

Reassessing our southern defence strategy



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Bangladesh's security concerns have historically been shaped by its relationship with India, particularly when the governing regime maintained strong ties with New Delhi, reflecting the enduring and complex historical dynamics between the two nations. This evolving security landscape now demands a shift in strategic focus. Recent developments along the southern border, particularly from Myanmar and non-state actors, indicate an urgent need to reassess the country's defense and diplomatic approaches. The rise of armed insurgent groups, border violations, and disruptions to trade highlight the vulnerabilities of Bangladesh's southern frontier. In response to these emerging threats, a new security paradigm—the Southern Contingency Framework (SCF)—is necessary to address these challenges effectively.

The China India rivalry and Bangladesh's strategic dilemma

Bangladesh's geopolitical landscape has been linked to the ongoing rivalry between China and India. Both regional powers have vested interests in South Asia, often influencing Bangladesh's security, economic policies, and foreign relations. China has invested in Bangladesh's infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while India has historically played a crucial role in Bangladesh's defense and diplomatic affairs. The Myanmar crisis further complicates this dynamic, as China has maintained close ties with Myanmar's military regime, while India has historically supported certain movements within Myanmar. These competing influences leave Bangladesh in a precarious position, requiring a carefully balanced foreign policy that prioritises national security while maintaining strategic autonomy.

The escalating security crisis in the south

Tensions involving Myanmar affecting southern Bangladesh have long existed but have recently intensified to a concerning level. On October 27, 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BTA), which includes the Arakan Army (AA), launched Operation 1027 against Myanmar's military, capturing significant territory in Rakhine State. The growing instability along the Myanmar border quickly spilled over into Bangladesh, as seen on February 4-5, 2024, when over 100 Myanmar Border Guard Police (BGP) personnel illegally crossed into Bangladesh and were disarmed and interned by the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB). The situation further deteriorated on May 22, 2024, when the AA launched a large-scale attack on Maungdaw, seizing over 10 junta camps and killing approximately 200 Myanmar military personnel. This escalation

posed direct risks to Bangladesh's territorial integrity and border security.

The security threats extended to the maritime domain. On June 6, 2024, ferry services on the Teknaf-Saint Martin route were suspended due to gunfire from Myanmar, leaving over 10,000 residents facing food shortages. That same month, AA fighters allegedly fired at Bangladeshi trawlers, including one carrying election officials. These hostilities continued into October when the Myanmar Navy fired on six Bangladeshi fishing trawlers near Saint Martin's Island, killing one person and injuring two. Although Myanmar authorities later released 72 detained

fishermen and their trawlers on October 10, 2024, the situation underscored the fragile nature of Bangladesh's southern security.

By November 2024, the crisis had escalated further. On November 5, the AA detained 20 Bangladeshi fishermen and seized 15 boats, accusing them of illegal entry. Although the fishermen were released on November 7 after negotiations with the BGB, this episode demonstrated the group's growing power in the region. The most alarming development came on December 8, 2024, when the AA announced its control over the entire 271-kilometre Myanmar-Bangladesh border after capturing a BGB base in Rakhine State. This takeover led to an indefinite ban on vessel movement in the Naf River, disrupting trade between the two countries.



A view of Myanmar visible from the bank of the Naf River in Teknaf.

PHOTO: MD RAJIB RAIHAN

The economic ramifications of this crisis

Some key theories of security and strategic

informal economic networks. Given these limitations, Bangladesh requires a more comprehensive and adaptive security approach, such as the SCF, which must comprehensively integrate military, diplomatic, economic, and community-driven strategies to address evolving security threats effectively.

Some key theories of security and strategic

Realism, Securitisation Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)—offer valuable insights but present limitations in fully addressing the emerging threats in Bangladesh's southern frontier. Realism, which prioritises state-centric power politics and military preparedness, provides an essential framework for understanding geopolitical tensions. It primarily focuses on conventional state actors, making it less adaptable to addressing asymmetric security threats and non-state actors like the AA. The Securitisation Theory highlights how security threats are shaped through political discourse, aiding in understanding how Bangladesh frames its security concerns. Nevertheless, it does not offer direct policy mechanisms for managing concrete security risks beyond discursive practices. The RSCT explains Bangladesh's security challenges by situating them within the broader dynamics of South Asia, particularly the China-India-Myanmar triangle. While useful, this theory assumes that regional security is shaped predominantly by state interactions, overlooking the significant role of transnational insurgent groups and

should conduct more joint military exercises with friendly nations to improve rapid response capabilities. Strengthening naval and coast guard operations near Saint Martin's Island is essential.

Thirdly, Bangladesh should leverage diplomatic channels, particularly through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations, to address cross-border tensions. Engaging China and

Bangladesh must deploy advanced surveillance technology, including drones and satellite monitoring, to enhance situational awareness along the Myanmar border. Additionally, fortifying border security posts and increasing the presence of the BGB and the Bangladesh Navy will serve as deterrents against incursions.

India (on equal terms) in diplomatic dialogues to ensure Myanmar's stability will be crucial in preventing further escalation.

Fourthly, to mitigate economic risks, Bangladesh should reduce its reliance on Myanmar for imports and explore alternative trade routes. Strengthening domestic fisheries, agriculture, and logistics infrastructure will help absorb trade shocks caused by border disruptions.

Fifthly, we need to increase focus on community-based security and intelligence gathering. Local communities near the border should be integrated into intelligence-sharing networks. Establishing rapid communication channels between security forces and residents will enhance early threat detection and crisis response.

Finally, Bangladesh should focus on exploring innovative methods to engage with non-state actors following the UN Charter. The Charter encourages peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution through mechanisms such as Article 33 (negotiation and mediation) and Chapter VIII (regional arrangements). By leveraging these provisions, Bangladesh can establish new avenues for communication with non-state actors while ensuring compliance with international norms and advancing its security and strategic interests. This approach can boost broader regional stability and enhance Bangladesh's diplomatic capabilities.

Bangladesh's security posture must evolve to address the emerging threats from the south. The SCF offers a comprehensive strategy to safeguard national security, economic stability, and regional influence. By strengthening border defense, military preparedness, diplomatic engagement, trade security, and community intelligence, Bangladesh can effectively mitigate the risks posed by the ongoing instability in Myanmar. As regional dynamics continue to shift, Bangladesh must remain proactive in securing its sovereignty and national interests.

Trump's trade policy and its effects on women in Bangladesh



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President Trump's recent imposition of steep tariffs on countries around the world has shocked the international community. It has sent the share market tumbling, wiping off some \$6 trillion from Wall Street in a fateful two days since the announcement went public earlier this week. As countries and their leaders are formulating their responses—some favouring a more belligerent approach, like China and perhaps the European Union—and others most likely making a frantic dash through formal and informal channels to appease the US president, Bangladesh faces a precarious scenario. While the way the tariffs have been calculated has puzzled economists and trade analysts alike, the effect on the world economy doesn't look very promising. But I'll let people who are trained in trade policy and economics address that. What is critical to the declaration of an additional 37 percent tariff on Bangladeshi imports is this: what does it mean for women's labour force participation in the country, and more broadly, women's economic empowerment?

Although the new tariff, has been applied immediately to all Bangladeshi goods entering the US, the sector that will be disproportionately hit is Bangladesh's RMG industry. The RMG sector contributes to 80 percent of the total national exports in Bangladesh and 10 percent of the country's

GDP. It also employs some four million workers, more than 60 percent of whom are women. Even after all the talk in the last few decades about diversifying Bangladesh's export portfolio, the country is still very much dependent on the RMG sector for bringing foreign currency into the nation, thereby being a key driver of the economy. Among the countries in South Asia, Bangladesh has somehow been slapped with the second-highest tariff, coming only after Sri Lanka, which has seen a 44 percent tariff imposed. India and Pakistan are at 27 percent and 29 percent, respectively. Economists around the world are still scratching their heads about how the "reciprocal tariff" was calculated. But that is also something probably not worth debating anymore—it is the post-truth world we live in, and as a nation whose single largest export market is the US, there is only so much flexing our muscles can do.

One thing that is often ignored in policy circles is the impact of the RMG sector beyond the economic sphere and its effect on the overall journey of women's empowerment in Bangladesh. The growth of the sector has coincided with phenomenal social transformation: fertility declined from 6.9 births per woman in the early 1970s to around 2 by 2021, and the average age of marriage for girls rose from 14.6 years to 17

years within a similar time period. Some 15 percent of all Bangladeshi women aged 16-30 now work in the garments sector. This is a very high number in the national context, where less than half of Bangladeshi women participate in the labour force. All this points to the fact that the prosperity of the garments sector is closely linked with female economic empowerment.

Researchers have found solid evidence

to their ability to be financially independent. Young girls in villages with nearby factories are more likely to stay in school, since better-paying jobs are awarded to workers with more cognitive skills. Meanwhile, adolescent girls gain the option of wage work, as older girls are more likely to be employed in the factories. Together, these effects lead to families investing in girls' education and deferring marriage and childbearing.



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that the availability of nearby manufacturing jobs has positive impacts on women's life prospects. One study examining the impact of RMG factories in Bangladesh found that girls living near garment factories married and had children later than those in villages without nearby factories. The profound impact of this cannot be overstated. Delaying marriage and childbearing until women are ready and able has long-term consequences for health outcomes and directly contributes

On the other hand, staying out of school and losing potential employment opportunities has a deleterious effect on girls' empowerment. During the Covid lockdown, there was a spike in child marriage, which was the outcome of parents marrying off young girls as a coping strategy to deal with economic strain at the household level.

Trade analysts and industry actors are perhaps better positioned to forecast what this tariff means in real terms for the garments

sector. Both Vietnam and Cambodia are facing their own tariff-related challenges, with 46 percent and 49 percent tariffs imposed on their imports, respectively. Common-sense logic indicates that the competitive advantage Bangladesh enjoys—low labour costs—will be further stretched, with RMG companies already operating on razor-thin margins. The rising costs in the US market of garment products made in Bangladesh will compel buyers—i.e., the brands—to move to other, more favourable countries, such as Egypt, Kenya, or Honduras—all three of which have lower tariffs imposed on them by the US.

Regardless of the government response—which I believe will be driven by negotiation and diplomacy to gain concessions—the impact on women's labour force participation and overall financial empowerment is very much on the line. The recent cuts to foreign aid by the US have been decry by many, but this will be a larger blow to women's economic empowerment, as Bangladesh has yet to develop a sector that can hire and retain women workers at such scale. The strain on the RMG sector may eventually lead to job cuts and women moving down to lower-productivity jobs and more traditional gender roles. Families will also not see the value in sending girls to school without the economic pay-off, and this might lead to a further rise in child marriage.

Trade policies such as these have a strong impact on social outcomes, as decades of progress could be eroded by these decisions. Policymakers and other development partners should take note of this phenomenon and begin thinking of policy tools like cash transfers and support for displaced women workers. Let's not let the hard-won gains of the last few decades in women's economic empowerment go to waste. The losses could very well be irreversible.