

What should Bangladesh's foreign policy be in the changing world order?



Tariq Karim
a former ambassador of Bangladesh, is currently president of the Bay of Bengal Institute of the Cosmos Foundation, and adviser to the Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

TARIQ KARIM

These days, I witness a lot of societal fulminations on the directions and goals of our foreign policy. Having been an active practitioner for almost four decades and a continuing interested observer for well over a decade, I am not a little disturbed at some of the things I hear. Perhaps I hear incorrectly, but what I worry about more is that the external actors with whom we maintain interstate relations may also be hearing, and misinterpreting, as incorrectly as I.

A few years ago, I wrote in *The Daily Star*, "A fundamental dictum in foreign policy formulation and analysis is unquestionably this: each country, as a sovereign, independent nation-state, contextualises its every move or action within the overall rubric of preservation and advancement of its own national interest. Therefore, each party, in any bilateral relationship, must acknowledge and be fully conscious of these mutual constraints, and also respect 'where' the other party is coming 'from.' It takes two to tango, as they say, and if each dancer in performing this very difficult and complex choreography is not in tune, innately, with the partner, a misstep or miscue would end in serious accident or injury to one or both."

Writing in the annual *Journal of the Bangladesh Foreign Service Academy* last year, I asserted that our foreign policy configuration must be "buttressed by a hard-nosed pragmatism and understanding that while one may choose one's friends, one cannot choose one's neighbourhood; and that while friendship may exist between peoples and persons (which even then are vulnerable to change), 'friendship' between states is primarily driven by the national demands of each state, rendering such friendship very protean in nature." In this context, friendship between states may best be described as being the state of relatively happy equilibrium between two or more states that have managed to arrive at a mutually acceptable alignment or coexistence of their national interests that serves everyone in perceptibly equitable measure.

When formulating the parameters of foreign relations with other states, whether far or near, there are several essential factors that need to be considered.

First, geography matters. It encompasses geolocation, geomorphology, and geopolitics.

Second, sizematters. It alludes to the physical size in terms of land (and water) areas in possession. It also, importantly, alludes to the size of population, combined military capacities, economy including GDP and GDP per capita, and the state of technological advancement.

Third, perception matters. This not only encompasses how the governments of

interacting states perceive each other, but also how the domestic population of each state views its governments or governments of other states, near or far from it.

All of the above are variables with their own subsets. They comprise a complex mix that can be volatile and subject to spontaneous combustion by the slightest spark. We can address these either with viscerally charged, emotionally soaked jingoism, or cool-headed rationality standing with feet on the bedrock of pragmatic realism.

The world we know has witnessed two World Wars in the last century. Each ended

impermeable and inviolable, their sovereignty supreme, not brooking any interference in their internal affairs.

The superpowers that emerged set up the new international financial institutions and rules through putting in place the Bretton Woods system. They set up global institutions like the United Nations and its General Assembly and numerous organs like the International Court of Justice (ICJ), or much later the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Human Rights Commission, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and so on.

While the UN was set up with the loftily stated ideal of preventing any repetition of the scourge of war, a goal that was to be ensured by the UN Security Council, the most powerful entities of this so-called New World Order have been the instigators or supporters of most wars or conflicts after 1945. While the most powerful are supposed to safeguard a rules-based world order, the last decade has shown that the principles of inviolability of borders, state sovereignty and non-intervention in the internal affairs of

relations today appears to be increasingly the axiom "Might is right." All prior agreements, supposedly inviolable, can be revoked at will. All smaller, less powerful states, anywhere or everywhere, have never been more vulnerable and fragile than they are today.

In such a situation, what should Bangladesh do in what is obviously a far more hostile world today than what existed at the time of its birth, almost five and a half decades ago?

At a recent gathering at the Foreign Service Academy, our foreign affairs adviser asserted that Bangladesh seeks friendship with all countries and does not want to take side with any one country or power against any other. He was absolutely right.

Bangladesh must look at the map of Asia and its own geomorphological location in that. It is almost entirely surrounded by India, which controls all rivers as upper riparian. It is "spitting distance" away from China, the Asian giant aspiring to superpower status and already the second largest economy in the world. By virtue of its propulsion of being at the epicentre of our oceanic planet, with

neighbours or near neighbours, whether to our east in Southeast and East Asia, or to our west in South, Southwest and Central Asia, without exception.

We must at the same time strive to have peaceful, friendly and mutually beneficial cooperation with all powers, in Asia, Africa, Europe or Americas, regardless of whether those powers behave with each other in terms of friendship or animosity. Ours must be a

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policy not of isolation with anyone, nor seeking confrontation with anyone, but living in peace with all and promoting peace among all.

Since the earliest times, at least from Fourth Century CE, our location in the Bay of Bengal propelled us to become the richest region, or Mughal *suba* (province), Colonial British India's presidency. That enabled all the countries of the Bay of Bengal region to comprise a living, thriving, prosperous integrated economic region that invited global covet and respect. World War II fragmented that hitherto regional integration, just as it fragmented our own subcontinent.

We must now collaboratively strive to work with our Bay of Bengal neighbours to ensure that our Bay, from which we derive our identity and historical legacy, remains a zone of peace, neutrality, prosperity and friendship, serving once again as it did in the earlier times as the highway for peaceful interlocution between states and peoples, inclusively, whether in the Eastern or Western Hemisphere. We should strive to be a catalyst for fashioning a fraternity for the Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation.

Bangladesh is like a walnut, caught in the jaws of two nutcrackers in today's world. One nutcracker is regional, comprising the competing jaws that are India and China. The other nutcracker is global, its jaws comprising the US-led Indo-Pacific narrative facing off the China-led BRI. We must be with both, without being against either. The shell of the walnut gains its strength and firmness from within, and so must we, through developing internal resilience.

Within South Asia, we must champion better relations and cooperation with all countries, from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka, even if some of them have indifferent or even hostile relations with each other. Their fights should not be our fights, but our peace and friendship must also be theirs to emulate. Our policy must strive to tread the razor edge path of "strategic autonomy" that walks with "active neutrality."



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with global political geography being changed, ending the *status quo ante*. Former empires crumbled; new states were formed while some were broken apart. Ironically, the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I generated the drivers for World War II. The Wilsonian idealism that eluded the closure of World War I was brought out of the woodworks after World War II, putting in place institutions and building blocks of what was touted by the Allied victory as the "New World Order." The basic unit comprising this new order was the state, which was to be looked upon by all others as being equal in the "comity of nations," their borders hard,

the state are flouted, egregiously, by the most powerful of states.

We appear to be already in the early throes of a World War III, with principles of state "sovereignty" and state borders being "inviolable" being rendered figments of the imagination. The mighty can impose their wills on anyone they please, and change borders and lives of settled peoples at their will. The UN, the ICJ, the ICC, and the WTO have all proven to be made of clay. Political geography in former Eastern Europe and Middle East are already being reconfigured from their hitherto accepted positions since 1945. The only overriding principle of inter-state

the Bay of Bengal where it is centrally located bridging the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, Bangladesh finds itself in the strategic crosshairs of competing (or contesting) global powers, located near or far. Its socioeconomic vulnerabilities and the aspirations of its largely youthful population, demanding better lives and opportunities for themselves, necessitate that we must stay out of geopolitical conflicts that will derail our development efforts. Internal intercine factional strife will be self-defeating, even self-destructing.

We must endeavour to develop friendly, mutually beneficial cooperation with all nations, whether they be our immediate

TRUMP'S USAID ROLBACK

A policy of indifference



Hamzah Rifaat
is a consultant specialising in gender and conflict, governance, development and addressing inclusivity challenges in Pakistan. He is senior expert at Initiate Futures, a think tank.

HAMZAH RIFAAT

As we all know, US President Donald Trump is an Israeli settlement advocate, a champion of annexing territories ranging from Greenland to Canada, and a proponent of tariffs on China. He is also a president who is indifferent to the plight of populations in the developing world. No more is this evident than in his protégé Elon Musk's decision to suspend global USAID programmes as part of his Make America Great Again (MAGA) agenda. As an independent agency responsible for administering and delivering foreign aid and assistance, USAID has been critical for the socioeconomic development of countries that are not only impoverished, but also suffer from severe governance challenges, lack of robust disaster management mechanisms, and the ability to cope with communicable diseases.

The Trump administration has turned a deaf ear to such contributions and is pursuing its narrow, parochial interests instead. It has announced significant changes to the agency amid a complete, near-total freeze on all foreign aid being instrumentalised.

All this points to US apathy for the suffering of people in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and bodes ill for world peace and multilateralism.

Reversing a legacy

USAID is a product of an executive order by

President John F Kennedy, who sought to unite all US foreign assistance programmes under one agency. It also has a decentralised network operating in over 100 countries, primarily in the developing world, including Eastern Europe. With a budget of over \$50 billion, it is one of the largest aid agencies in the world, despite allegations of conducting political operations abroad, being involved in forced sterilisations in Peru, and engaging in wasteful spending. The agency has been a symbol of US multilateralism, goodwill, and commitment towards addressing the developing world's existential challenges.

Trump's USAID rollback dents US credibility on the world stage and can disillusion allies in Europe, who are now caught up in the crosshairs of his aid rollouts for the developing world. This move also threatens to have other countries, such as China, upstage the US, given that in 2023, the US was the world's largest humanitarian donor, accounting for nearly a third of global aid.

Pushing the world towards further chaos

However, Trump remains adamant and defiant with his nationalist policy.

His administration's decision to suspend USAID—on the pretext of cutting spending on high-impact foreign assistance programmes—is both baffling and disturbing. Many

countries falling under the ambit of USAID operations continue to witness crippling issues such as a lack of socioeconomic development, brutal internal conflicts, and the pernicious effects of climate change. These realities have worsened over the years due to global shockwaves being sent down because of heightened political polarisation and economic turmoil. Afghanistan, for example, which is a major recipient of funding

populations without any relief and to fend for themselves.

But the "America First" priority for the Trump administration does not serve the entire population of the nation either. Rather, it's the upper class, largely the White segment of American society, that is set to benefit from tax cuts as his government turns its back on spending on public welfare. His policies of cutting aid agencies abroad will



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

People hold placards outside the USAID building, after billionaire Elon Musk, who is heading US President Donald Trump's drive to shrink the federal government, said work is underway to shut down the aid agency, in Washington DC on February 3, 2025.

from USAID, is reeling from abject poverty and security quagmires under the Taliban government despite decades of US military intervention and constructive engagement. To cut a key source of aid that contributes to public goodwill in countries like Afghanistan, it is hence catastrophic, leaving entire local

also have domestic implications as they will contribute to greater income inequality in the US. The elistist constituency, however, remains the key to Trump's fortunes as he seeks to alienate the Democrats, the egalitarians, the paceniks, and the reformists as "threats" to his presidency.

The Republican House and Senate causing chaos and major disruption across the world will not stop Trump or his supporters, despite aid agencies scrambling to mitigate damages caused to life-saving programmes and more. Unemployment as a result of aid agencies shutting down is also bound to soar, and with limited access to unemployment benefits and welfare, poverty under Trump will increase in the US. Development contractors predict that up to 3,000 development professionals in Washington DC could lose their jobs as aid organisations try to survive 90 days without US funding. Globally, such policies put both US nationals overseas and vulnerable populations across Africa, Latin America and Asia in a more unprotected situation in the face of transnational crimes, diseases, and conflict.

There is also a moral question involved that the Trump administration has successfully evaded. Historically, US military and political interventions, whether in Libya, Iraq or Afghanistan, necessitate US policies that cater to the needs of the local populations at the receiving end of war and destitution. By not paying heed to this precedent, the Trump administration would lose the "moral ground" that the US has so desperately touted to assert its "greatness" while competing with countries such as China and Russia. That will not be the case anymore, as Trump's populism believes in keeping societies and infrastructures crippled in the absence of reform and equitable governance. US partnerships with different countries, which were anchored in life-saving global partnerships, will be jeopardised. The ounce of morality and social responsibility in US foreign policy is now removed; the ripple effects are already being felt, but the administration is indifferent to the woes of the people they consider as "others."