

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY: DREAMS OR NIGHTMARES?

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In the age of globalization the modernist principle that “foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy” has practically lost its relevance. And this is true not only for the relatively disempowered developing countries but also for the relatively empowered developed economies. Today the ‘foreign’ is less an external entity while the ‘domestic’ is hardly fully internal. Rabindranath Tagore in pre-partition years had alluded to this problem in his novel, *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World, 1916), arguing how the foreign or more precisely European-bred discourse on nationalism has come to impress and impact upon the minds of the Indians, albeit to their detriment, but then few had the scholarship and wisdom to understand his warnings and formulate policies accordingly.¹ The genocidal partition of British India was surely an outcome of what can be regarded as our collective failure to distinguish the internal from the external, with the external succeeding in overwhelming the internal and creating structures of divisiveness in the minds of the people. The 1971 genocide too was no less a consequence of that. But as we speak today, globalization provides us with an opportunity to reconceptualize issues like foreign and domestic or internal and external or for that matter present and future/s and have them understood beyond the banal discourses of linearity, dualism and dichotomies. A good starting point would be to consider the changing nature of the Westphalian state, including post-colonial state.

The meaning of Bangladesh, for instance, is no longer limited to the territoriality of 55,126 square miles but rather has come to include the hundreds and thousands of Bangladeshis living abroad, from Canada to Canberra, from Jeddah to Japan. This is as much an issue of economics as it is an issue of technology. While it is true that a greater part of the state gets reproduced through the constant flow of remittances from the unskilled and semi-skilled members of Bangladesh diaspora but then the current state of technology (cell phones, internet, air transport, etc.) also ensures that the latter is constantly in touch with the motherland, a feature that puts the old and new diasporas miles apart. If this invites freshness of thought and newer kinds of activities it also remains susceptible to the transfer of ideas

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¹ See also Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (1917) (reprint, Madras: Macmillan, 1985).

and cultures that could very well be a source of conflict at home. I will have more to say about this shortly.

Post-territorial or demographic Bangladesh needs further explication in the age of globalization. If future directions of Bangladesh foreign policy are to be framed and policy initiatives requiring their fulfillment pursued to support the aspirations of the people then the conceptualization of Bangladesh as a 'small state' has to be erased forever. How can a country of nearly 150 million people – the eighth largest in the world - be called 'small'? Or, for matter, how can the Bengalis – the sixth largest linguistic community in the world - be territorialized and dwarfed into 'smallness'?

A certain politics however pervaded when scholars and policymakers first began calling Bangladesh a 'small state.' In fact, there existed an element of *Indo-centrism* when the idea was first mooted. I am reminded of a seminar at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) in August 1979 under the banner, "Security of Small States in the Contemporary World," in which the then President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, made a brief presentation beyond presidential protocol.² This is probably the first of a series of seminars on the theme in Bangladesh. The theme, in fact, soon caught the attention of many. In 1982, Talukder Maniruzzaman published his monograph titled, *The Security of Small States in the Third World*, in which he argued that the small states, including Bangladesh, must develop a "complex diplomatic repertoires to counteract the moves of much larger states," presumably in Bangladesh's case the author had India in mind.³ It may be mentioned that Maniruzzaman categorized 'large' and 'small' states in terms of quantitative and traditional war capabilities!

Two years later in 1984 came an edited volume, in which I also had a piece, with an interesting sub-title, *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: A Small State's Imperative*. I guess this was the first concrete attempt to depict and formalize Bangladesh as a small state, and the idea behind the book, at least to the editor, Emajuddin Ahamed, was no different from the position of Ziaur Rahman or Talukder Maniruzzaman and that was to get Bangladesh out of the Indian nexus. It was otherwise a politically thought-out intellectual intervention insofar as defining Bangladesh was concerned, albeit devised at a critical moment when political compulsions at home

² This is well documented in the magazine, *BIISS Silver Jubilee*, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka, 25 June 2003.

³ See, Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Security of Small States in the Third World* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1982), p.25.

demanded an anti-Indian stance. That is, Bangladesh as a 'small state' required external support, extending from the Muslim states to China and the United States, to contain 'Big Brother' India! Ironically, while India remained where it was, Bangladesh got stuck into the idea of being 'small'!

Globalization however changed all that, as many would now argue. But then what 'globalization' are we talking about? There are several versions of globalization and with respect to Bangladesh, each holding 'promises' of millennial nature as well as 'problems' bordering on nightmares. Let me take up *economic globalization* first. Internationalization of 'production' is what economic globalization more centrally refers to in addition to the internationalization of trade, finance and investment. What this means is that the multi-national or rather transnational companies now *collect* resources in several countries, *process* them in another several countries and finally, *export* the finished products to the rest of the world. A fully finished product, therefore, no longer has one single birthmark; it has multiple birthmarks since several countries have gone to produce it. A Compaq computer, in that sense, is no longer entirely American, or a Toyota car fully Japanese. The final product of both these items will have components made in several countries of the world. Put differently, unlike the previous internationalization of things, in the globalization phase of capitalism the thing itself is the product of the international or global market. The implications for Bangladesh can hardly be minimized.

Bangladesh's clothing industry, for instance, has progressed well by adding value to the commodity, which the industry could pursue to the envy of many, including big players like China and India, mainly because of the relatively cheap labour and the ingenuity of some of the local manufacturers. This has contributed to a situation where our capitalists and workers are structurally tied up with the economies of the developed West and therefore ought to be more attentive about developments there, including the growth of the economy or lack of it or even who is in charge of the government. Now since the meltdown in the US economy there are regular discussions as to what impact it would have on the Bangladesh economy. I would argue that if we are to believe in Barack Obama's election pledges then there is a possibility of actually gaining from the crisis. The reasons are not farfetched. Traditionally, products from Bangladesh abroad have catered to middle and low-income groups and since Obama has promised to cut taxes for 95% of working families and provide \$1,000 of tax relief for workers and new tax benefits to help families pay for college, childcare and save for retirement,⁴ there is a

⁴ Barack Obama, *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), pp.18-19.