

Navigating the US-China-India triangular labyrinth

Foreign policy challenges for Bangladesh's new political party



Alaudin Mohammad is joint member secretary of National Citizen Party (NCP) and executive director at Institute of Policy, Governance and Development (IPGAD).

ALAUDIN MOHAMMAD

The advent of a new political party in Bangladesh demands a diplomatic vision rooted not in traditional alignments but in nimble strategic thinking. As global power dynamics tilt towards a volatile balance between the United States, China, and India, the party's survival and success depend on its ability to chart this complex triangle without compromising sovereignty, economic prospects, or democratic integrity. In this context, the nature of a political party's foreign policy, especially how it balances international friendships while securing domestic legitimacy, emerges as a cornerstone of governance. A right negotiation on the global stage will determine the party's resilience at home.

The National Citizen Party (NCP), being a newcomer to the political landscape, is no exception to the demands of strategic manoeuvring. It, too, must engage in the gauzy act of balancing within the triangular dynamics of the US, China, and India—an essential yet knotty task that defines political survival, foreign policy coherence, and long-term relevance in a shifting global order.

Historical geometry of foreign powers in our domestic politics

Since its inception, Bangladesh's political landscape has been influenced by the gravitational pull of external powers. The nation has endured ideological shifts, economic dependencies, and strategic coercions from India, China, and the US. While some political actors maintained longevity by bending towards one pole or another, others perished due to diplomatic miscalculations despite

considerable domestic support.

India, being the first state to recognise Bangladesh's sovereignty in 1971, has maintained deep-rooted influence through security, cultural, and economic ties. China, on the other hand, has capitalised on economic diplomacy and military assistance, becoming Bangladesh's top trading partner and largest source of foreign investment. The US, often donning the cloak of democratic advocacy, exerts its power through developmental aid, political influence campaigns, and geopolitical manoeuvring—most notably its interest in strategic installations like Saint Martin's Island.

The challenge for the new political party is therefore more nuanced than before. It must not only balance three giants but do so while managing their competing pressures within Bangladesh's own political narrative. This, in effect, transforms Bangladesh's foreign policy into a diamond—multifaceted, precious, and at constant risk of shattering under pressure if not managed with precision.

Context of the new party

The emergence of this new political force is not taking place in a vacuum. It is born into a climate where propaganda, perception, and political branding have become more vital than ideology. With competing narratives, both domestic and foreign, already attempting to define the party's image, it must actively shape its own identity. This requires a disciplined diplomatic front that reflects neither overt alignment nor vague neutrality, but a deliberate

strategy of "strategic equidistance."

In such a context, the party must constantly update its foreign policy toolkit. Unlike previous eras where ideology could offer direction, today's diplomacy requires a technocratic blend of pragmatism, optics, and influence management.

The call for a middle path doctrine

Bangladesh's new political leadership must move away from the binary Cold War framework of choosing allies. Instead, it must institutionalise the doctrine of "Middle Path Diplomacy." This approach seeks partnerships based on mutual benefit, national interest, and non-alignment—a more pragmatic version of the old Bangladeshi principle of "friendship to all, malice to none."



Bangladesh's new political leadership must move away from the binary Cold War framework of choosing allies.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

The US, China, and India each bring both opportunity and risk. Bangladesh must leverage China's economic clout without falling into debt traps. With India, it must pursue neighbourly diplomacy that respects sovereignty and mitigates asymmetry. The US remains a key partner in trade and security, but its interventions in domestic politics necessitate a cautious engagement model.

For this middle path to succeed, it must be fluid, not fixed, evolving as regional and global tensions shift.

Strategic hedging, multilateralism, and soft power projection should be the tripod of this new diplomatic architecture.

India: The hardest balancing act in the tripartite game

Among the three, India poses the most complex diplomatic challenge. As both a neighbour and a hegemon-in-waiting, India's relationship with Bangladesh is deeply connected with domestic politics, water and energy security, border stability, and cultural memory.

India's support of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and its scepticism of the BNP (seen as pro-China and Islamist-leaning) have long impacted Bangladesh's internal political equilibrium. Transit agreements,

and public opinion in both countries must anchor this engagement, not emotion, nostalgia, or ideological romanticism.

Revitalising regional frameworks

No foreign policy of balance is sustainable without multilateral anchors. Regional organisations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and ASEAN must be rejuvenated as platforms for non-hegemonic cooperation. These frameworks can act as diplomatic equalisers, giving smaller states like Bangladesh collective bargaining power in a polarised global order.

SAARC, though stymied by India-Pakistan tensions, can still be instrumental in people-to-people connectivity and climate resilience. BIMSTEC, with its focus on the Bay of Bengal, provides a strategic maritime pivot point, while ASEAN's economic corridors can help Bangladesh diversify its alliances beyond the big three.

The African Union's (AU) model is worth studying here. With its assertive stance against foreign domination, emphasis on intra-continental trade (AfCFTA), and pushback against debt-trap diplomacy, the AU exemplifies how regional coalitions can counterbalance global pressures. Bangladesh's new political party must take inspiration from such models to propose a "Bay of Bengal Compact" or a "South Asian Strategic Community" that ensures collective self-reliance.

The inconvenient truth about meddling

The entanglement of the US, India, and China in Bangladesh's domestic affairs is not speculative—it is empirical. The US has deployed soft power via USAID and programmes like IRI's "Promoting Accountability, Inclusivity, and Resiliency" initiative, funding activists, cultural projects, and civil society movements critical of the ruling party. Allegations of attempted regime change, pressure campaigns against politicians, and the leverage of military base proposals

(Saint Martin's Island) further expose the depth of American interest.

India, meanwhile, has utilised both carrot and stick—offering infrastructure projects and energy cooperation on one hand, while exerting pressure through border policies, trade asymmetries, and political favouritism on the other. China, though more restrained in public diplomacy, quietly embeds itself through infrastructure megaprojects, military sales (accounting for over 70 percent of Bangladesh's arms imports), and strategic port development—all aimed at securing long-term influence.

The new political party must publicly acknowledge these realities, not as anti-Western, anti-Indian, or anti-Chinese rhetoric, but as pragmatic considerations in formulating a sovereign foreign policy.

A new political cartography for a post-fascist democracy

The geopolitical stakes are high for any new political actor in Bangladesh. The country is at the crossroads of a shifting world order, where traditional alliances are obsolete and soft power is the new currency of diplomacy. The emergence of this new political force must be guided not by ideology alone but by strategic realism, dignified neutrality, and intelligent manoeuvring.

A future-oriented foreign policy, based on equal dignity, regional solidarity, and multilateral engagement, will help Bangladesh insulate itself from undue influence while maximising economic and security dividends. If navigated well, the diamond that is Bangladesh's position in South Asia can refract power in multiple directions, not just absorb it. Ultimately, foreign policy is no longer a peripheral concern of governance. It is central to legitimacy, survival, and progress. The new political party must tread carefully, yes, but it must also tread wisely.

Our universities need to bring in top talent

Dr Mohammad Omar Farooq is professor and head of the Department of Economics at the United International University (UIU).

Dr Syed Saad Andaleeb is distinguished professor emeritus at the Pennsylvania State University in the US, and former vice chancellor of BRAC University.

MOHAMMAD OMAR FAROOQ and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

The education system in Bangladesh, particularly its tertiary sector, is grappling with severe quality issues. This failure is reflected, among other factors, in global university rankings such as the QS and Times Higher Education (THE), which consistently place Bangladeshi institutions at the lower rungs. While some universities have made modest progress in moving up, the reality remains that their starting position is so low that even incremental advancements appear more significant than they truly are, especially in a country that gained independence more than half a century ago. This indeed reflects the lack of attention to this sector, creating a fundamental and debilitating gap in educational best practices.

Numerous factors—such as inadequate funding, outdated curricula, a weak research culture, limited industry-university collaboration, a shortage of quality faculty, and above all, deficiencies in governance and accountability—contribute to the struggles of the higher education sector in Bangladesh. While a full analysis of these challenges is beyond this presentation, one critical issue deserves attention: faculty recruitment. Effective recruitment ensures a diverse and skilled faculty that fosters innovative thinking and enhances education quality. Faculty shapes curriculum development, mentors students, and drives research initiatives, all of which directly impact a university's growth and reputation. The ability to attract and retain qualified, motivated, world-class faculty is thus a key determinant of educational quality. Unfortunately, Bangladesh continues to lag in addressing this challenge effectively.

Compounding this problem is the persistent brain drain, which both stems from and worsens the weak educational ecosystem. While students from emerging economies commonly pursue higher education in developed nations, many return to help their home country's

development. This has not been the case for Bangladesh, where a significant proportion of highly educated individuals choose to remain abroad rather than support the country's struggling academic institutions. Meanwhile, efforts to attract distinguished scholars—whether from the Bangladeshi diaspora or international academia—have largely failed.

Several factors contribute to this failure, foremost among which is the issue of salary and benefits. Even the best universities in Bangladesh offer remuneration packages that are simply not competitive globally. Faculties in developed nations enjoy much higher salaries, greater research funding, broader professional opportunities, and more flexibility, making it unsurprising that few are willing to relocate to Bangladesh. Some argue that, as a lower-middle-income country, Bangladesh cannot afford globally competitive salaries. However, this presents a classic chicken-and-egg dilemma: the country cannot offer better salaries due to economic constraints, yet remains constrained because it fails to invest in developing a productive, robust, and relevant human capital base. East Asian and Southeast Asian countries have been relatively successful in this regard and deserve closer study.

Beyond salaries, inadequate support for faculties relocating to Bangladesh is another major issue. In developed countries and many emerging economies, universities offer incentives to attract international academics, such as relocation allowances, housing, health insurance, and logistical support. China's "Thousands Talents Plan," for instance, recruits top-tier international scholars by offering prestigious titles, generous financial incentives, research funding, and additional support for travel and visas in return for advancing their universities.

Another overlooked but crucial element is the failure of universities to create meaningful opportunities for visiting faculty. Globally, many distinguished scholars engage in short-term teaching or research positions in foreign institutions through sabbaticals, fellowships, and other exchange programmes. Bangladesh has yet to take full advantage of such arrangements. Unfortunately, rigid bureaucratic structures, cost and revenue-driven thinking, and lack of institutional

support mean that such exchanges remain sporadic at best.

Perhaps the most profound obstacle to effective faculty recruitment is the overall academic environment in Bangladesh. Most universities don't operate in a manner that aligns with international best practices. Even those that claim to follow global standards often pursue accreditation and compliance procedures primarily as formalities rather than out of a genuine commitment to excellence. The quality of academic life is significantly hindered by rigid structures, limited academic freedom, and a system in which administrative control reigns supreme over intellectual autonomy.

Bangladeshi universities—both public and private—impose rigid, ceremonial, and bureaucratic requirements on faculties, limiting their academic potential. Administrative duties often take precedence over teaching and research, burdening faculty with excessive clerical work, compliance procedures, and arbitrary regulations that detract from their core responsibilities. This bureaucratic intrusion stifles creativity and innovation, discourages collaboration, and creates a gap between faculty potential and administrative overload. As a result, talented individuals are less likely to be attracted to or remain in the system.

Moreover, in many developed countries, faculty members have discretion over how they utilise the summer months: research, publishing, global collaborations, personal enrichment, or simply rest. In Bangladesh, many institutions fail to recognise the importance of such flexibility, instead enforcing rigid contracts or service rules that do not align with global academic norms. In fact, many universities operate on a year-round academic calendar, preventing any extended breaks. This not only discourages prospective faculty members from joining Bangladeshi institutions but also stifles research output and academic innovation.

Other challenges facing public and private universities in Bangladesh stem from different but equally detrimental sources. Public universities are heavily influenced by politics, often prioritising partisan interests over academic distinction. Many faculty appointments are dictated by political considerations rather than merit, leading to a serious

decline in educational standards. And continuing political incursions into academia to promote particular ideologies while suppressing others have shredded all vestiges of academic freedom. Instead of serving as arenas for domination, academic institutions must practise freedom, empowering individuals to transform their world rather than passively accepting it.

At the same time, private universities, which should ideally offer a more dynamic alternative, often operate as commercial enterprises rather than genuine centres of learning. Their primary goal is profit maximisation, often at the expense of academic quality, whereas international best practices dictate that private universities be not-for-profit. This does not mean they avoid generating a surplus; rather, any surplus is reinvested to sustain, grow, or enhance education, rather than benefiting shareholders or investors. Due to their current revenue focus, university faculties in Bangladesh are overburdened with teaching loads and administrative duties, leaving little room for meaningful research or professional development.

This dire situation demands urgent reform. Perhaps a soul searching "national dialogue" is needed to reconsider a critical question: what is a university—or what should it be—and how can Bangladesh's aspirations for a brighter future be shaped by reconceptualising higher education. In this context, the country must recognise that without a major overhaul of its faculty recruitment strategy, as part of broader systemic reform, its universities will continue to lag significantly behind global counterparts.

The challenges facing the education sector, especially university education, are part of a larger systemic problem, making broader structural changes essential. To attract and retain high-quality faculty, particularly distinguished international scholars from the Bangladeshi diaspora, universities must offer better research funding, provide appealing relocation benefits, and actively engage visiting scholars. More importantly, academic culture must transform. Bureaucratic interference and ceremonial fanfare should be sharply reduced, granting faculty members the autonomy

to be result-oriented by pursuing research and teaching aligned with international best practices. Ultimately, the future of higher education in Bangladesh depends on its ability to attract and retain talented educators.

Without world-class faculty, no amount of infrastructure development or policy reform will be sufficient to elevate the country's universities to a competitive level. Policymakers, university administrators, and the business community must also collaborate, as outlined in the Triple Helix Model, to cultivate an environment that actively promotes and rewards academic excellence.

As part of systemic reform and transformation, Bangladesh has an opportunity now to set the foundation for long-term academic success and global recognition by nurturing world-class faculty members in its universities. Only then can the country hope to build a tertiary education system that effectively serves its people and contributes meaningfully to national development, paving the way for a world-class future.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Office of the Divisional Forest Officer

Bandarban Forest Division, Bandarban

Date: 17/04/2025

e-Tender Notice

e-Tender are invited in e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) by Divisional Forest Officer, Bandarban Forest Division, Bandarban for the procurement of:

SL No.	Description of works & Package No.	Tender ID No.	Tender publication date	Last selling date & time	Tender submission deadline & opening time
01	Construction of Road BFD-REV/2024-25/W-15	1095664	20/04/2025 12:00	04/05/2025 16:00	05/05/2025 14:00

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in e-GP Portal and on offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender please on e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>). Further information and guideline are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

GD-927

Mohammad Abdur Rahman
Divisional Forest Officer
Bandarban Forest Division, Bandarban
Phone: 02333302090

