

## **NORMATIVE TRENDS, VALUES, AND BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY: A FRAMEWORK**

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*“We he have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”*

Lord Palmerston, (Henry John Temple, 1784-1865) 3rd Viscount, 1848.

These forthright and prophetic words of Lord Palmerston dating back about a century and a half had placed the essence of a country’s foreign policy destiny. Time has changed, so has process and structure of decision making, and even the nature of the international system itself has changed; but the focus or motivation of foreign policy decision-making has not. It is appropriate to mention that Palmerston's foreign office had about 50 staff members, a hundred year later George Brown was presiding over a foreign office with a staff hundred-fold more than in Palmerston's time. Across the Atlantic, when Thomas Jefferson took over as the First Secretary of State in 1790; the U.S. State Department had eight employees, two diplomatic missions and ten consular posts. If one compares the current diplomatic setup in either of the two countries with the old one can imagine how complex and wide-ranging foreign policy establishment has emerged in either of these countries.

Foreign policy of any country is a process of evolution, since ninety per cent of the time foreign policy is, as Henry Kissinger put it, “a trend, not a hot item”. Treaty obligations cannot be abandoned. Even lesser commitments undertaken by one government cannot be lightly set aside by its successor. Being a member of international organizations requires a government to keep paying its dues, political and financial<sup>1</sup>. Being a new nation-state Bangladesh is yet to familiarize itself with the complex nature of the international system, which provides the base and context of foreign policy decision making. Touching on a few specific antecedents and current issues, the article suggests some ideas which may form the basis of a framework for more thoughtful reflection by our policy makers and others concerned in the framing of our external policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in John Dickie, *Inside the Foreign Office* (London: Chapman's Publishing, 1922).

## **I. Background**

"The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent nation, the 136th member of the United Nations, carried with it an important meaning not so much in terms of the political architectonic, as in the fact of ideological moorings.

The preamble of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh passed by the constituent Assembly of Bangladesh on November 4, 1972 stated, "We, the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our Independence on the 26th day of March 1971, and, through a historic struggle for national liberation, established the independent, sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh"<sup>2</sup>. In 1977 by proclamation order No.1 the phrase "a historic struggle for national liberation" was replaced with, "a historic war for national independence"<sup>3</sup>. Does this represent any basic divide in national ideology? Perhaps not, for the change at best represents a regime dimension or an act by a new regime in its search for legitimacy in the changed context of national politics.

If foreign policy of a country is the reflection of its domestic policy – as we have already seen with regard to the policies of the two old functioning democracies of the world – the lack of consensus in the approach of our policy makers demonstrates the difficulty of our leaders in agreeing on an irreducible minimum for giving expression to our national aspirations in consonance with the zeitgeist of the country.

The struggle of national independence of Bangladesh was not only a struggle for the emancipation of a people; it was a struggle for the preservation of democratic human values and rediscovering the cultural soul which were trampled under foot by an undesired military authoritarianism which successively imposed itself upon a hapless people<sup>4</sup>.

Love for the land and love for the people who inhabit this land, and love for the language and culture and the people of this land – these are the feelings which form the bedrock of the new nationalism of today in Bangladesh<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh passed by the Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh, November 4, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh* - as amended upto October 10, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> A.F. Salauddin Ahmed. *Bangladesh: Tradition and Transformation* (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1987).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

Why then our inability till today, to find a common ground? Foreign policy in any country is an extension of domestic policy. Bangladesh should offer no exception to this. In British political system the Labour and Conservative parties may disagree on the modality of implementation of policies, with difference of emphasis, but there is hardly any divergence of views on the basic policy objectives or their foreign perceptions of national interest, which determine their foreign policy objective and its projection, are almost indistinguishable. In our country such a perceptual convergence is still pre-eminently missing.

## **II. Search for Mindset**

As in domestic politics so in foreign policy of any country history and historical experience plays a most dominant role. If we have yet not been able to conceive of a proper foreign policy objective it is not because of lack of our political commitment or patriotism. Regardless of differing political orientations of the major parties of the country they all realize that we have only one country and one flag.

If we take a deeper look into history of what was India our ability to understand the present and still prevailing doubts about the nature of our statecraft, secular, non-secular or Islamic will become clearer. The War of Independence was fought on the basis of a secular philosophy, telling the world that religion alone could not be the basis of a state. The military-bureaucratic combine of Pakistan got a rude shock when the Bengali nation rose as one man and at the cost of three million martyrs made the surrender of the Pakistan Army on December 1971 possible. The Muslim countries, excepting Iraq and Egypt, did not recognize Bangladesh for a long time. The Saudi Arabian recognition of Bangladesh on 16 August 1975 was quickly followed by other conservative Islamic countries. Efforts were then made to give an Islamic orientation to our foreign policy. But if we try to find Bengali Muslim mindset in history it will be easier for us to recognize what ought to be our foreign policy objectives.

Along with the existence of the civilizations of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa we know of similar civilizations in the Sutlej valley in Rajasthan, in Ahmedabad and also in area what now constitutes North Bengal. In the scale of civilization the Aryans were perhaps inferior to the people of Mohenjo Daro, but their more aggressive character and their superiority in the art of warfare gave them the victory<sup>6</sup>. The fact that Bengalese as a race with

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<sup>6</sup> Humayun Kabir, *The Indian Heritage* (New York. Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 3.