

## Amid an uncertain Middle East, Bangladesh must rethink its migration strategy

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MOHAMMAD JALAL UDDIN SIKDER

International labour migration is a key pillar of Bangladesh's economy, with most workers going to the Gulf region. In 2025, out of 1,116,399 migrants, about 82.4% (919,981) went to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (BMET, 2026). Remittances are equally important: Bangladesh received \$32.8 billion in 2025, of which around \$15.07 billion—about 46%—came from GCC countries (Bangladesh Bank, 2026). This shows the country's heavy dependence on the Gulf for both employment and income.

However, migration is not only economic; it is also shaped by politics and international relations. Rising tensions in the Middle East, especially the US–Israel–Iran conflict, are creating new uncertainties for Bangladeshi workers in terms of jobs, mobility, and safety. Therefore, migration should not be seen simply as a matter of labour demand and supply. It needs to be understood within a broader geopolitical context, where global power relations shape both opportunities and risks.

### Political nature of migrant workers

To understand this situation, we need to look at how countries behave in international politics. Political scientists Hans Morgenthau (Politics Among Nations, 1948) and Kenneth Waltz (Theory of International Politics, 1979) explain that during crises, states focus mainly on their own interests and security. As a result, migrant workers become less important. They are needed in stable times, but are easily pushed aside when risks increase.

Because of this, migration governance becomes weak. Agreements such as MoUs often fail during crises, as countries take decisions independently. As Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller show in The Age of Migration (2014), host countries can change rules suddenly, while countries like Bangladesh have little influence to protect their workers.

Migrant workers also remain in a vulnerable position. They have little bargaining power, and in many Middle Eastern countries, the kafala system ties their legal status to employers. Human Rights Watch (EU: Human Rights Should Be Priority at GCC Summit, 2024) highlights that this increases the risk of exploitation. During crises, support systems such as evacuation and legal assistance remain limited.

As a result, crises quickly turn into real risks. Workers lose jobs first, are

forced to return without compensation, and face movement restrictions. We saw the same during the COVID-19 crisis and the Libya conflict (since 2011). At the same time, xenophobia increases. For example, UN human rights experts (OHCHR, May 21, 2020) reported that migrants in Malaysia were blamed for spreading the virus and were detained or deported.

A similar pattern is now visible in the Iran war, where some migrant workers are being detained or deported for sharing war-related content on social media. Overall, migrant workers are not just labour—they are a geopolitically vulnerable population, often the first

smart cities like “The Line”, advanced technology zones, and tourism hubs. Alongside NEOM, projects such as the Red Sea tourism project, Qiddiya entertainment city, and the FIFA World Cup 2034 are expected to create millions of jobs. However, if instability continues in the region, these projects may face delays, rising costs, or downsizing.

This impact will also affect the United Arab Emirates—especially Dubai and Abu Dhabi—as well as Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. Major real estate and infrastructure projects may slow down, investor confidence may decline, property sales may fall, and

employment. Many migrants may be forced to return without savings, increasing pressure on the domestic economy. Families dependent on migration income will face growing hardship.

### From risk to opportunity: A geopolitical strategy

At the same time, these risks also create opportunities for Bangladesh to rethink its migration strategy. When risks spread, new opportunities also emerge. This makes it important to explore labour markets beyond the Gulf region.

A good example is China's Belt and

crisis-time protection measures such as evacuation support, compensation, legal safeguards, and waivers of costs like iqama renewal fees during emergencies. Bangladesh should also develop an early warning system to monitor geopolitical risks and adjust migration policies in advance.

At the same time, migration strategies must shift towards skills and language. Bangladesh should invest in training in Russian, German, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, and gradually move from low-skilled to skilled labour markets. Language has become a key tool for accessing new labour markets. For example, Russian is widely used in Central Asia and parts of Eastern Europe, allowing workers to access multiple countries through a single language.

To achieve this, Bangladesh needs new training systems. Through bilateral cooperation, foreign trainers can be brought in, and the skilled Bangladeshi diaspora can be engaged online. By digitalising training centres, students can learn directly from them. Partnerships with foreign governments or companies can help develop workers based on labour market needs and allow direct recruitment. This will improve skills, reduce dependence on brokers, and make migration safer and more transparent.

In addition, a new strategic direction could be virtual migration, which is clearly different from traditional outsourcing. While outsourcing usually depends on intermediaries, virtual migration allows Bangladeshi workers to stay in the country and directly provide services to foreign employers through digital platforms. This includes IT services, freelancing, and various forms of remote professional work. Since this process does not depend on visas, borders, or physical relocation, it is comparatively less affected by geopolitical instability. As global demand for digital services continues to grow, this type of virtual migration can create relatively stable income opportunities and help reduce both the risks and costs associated with overseas employment.

Finally, geopolitics should be seen not as a crisis, but as an opportunity to explore new labour markets and build a safe and sustainable migration system for Bangladesh.

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FILE VISUAL: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

to be excluded and the least protected during crises.

### Future migration trends & structural risks

The ongoing tensions surrounding Iran will not be limited to politics; they will also affect the global labour market in the future. The war has already damaged key infrastructure such as the oil and gas sectors, which are the backbone of Gulf economies. As a result, government revenues will decline, major investments will be delayed, and economic uncertainty will increase across the region.

In Saudi Arabia, this impact will be most visible in its Vision 2030 projects. One of the largest projects is NEOM—a futuristic city worth around \$500 billion—which includes plans for

jobs in construction and services may decrease. At the same time, prolonged conflict may damage the region's reputation for stability, leading to further declines in investment and business.

At the same time, structural changes will continue. Gulf countries will invest more in automation and digital technologies, reducing the demand for low-skilled labour. Governments will also strengthen nationalisation policies to prioritise local citizens. As a result, demand for low-skilled migrant workers will gradually decline.

For Bangladesh, the consequences will be serious. Job opportunities in the Gulf will become more uncertain, recruitment will slow down, and visa restrictions will increase. Remittance inflows may decline due to unstable

Road Initiative (BRI). Through this initiative, large infrastructure projects are being developed across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Many countries face labour shortages due to small populations or low birth rates. As noted in the World Bank's Belt and Road Economics report (2019), these investments are expanding rapidly and creating new labour demand. Similar opportunities are also emerging in Russia, Central Asia, and parts of Africa, where investments in gas, oil, and energy sectors are increasing labour demand. If Bangladesh can develop a skilled workforce, it can take advantage of these opportunities.

To capture these opportunities, Bangladesh needs to strengthen migration diplomacy. It must go beyond traditional agreements and include

## FROM NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY TO MODERNISATION

# Mapping Bangladesh's defence future

AYESHA BINTE TOWHID

The political transition in Bangladesh has ushered in a new era of hope, presenting a unique opportunity to rethink and reformulate several aspects of statecraft. As the defence forces embody the strength of a nation, there is much anticipation regarding the plans for this sector. The political parties have also resonated with this sentiment in their election manifestos, as they laid out their visions for enhancing defence capabilities under the overarching philosophies “Bangladesh Before All” and “An Uncompromising Bangladesh”. As the new political government settles in, it is imperative to look at the key pledges and share some insights regarding the expectations surrounding them.

At the strategic level, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) shared its plan for formulating a National Security Strategy (NSS). Both BNP and the National Citizen Party (NCP) called for establishing a National Security Council (NSC). There have been calls for an NSC and an NSS for several years, and finally they might be in sight. The NSS is a crucial document, as it gives direction regarding the state's plan to apply all elements of national power to attain its political objectives, both during war and in peacetime. It indicates the state's approach to ensuring and upholding security, prosperity, and global standing. While it is common for major powers to publish their NSS at regular intervals, there has not been any such publicly available document for Bangladesh. Therefore, there is a great deal of eagerness to see what an NSS might look like for a country such as Bangladesh.

While formulating the NSS, it is very important to look into all elements of power used in contemporary times and assess what we have at our disposal. Self-identification of our current position is essential, as it would provide clarity regarding what combination of power we want to exercise and what kind of influence we want to project. Do we want to see ourselves as a small South Asian state, or do we want to establish ourselves

as an emerging middle power with greater stakes and responsibilities? These are some of the key issues that need to be addressed. It is expected that policymakers would take geopolitical realities into consideration and adopt an approach that helps to secure our strategic objectives.

In line with the NSS, political parties have called for formulating a defence policy and defence doctrine. The Defence Policy 2018 was based on the core aspects of the 1974 Defence Policy. Reviewing it is a need of the time. It is expected that the government would include all relevant stakeholders, including think tanks, in the policy formulation process. Consulting diverse views would make the policy more participatory and effective.

One of the core principles of our defence policy is credible deterrence, and the periodic enhancement of defence capabilities is a fundamental requirement for ensuring it. BNP, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, and NCP have pledged to strengthen defence capability by modernising the Armed Forces. In its election manifesto, BNP expressed its vision for a four-dimensional armed force; Jamaat shared broad views on updating the 2030 modernisation goal into a forward-looking Vision 2040; and NCP shared specific visions for the weapon systems it seeks to acquire. Although there are some differences in approach, the intention to invest in defence capabilities is well reflected in all three manifestos.

However, in this sector, there is an inherent struggle to match aspirations for technologically advanced armaments with economic realities. Here, it is important to note that the maximum portion of the defence budget is required to cover operating costs, and only a very small percentage can be dedicated to new procurements. It is paramount for policymakers to take this into consideration and plan ways to increase allocation for modernisation purposes. At the same time, it is essential to look for cost-effective technologies. Recent inter-state conflicts have demonstrated how low-cost defence technologies can deliver kinetic

effects in asymmetric warfare. Operational-level ingenuity has been instrumental in this process. These events have provided critical insights for small military organisations around the world. It is expected that policymakers would take these into consideration in the policy formulation process.

It is also pivotal to consider the geopolitical setting of the policy. The defence policy should be aligned with the evolving strategic landscape of both the immediate and extended region. Bangladesh's geography has always influenced its strategic thinking. While the priority on land is imminent, the strategic competition centring the Indo-Pacific region has made the operational



environment in the maritime vicinity very uncertain, requiring our defence forces to stay prepared for potential contingencies. It is expected that the defence policy would adequately emphasise the requirements for securing national interests in the Bay of Bengal and in the wider Indian Ocean region.

As geopolitical competition intensifies and a transactional approach in international relations becomes the new norm, it is wise to prepare for any restrictive

measures imposed by major powers. Such preparation includes the diversification of defence articles acquisition and the strengthening of indigenous production capability where possible. In the manifestos, both BNP and Jamaat shared their interest in promoting military research and developing the domestic defence industry. While some aspects of the manifestos are rhetorical, the underlying objective of expanding and strengthening indigenous capabilities is evident. A long-term vision is vital in materialising this pledge. This needs to start by developing subject matter experts to operate at different levels of this industry. Joint production is a major avenue for developing the indigenous industry. It

is expected that the relevant authorities would critically examine possible strategic partnerships and make informed choices. Reviewing the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy and making it more user-friendly is crucial in this regard. Moreover, such a large-scale endeavour cannot be sustained by solely catering to domestic needs. It is important to engage in active diplomacy to explore markets and attract potential buyers. The trade policy also needs to be reviewed, as production- and policy-level

synergy is integral for this purpose.

Besides strengthening and expanding the regular forces, it is also essential to plan and prepare for situations that may demand the integration of the general population in national defence. The concept of People's War has been a key feature of Bangladesh's strategic culture, as witnessed in the Liberation War. It is also reflected in the existing Defence Policy. The political parties have shared similar ideas in their election manifestos. BNP called for formulating the defence policy in light of Ziaur Rahman's ‘People's Warfare Doctrine’. Jamaat proposed a 6–12 month voluntary military training programme for men and women aged 18–22 years. NCP called for building a combat-ready reserve force by training 30 thousand youths in arms and military tactics every year. Although the approaches differ, the underlying objective appears similar. Short-term military training or national service can be instrumental in unconventional warfare. Several countries have either voluntary or mandatory national service requirements. Bangladesh can consider this as well. However, Bangladesh already has a large pool of paramilitary and auxiliary forces. If the government wants to proceed with the idea, there has to be a convincing narrative to justify, promote, and popularise this initiative through a consultative process.

Through the defence policy visions in the election manifestos, one can gain some working knowledge regarding the priorities and preferences of the political parties for strengthening our defence capabilities. Transforming these visions into policy would be a critical step. Election pledges have been made in the past too, but this time the people's mandate is strong, and so are their expectations from these policies. It is now time for the ruling party to deliver and for the opposition to follow up.

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