

Bangladesh Foreign Policy in the Information Age¹

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1. Introduction

The information age has transformed our world to a significant extent and the process of change continues at an accelerating pace. Information and communication technologies have brought us into a new era of instantaneous communication and unparalleled access to information. These technological advances affect our every sphere of life.. Moreover, they are changing the patterns of relations among the various nation-states. For people in the Third World countries like Bangladesh, it is imperative to understand and to find meaning in the changes taking place and to formulate proper policies from them.

Most of the information and communication technologies like computers, television, internet, fax are the innovations of the twentieth century, and they are mainly introduced in the late twentieth century to different societies. Broadcast satellites, cable, optical fibre communications, teletext, videotext are some of the names here, among many. Convergence of computer and telecommunications industry has changed the present world to a great extent. All these provide viewers, listeners and communicators a diversity of choices. IT (Information Technology) or ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) have increased the capacity for storage, transmission, and manipulation of information having considerable impact on human communication, health, education, commerce and trade, entertainment etc.

This article attempts to highlight the global transformations in the information age and its relevance to Bangladesh foreign policy and diplomacy. What implications do such information and communications revolutions have for the foreign policy and diplomacy of Bangladesh? This paper argues that the digital revolution has posed

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momentous challenges in traditional interstate relations and foreign policy makers cannot stay away from the challenges while fashioning the policies for the country in this globalised world. However, this article limits its focus mainly to information and communication aspects of foreign policy and diplomacy. Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), USA in a study identified some fundamental forces that demand change in the practice of American diplomacy in the present age: revolution in information technology, proliferation of new media, globalisation of business and finance, widening participation of publics in international relations, complex issues that transcend national boundaries.³ However, for an LDC like Bangladesh, information age and its linkage with foreign or any public policy may seem too early an endeavour by some quarters, but such a negligence can further place the country in the backtrack like before. It is now a truism that if the developing countries do not act with greater urgency, they would be on the wrong side of the widening knowledge gap. Furthermore, the internet revolution is said to be representing more of a challenge than an opportunity for many developing countries.⁴

This article has five sections. Section two attempts to clarify the different aspects of the information age and describes the present-day transformations of the world. Section three presents some internal dimensions of Bangladesh society, polity and economy as a result of information and communication revolution, which should be taken into consideration for foreign policy formulation now. The next section, more specifically, identifies some of the challenges and opportunities for Bangladesh foreign policy and diplomacy in an information age. The final section offers some concluding remarks.

2. The World in the Information Age: Current Transformations

The world is now being described to have entered into the information age. The information age is the victory of bits over atoms, when cyberspace is replacing the real space. Information is now considered as a national resource and a vital tool for governments. Economy is being described as information economy as new mode of

³ *Reinventing Diplomacy in the Information Age*, CSIS, October 9, 2000.

⁴ Cited in C Satapathy "Role of the State in the E-World", *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 23-29, 2000, p. 3497.

information predominates. Societies, particularly developed ones, are said to be rapidly transforming into information societies. But what are the defining features of an information society? Information society can be defined in five different ways.⁵ These are technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural. The most common definition of the information society emphasises on technological developments. According to this viewpoint, information processing: storage and transmission have led to the application of information technologies (IT) in virtually all corners of society. *Secondly* in economic terms, we find that the concept of information society, which originated in the 1960s and 1970s and the more recent idea of globalisation - are closely linked to the advances in ICTs. Marc Porat described United States as an information society as 'the major arenas of economic activity are the information goods and service producers'⁶ Since then, the concept of information society or societies has gained increased currency to depict the economic transformation of different societies. ICTs, with free market economy, are also major driving forces of the present day buzzword "globalisation". In an era of globalisation, we are now witnessing inter-linked economy between and among the nationstates, where ICTs have contributed most.

Thirdly, another popular measure of the emergence of an information society is the focus on occupational change. An information society arrives when clerks, teachers, lawyers and entertainers outnumber dockers and miners, which are evident in every society. If we combine economic and occupational change it is enormous, irrespective of any country or region. "Three main aspects of social change are particularly affected by ICTs: the 'formal economy' of paid work and officially organised production and services; the informal economy' of unpaid domestic activities and voluntary work; and the boundaries between public and private services."⁷ Capitalist societies are using ICTs to improve industrial productivity and standard service operations. *Fourthly*, the spatial dimension emphasises on the

⁵ For a brief discussion, see, Frank Webster, "What Information Society", *The Information Society* 10(1994), pp. 1-23.

⁶ Frank Webster, *Theories of The Information Society*, Routledge, 1995, p. 12

⁷ Ian Miles, "The Information Society: Competing Perspectives on the Social and Economic Implications of Information and Communication Technologies" in William H. Dutton (ed.) *Information and Communication Technologies: visions and Realities*, Oxford, 1996, p.43.