

What role can Bangladesh play in securing peace in South Asia?



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The South Asian region has long been a theatre of enduring geopolitical tensions. Central to this is the perpetual rivalry between two nuclear-armed states: India and Pakistan. Their antagonism is cyclical, manifesting in military skirmishes, diplomatic stand-offs, and proxy conflicts. Amid this volatility, Bangladesh, though smaller in size, holds a strategically pivotal position that offers both opportunities and responsibilities in shaping regional peace.

The legacy of Bangladesh's late President Ziaur Rahman remains significant when discussing the regional peace architecture. It was under his leadership that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was conceived—a bold attempt to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among South Asian nations. At a time when India and Pakistan remained at odds, Zia's vision provided smaller countries with a platform to assert their identities and strategic interests independently.

Over time, this initiative lost its momentum, largely due to growing Indian influence in regional diplomacy. This shift diluted the very balance that once allowed Bangladesh to act as a neutral and independent voice. Recent democratic movements, especially the mass uprising of July, have sparked renewed interest in reviving SAARC and Bangladesh's mediating role—this time led by interim leadership under Professor Muhammad Yunus.

However, Bangladesh's role in regional peace must go beyond ceremonial diplomacy. The country has the potential to become a nucleus of new geopolitical equations, as war today is not confined to just borders; rather, it extends to economic systems, democratic institutions, and national identities. In this context, small states like Bangladesh face four key challenges: preserving political neutrality, ensuring national security, maintaining diplomatic balance, and sustaining economic resilience. These challenges must be tackled holistically, grounded in theory and practical statecraft.

From an international relations



VISUAL: SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

perspective, the theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism offer distinct frameworks for understanding how Bangladesh can chart its foreign policy. Realism emphasises power dynamics and survival, seeing the international system as anarchic and inherently prone to conflict, where states prioritise their security and interests. Liberalism, in contrast, advocates cooperation, institutions, and interdependence, suggesting that peace can be achieved through dialogue and mutual understanding, where shared interests guide international relations. Meanwhile, constructivism prioritises national identity, values, and historical memory, emphasising how collective ideas and self-perception influence foreign policy decisions.

In Bangladesh's case, shaped by its Liberation War, democratic aspirations, and the recent student uprising of July 2024, the constructivist approach resonates most strongly. By embracing its identity as a peace-seeking, democratic nation, Bangladesh has the potential to offer both a moral and strategic counterbalance to the power struggles in its region.

If Bangladesh can act as a catalyst in reviving SAARC, mediating between India and Pakistan, and promoting peaceful coexistence, it would set a precedent for the role of smaller states in conflict resolution. The present leadership—emerging from a popular uprising—has the historic opportunity to steer the region away from conflict and towards reconciliation. The aim must be to ensure that peace, not war,

as practised by Malaysia and Singapore, offers an effective model. Such a middle-ground strategy enables smaller states to act as peace brokers while expanding their global legitimacy.

Constructivism emphasises moral positioning and national identity. Bhutan, for instance, has maintained neutrality in Sino-Indian conflicts based on its cultural philosophy and non-aligned foreign policy. Similarly, Bangladesh's stance—rooted in the Liberation War, popular uprisings, and its resistance to autocracy—provides a solid foundation for a principled foreign policy that supports peace and justice over partisanship.

Besides, history provides numerous examples of small states effectively navigating conflicts around them. After Yugoslavia's disintegration, countries like Croatia and Slovenia emerged as sovereign states with significant international support. In Lebanon, neutrality during prolonged regional tensions was paired with reliance on UN peacekeeping missions. Latin American nations have also responded to neighbouring conflicts with economic diplomacy rather than militarisation.

Given the volatile nature of South Asian geopolitics, Bangladesh must adopt a multi-layered approach that begins with maintaining diplomatic neutrality by advocating international cooperation in addressing potential refugee crises, economic shocks, and regional insecurity. Alongside this, a recalibration of security is essential. Bangladesh needs to reassess its existing defence agreements and strategic partnerships to strengthen national defence capabilities without compromising its sovereignty or falling under external hegemony. Economic diversification is also crucial; by building resilient trade routes and sustaining balanced bilateral relations with both India and Pakistan, Bangladesh can better insulate itself from regional instability. Lastly, a firm moral commitment is indispensable. Upholding human rights, advancing peace advocacy, and adhering to international law will not only reinforce the country's international credibility but also contribute to durable and principled diplomacy.

As the second-largest economy in South Asia, Bangladesh's influence and global acceptance are growing—and with that comes responsibility. As India and Pakistan continue their zero-sum rivalry, Bangladesh must maintain a careful, prudent stance that reflects wisdom rather than warlike

sentiment. Historical experiences show that Bangladesh's most potent political transformations have emerged from democratic mass movements. The July Uprising reinforced the strength of people's unity and resistance to external domination. But such victories must now be translated into stability, not further confrontation.

A worrying trend in recent years has been the rise of digitally manipulated hostility. Social media posts, misinformation campaigns, caricatures, and doctored content—often traced back to obscure or foreign-funded sources—seek to provoke anti-India sentiment or misrepresent Bangladesh on international platforms. Ironically, many of these campaigns serve interests within India itself, aiming to legitimise aggression through manufactured consent. In such an environment, Bangladesh must resist the temptation to react emotionally. Strategic patience, defence without aggression, and cool-headed diplomacy are the most effective tools against provocation.

As regional tensions rise, Bangladesh needs to institutionalise a proactive approach to crisis management. Establishing a strategic crisis management cell to anticipate and respond to potential geopolitical shocks can be vital. This cell would monitor emerging threats, such as border conflicts, refugee crises, or economic disruptions, and ensure a swift and coordinated national response. By streamlining decision-making processes and improving inter-agency cooperation, this entity can strengthen Bangladesh's ability to manage crises effectively. In addition to safeguarding national security, such a cell can bolster international trust by demonstrating Bangladesh's commitment to stability and preparedness in a volatile region. Through strategic planning and crisis foresight, Bangladesh can better navigate complex regional dynamics and assert itself as a reliable partner in international affairs.

Being a small state does not mean being a passive observer. Bangladesh has the potential to become a regional leader in peace-building by drawing on its history, values, and strategic location. With the right policies, moral compass, and institutional frameworks, it can transform its geopolitical vulnerability into a position of influence. As India and Pakistan continue their chess game of conflict, Bangladesh can and must choose the path of construction, dialogue, and peace. That will not only preserve its own sovereignty but serve as a guiding light for a troubled region.

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR BIODIVERSITY

Let's not send our biodiversity to the museum



Naziba Basher is a journalist at The Daily Star.

NAZIBA BASHER

There was a time when a walk through any rural stretch of Bangladesh meant brushing shoulders with the wild—migratory birds nesting overhead, medicinal herbs underfoot, butterflies flitting across mustard fields, and frogs croaking beside streams. Today, we have to squint to catch glimpses of what once surrounded us in abundance.

Our cities swell, concrete creeps across forests and wetlands, and the silence of disappearing species grows louder than ever. Meanwhile, our rivers, blackened by industrial and urban pollution, have turned into graveyards for aquatic life. Bangladesh has been a party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) since 1994, pledging to halt this erosion. Yet, here we are, three decades later, with species vanishing, ecosystems collapsing, and policies reading better on paper than they perform in practice.

According to Bangladesh's Fourth National Report to the CBD in 2010, over 50 species of plants and 100 species of animals were classified as threatened. The IUCN's 2015 Red List for Bangladesh identified 390 threatened species, including 56 mammals, 63 reptiles, and 41 amphibians. This is not just an ecological tragedy; it's a national emergency. When species disappear, they take with them centuries of balance, resilience, and interdependence. And once they're gone, they don't come back.

One would expect this crisis to spark political urgency and societal outrage. But our efforts to conserve biodiversity remain lukewarm at

best. Yes, some steps have been taken, including the enactment of the Biodiversity Act, 2017 and the development of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. However, these frameworks are often undermined by weak implementation, overlapping mandates, and a stark absence of public accountability.

Take the CBD's requirement for measurable biodiversity targets: Bangladesh's 2020 goals included halting habitat loss and reducing pollution. But Forest Department records show that forest coverage remains under siege, while urbanisation, illegal logging, and land encroachment continue unabated.

Currently, Bangladesh is grappling with serious challenges in forest conservation, with deforestation occurring at nearly twice the global average, driven largely by land use changes and human activities. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates the country's forest cover at 2.33 million hectares, or 15.78 percent of its land area, while the Forest Department reports a slightly higher figure of 2.57 million hectares, representing 17.31 percent.

Over the last two decades, Bangladesh has lost approximately 8,390 hectares of humid primary forest, constituting 3.5 percent of the total tree cover loss during this period. Overall, the country has experienced an 8.7 percent reduction in the area of humid primary forest. At the same time, our wetlands—once the lungs of the delta—are choking. Encroachment on haors has intensified, despite

these being vital breeding grounds for local fauna.

Meanwhile, pollution in the Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakkhya, and Karnaphuli rivers has collapsed entire aquatic ecosystems. Even the Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is not spared. Mangrove destruction continues even as salinity levels and cyclone frequency climb with climate change.

This isn't just an environmentalist's lament. Biodiversity loss threatens our food security, water supply, and climate resilience. In rural Bangladesh, much of the population depends on nature for medicine, fuel, and nutrition. With pollinators dwindling, fish stocks collapsing, and medicinal plants growing scarce, these communities face existential threats. So, what went wrong?

A large part of the failure, of course, is institutional. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change often lacks the enforcement power to regulate extractive industries or penalise violations of conservation law. And biodiversity conservation is rarely integrated into the relevant sectors such as urban planning, transport, and agriculture. The result? You see brick kilns next to wetlands, highways through elephant corridors, and industrial parks in ecologically critical zones.

Bangladesh's performance under the CBD's three core pillars—conservation, sustainable use, and benefit-sharing—remains patchy. Benefit-sharing with Indigenous communities, who have safeguarded ecosystems for generations, is largely rhetorical. Their voices are ignored in development plans. Yet, their forests and water bodies are often the first to be sacrificed.

That said, not all hope is lost. There are glimmers of progress: community-based conservation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Indigenous forest restoration programmes, and successful co-management of protected areas. But

these remain the exceptions, not the norm.

If Bangladesh is to truly live up to its CBD commitments, cosmetic measures will no longer suffice. What's needed now is radical political will and grounded, localised action. This means enforcing the Biodiversity Act without fear or favour. It means funding research into native species, empowering

marginalised communities with legal rights to defend ecosystems, and equipping institutions to effectively fight ecological crime.

We must now rewrite the story we tell ourselves about development. Concrete is not the only measure of progress, and GDP means nothing if our children grow up never hearing the call of the kokil (Asian koel) or seeing a freshwater turtle. Economic

growth cannot come at the cost of ecological suicide.

Biodiversity is the foundation of our survival, and it is disappearing. As a nation, we are failing our convention commitments, failing our people, and, most unforgivably, failing our future. The clock is ticking. Let us not wait to act until the forests are lost and the rivers run dry.

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Important Deadlines:

Sl	Descriptions	Date
1.	Start date of application (Online)	29/05/2025 (9:00AM)
2.	Last date of application submission (Online)	07/07/2025 (5:00 PM)
3.	Publication of the list of eligible candidates	13/07/2025
4.	Date of admission test	20/07/2025
5.	Publication of the list of selected candidates	27/07/2025
6.	Date of admission & registration	30/07/2025 & 31/07/2025
7.	Start date of class	31/07/2025

//Signed//
(Prof. Dr. Sheikh Muhammad Humayun Kabir)
Registrar (Additional Charge), CUET

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