previous government had shameless support from certain so-called environmental activists, some of whom were involved in the elevated expressway's landscaping.

After the fall of the fascist regime, one would have expected that all

these anti-people, anti-environment projects, undertaken in violation of the country's constitutional laws, would be reassessed, reevaluated, and ultimately canceled. But to our surprise, the elevated expressway project was resumed this month, and a huge portion of Panthakunja Park was stripped of its natural beauty. The entire area now lies barren. Kingfishers and doyl birds keep circling the area, searching for their lost habitat. After the tall gogon shirish trees were cut down, a colony of kites lost their home and has now taken refuge on the metro-line cables.

It may sound cliché to write about the importance of parks and open spaces in the city, but it seems that even after the fall of an autocratic regime, the challenges for environmental activists remain the same. Dhaka has less than seven percent of the tree coverage that a geographical area

North City Corporation (DNCC) has 23 parks for its 54 wards. The utter disregard for the maintenance of these parks was evident during the previous regime. From Suhrawardy Udyan to Anowara Park, Tajuddin Park, and the trees of Satmasjid Road, environmental destruction was widespread. Now, during the interim government's term—a government responsible for fulfilling the people's mandate—the trees of Panthakunja have been destroyed mercilessly.

Leaving aside the destruction of the park, how will the construction of the expressway impact the roads below? The environmental impact assessment of the report itself states that building this expressway will have dire consequences on the streets below, particularly in the Palashi and Katabon areas. One can easily assume that upon completion of the project, the entire route of the expressway—

through Hatirpool Bazar, Katabon, Dhaka University, Palashi, and BUET—will seriously impact traffic and the environment underneath, as has been seen with several other flyovers in the city.

The sit-in protest by the activists of the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement, which began on December 14 last year, has now been going on for 40 days. On the 11th day, Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, adviser to the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, adviser to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, and Adilur Rahman Khan, adviser to the Ministry of Housing and Public Works, visited Panthakunja Park and Anowara Park. They promised to free up Anowara Park by March 25, 2025, as per the demands of the activists. They also promised to organise a meeting with the protesters regarding the issue of

Panthakunja Park. On January 2, the protesters were allegedly attacked by environmental activists, including many from Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA) and Green Voice. Braving threats of attack, severe cold, mosquitoes, dust, and noise pollution, the activists of the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement are continuing their peaceful protest, halting the construction of the elevated expressway. We have yet to hear from the advisers regarding this issue.

As a country at the forefront of the climate catastrophe, we seriously need to rethink our approach to the environment. The question remains: will the interim government reevaluate these environmentally destructive projects, or will it be business as usual? If the implementation of such projects continues, what has truly changed after the July revolution?

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NWPGCL, Soydabad, Sirajganj-6700.

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Sl. No.	Tender ID	Brief Description of Tender	Publication Date & Time	Last Selling Date & Time	Opening Date & Time
1	1058099	Procurement of Carbon Brush, Variable Frequency Drives and Other Equipment	20/01/2025 12:00 PM	10/02/2025 12:00 PM	10/02/2025 2:30 PM
2	1063146	Procurement of Spares for Transformer & Generator Protection System	20/01/2025 12:00 PM	10/02/2025 2:00 PM	10/02/2025 3:00 PM

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