

BANGLADESH AT 35: INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND EXTERNAL LINKAGES

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Bangladesh, which was once called a basket case, is today a leading moderate Muslim democratic country of the world, and has immense geo-strategic and geo-economic importance. Its geographic location in South Asia has made Bangladesh an important country in the region. By its *physical geography* major portion of the country is surrounded by Indian states, which makes the Bangladeshis to feel 'India locked'¹. Having being located in the Center of South and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh is a potential route for commercial interactions of these two regions. Besides, Bangladesh is also located in between the two strong economies - China and India - who are also looking Bangladesh as a market for their products. Apart from these locational advantages, Bangladesh is having a huge market oriented population, cheap labour forces and potential source for oil and gas, which are also not gone unnoticed. The Readymade Garment sector has become the largest source of earning foreign reserves in Bangladesh. The NGOs are also performing well in the economic and social sectors of Bangladesh.

The independence of Bangladesh in 1971 was also a unique historical event as it symbolized a social revolution in terms of rising expectations among a large segment of the people for a better life. These expectations enabled the predominantly middle class and subsequently an overwhelming number of people to undergo a bitter and bloody war of independence. The independence of Bangladesh was the result of its people's aspirations for democracy, self-identity, equality, freedom and progressive society. Ironically, the progress made in the past thirty-five years of its independent existence has belied all those over-optimistic hopes in reality in Bangladesh. Despite sustained domestic and international efforts to improve economic and demographic prospects, Bangladesh remained a poor, overpopulated, and ill-governed nation. Major impediments to growth include frequent cyclones and floods,

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1. Hussain, Akmal (1989), *Geo-Politics and Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, CLIO, 7 (2), pp. 99-100. Also see, Akhtar, Shaheen, 'Determinants of Foreign Policy Behavior of Small States in South Asia', *Regional Studies*, p. 95.

inefficient state-owned enterprises, inadequate port facilities, a rapidly growing labor force that cannot be absorbed by agriculture, delays in exploiting energy resources (natural gas), insufficient power supplies, and slow implementation of economic reforms. Economic reform is stalled in many instances by political infighting and corruption at all levels of government.

Today, Bangladesh has shown considerable resilience and is trying to overcome its various problems, with the aim of acquiring a respectable position in the comity of nations. The political instability and problems of governance are encouraging to the recent growth of religious extremism in Bangladesh. Driven by political compulsions and calculations, the major political parties have encouraged the growth of religious feelings, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) propagated the ideology of the Muslim League.² In a parallel development, Bangladesh is witnessing signs of social fragmentation due to the alienation of the minority population.

This study is an attempt to focus on geo-economic and locational advantages of Bangladesh as well as its external linkages. The study will also draw the attention of the policy makers in the context of recent rise of fringes elements and political environment in Bangladesh, which would give negative impression on trade, aid and investment regime, and country's New Economic Diplomacy.

Bangladesh is a small state in terms of size, population, resources, state of economy, and military capability and somehow behaves differently from the economically and militarily stronger countries in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. The internal compulsions of the country and external forces have always remained the major determinants in foreign policy formulation of Bangladesh. Although, the priorities in foreign relations have seen different as ideology of ruling party and regional and international situations were different in different regimes. Initially, in the foreign policy application Bangladesh had some target areas that included India, South Asia, Muslim world, West Europe, the United States and China. Although, it is no exaggeration to note that Bangladesh foreign policy remained India centric in the existed strategic environment of South Asia. Its governing elite either perceived

² Ahmed, Sayeed Ifterkhar (2006), 'Resurgence of Islam in Bangladesh Politics', *South Asian Journal*, p.149.

India vital for economic and political benefits or threats to country's security for military and environmental reasons. However, in the last couple of years Bangladesh foreign policy establishment has given Southeast and East Asia special considerations in the context of changed international scenario. A historical glance of evolution and nature of foreign policy of Bangladesh is required to understand the present external Linkages.

Since the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1990, the present ruling party has followed the foreign policy of its military regimes, which were mostly based on pro-West, pro-Islamic world and pro-China determinants and were almost anti-Indian. A moderate democratic and secular nationalist government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was replaced by the undemocratic forces in August 1975 and his policies of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, non-alignment, and close friendship with India at the regional level underwent a dramatic change under the military regimes. Begum Khaleda Zia and her party nevertheless represented the post-Awami League dynamics in Bangladesh politics. As the BNP leaders have always been opposing renewal of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace with India, she pledged "to free Bangladesh from the shackles of Indian domination and the limitations of Bangladesh's sovereignty, which the treaty imposes due to the lack of foresight of the late Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman".³ The statements, if compared with what Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proclaimed soon after the independence of Bangladesh, refer to how the emotions and sentiments of people changed with time. In 1972, framing the foreign policy of Bangladesh, Mujib told the newly independent nation, "Friendship with India is a cornerstone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh".⁴ Even in India, the same mood prevailed then, which could be well understood from Indira Gandhi's speech in the Lok Sabha in 1972. She stated, "In future, the governments and people of India and Bangladesh, who share common ideals and sacrifices, would forge a relationship based on the principles of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-

³ Dubey, Muchkund, 'Changing Guards in Bangladesh', *The Hindu*, New Delhi, October 19, 2001.

⁴ Department of Publications, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (1972), *Bangladesh Progress Report*, Dhaka