

Foreign Policy of Bangladesh towards India-China Tussle: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis

NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability
2023, Vol. 6(1) Pages 37-53



njips.nust.edu.pk

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37540/njips.vi.138>

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Abstract

The security of South Asia often remains in turmoil because of the rivalry between the neighboring countries. South Asian countries, particularly developing states, adhere to the principles of strategic hedging for security and economic development. Bangladesh, as an ambitious and developing state, is no exception. Aiming for economic prosperity, Bangladesh maintains a balanced relationship with its bordering states. The evolving regional economic and political dynamics are becoming more competitive and challenging than ever before. This competitive environment can enable Bangladesh to pursue economic and political advantages, reflecting neoclassical realism. Considering the South Asian political developments, the India-China relationship is the foundation of regional balance. This research utilizes a qualitative methodology based on neo-classical realism to assess previous data and forecast potential intervening variables that drive Bangladesh to achieve strategic balance in its bilateral relationship with India and China. In this context, the study uses the neoclassical realist model to explain the structural and national interests of Bangladesh and the influence of the strategic environment of the region on its foreign policies.

Keywords

Bangladesh, neoclassical realism, foreign policy, India, China

Introduction

The 'State' as an entity relies on rational calculation and concentrates on alignment and balance to function appropriately in the junctures of an insecure environment. In solemnizing reality, the weak states perpetuate a margin of safety through their foreign policy (David, 1991, p. 245). Bangladesh, an important country in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, expects to pursue its foreign policy course based on possible

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Received 19 September 2022; **Revised** 15 January 2023; **Accepted** 17 January 2023; **Published online** 23 January 2023

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national interests and the regional structure that has a benchmarking effect (Yasmin, 2019). Therefore, Bangladesh's foreign policy reflects domestic political urges and external influence.

In the last ten years, the government of Bangladesh has prioritized long-term projects as part of the national interest. However, on the other hand, Bangladesh as a state is highly lucrative for foreign investments due to its resources, geopolitical location, and investment-friendly economy. Likewise, Bangladesh is also in search of opportunities to engage with neighbors. The assertive foreign policy of Bangladesh is made possible by the tense relations between the country's close ally India and its new strategic partner China. As a sovereign state sharing borders with regional powers, Bangladesh is always dialectically grateful to the hedging strategy to maintain the strategic balance between the powerful states (Siddiquee, 2022).

Nevertheless, regional tensions have become somewhat increasingly visible vis-à-vis national interest. As a result, Bangladesh is progressively looking for security through a realpolitik lens. In this respect, the *behavioral* source of the foreign policy of the subject state includes various national determinants. The primary focus of this paper is to discover these interfering factors in the foreign policy of Bangladesh. The article analyses two major regional countries, India and China, considering their geostrategic and geopolitical importance.

In view of the above, the paper elucidates several factors that play a crucial role in determining foreign policy choices concerning the quandary associated with India and China. In doing so, the discourse is framed by the neoclassical realism theory, accompanied by the foreign policy choices of Bangladesh from 2009 to 2022. Furthermore, the study aims to understand the intervening elements influencing the behavioral source behind Bangladesh's foreign policy outcomes. The proceeding part presents the main arguments, which view Bangladesh as the pivot of South Asia and highlights several different modes of its engagement with India and China. The paper concludes with some potential challenges Bangladesh may face in pursuing its interests and related strategic policies.

Theoretical Framework

Realists define themselves as practitioners of the 'science of power politics' (Sutch & Elias, 2007). Classical realists assert that a state's outward behaviour is dictated by its domestic politics and preferences. They stress that a state's foreign policy must be conducted under domestically controlled conditions. Political and economic ideology, national character, partisan politics and socio-economic variables, regarded as domestic factors, are also considered to influence any state's foreign policy (Rose, 1998; Morgenthau et al., 1985). Although there are differences in the configurations and interests of domestic political actors, the influence of domestic politics in establishing foreign policy patterns cannot be undermined (Fearon, 1998). The structural realists, in contrast, argue that states' foreign policy behaviour is determined by the international system's structural contours (Waltz, 1979, p. 49).

Power distribution in the international system unambiguously defines a state's foreign policy decisions (Dunne & Schmidt, 2011). The proponent of *neorealism*, Kenneth Waltz, argues for defensive realism, particularly believing domestic political factors are causal variables for international outcomes (see also Williams, 2008). As two variants of structural realism, offensive realism stresses that systemic pressure influences state behaviour in an anarchic system, while defensive

realism asserts that systemic factors drive state behaviour to some extent but are not wholly responsible (Rose, 1998).

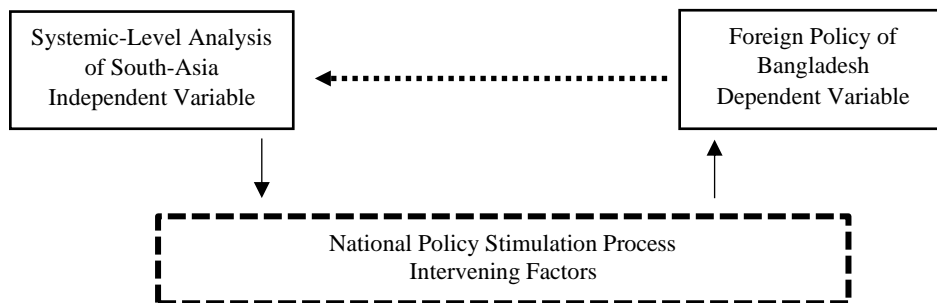
Though classical and neo-realism use different lenses to understand a state's external behavior, both have limited relevance. The first theory contends that only domestic variables influence international policy, whereas the latter points to the systemic factors that influence external behavior. Even though both are important in explaining external behavior, a state's foreign policy results from a *rational* calculation. Neo-classical realism is a convergence between classical and neorealism which considers that international systemic competition alone cannot explain states' actions (Dunne & Schmidt, 2011). It can also be connected with the Inclusivist school of thought, which bridges the *Innepolitik* and *Aussenpolitik* schools (Chakma, 2015). *Innepolitik* school explains that domestic or internal politics spur foreign policy behavior; meanwhile, the *Aussenpolitik* school affirms that international or external politics shape a state's foreign policy. By combining external and internal variables, neoclassical realism presents a framework to evaluate the factors for studying foreign policy.

Neo-classical realism views domestic political dynamics as interfering variables between systemic restrictions (independent variables) and foreign policy behavior (dependent variables) (Dunne & Schmidt, 2011). But, several domestic-level variables have a significant impact on a state's ambition as well as its foreign policy. The masterpiece 'From Wealth to Power' by Fareed Zakaria (1998) identified four critical domestic variables that affect a government's ability to take vital foreign policy decisions; centralization of government's power; relative autonomy from the society; degree of elite cohesion; and, mobilization and extraction capacity. In practical terms, foreign policy decisions are made by the government's political pillars, and thus it is crucial to consider the leader's policy priorities while evaluating foreign policy. In line with Zakaria, other scholars have also argued that domestic groups motivated by commercial interests might oppose foreign policy with negative economic implications (Ripsman et al., 2016). In the domestic purview, the public and media might also play a role in foreign policy decision-making. All these variables make the domestic process of making foreign policy decisions complex. That is why states often react differently to similar systemic pressures and possibilities (Williams, 2012).

Adapting to realism, Bangladesh has always tried to balance India and China with bilateral relations. The manner Bangladesh shields its foreign policy fits very well with a neoclassical realist framework which is to maximize gains and minimize risks. However, as India-China relations have pushed regional tensions towards conflict, Bangladesh has repeatedly altered its approach according to the situation.

Regarding the independent variables, Bangladesh has no control or predictability over the international or regional environment where players like China and India put their behavioral impulses toward the system and their power projection sophistication. Like the nature of foreign policy, India and China's bilateral relationship can influence the regional structure, and Bangladesh must adapt to the system. Bangladesh's foreign policy, which will be examined throughout the article, is the dependent variable. However, domestic issues influence the foreign policy outcome and can change the structure's appearance between these dependent and independent variables (See figure 1).

Figure 1: Neoclassical Realist Model applied to the foreign policy of Bangladesh



Scholars of international relations have frequently resorted to neoclassical realism to investigate the behavior of a state. Though neoclassical realism is one of the embodiments of realism, most scholars have always judged state behaviors using the mass branches of realism, especially classical realism. Realism propagates power as the driving force of politics; the focal point of modern politics is the balance of power. Danilovic (2002) agreed that the style of the balance of power is embedded in the pattern of regional power exercises. When defining South Asia's political climate, a major role is played in the tense relationship between India and China (Zhang, 2020).

Bhumitra presented that the Innenpolitik School criticizes realism because of its immense focus on external factors in analyzing foreign policy. And Aussenpolitik School's argument mirrors the neo-realist theoretical approach, where the international system is the primary determinant of state behavior in the international system. However, the Inclusivist or Integrative school of thought interlinks the influence of domestic politics and the international system, thus, echoes neo-classical realism (Chakma, 2014). Nonetheless, Majumdar takes a different lens in line with neo-classical realism, and she puts that Bangladesh-India relations can be explained as fear complex from the Bangladesh side. She covers structural factors of neo-classical realism with geopolitical security concerns and domestic factors with the migration and resource-sharing disputes, which shape the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh (Majmudar, 2014). On the other hand, Yasmin (2019) contemplates India and China's rise in Asia and, thus, projects Bangladesh's ability to alter the zero-sum expectation in the regional power struggle into an even-score game.

Strategic Position of Bangladesh in South Asia

Bangladesh's strategic importance in South Asia has to be analyzed in the context of its closest neighbor India's aspiration to be a regional power and China's rise in the international economic and political arena (Yasmin, 2019). Encircled by powerful political and economic elites in global affairs, Bangladesh is perplexed by a security dilemma from the small country syndrome (Majmudar, 2014). Bangladesh has made reasonable efforts to improve its financial capacity and pragmatic investment environment for the past few years. For instance, the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of Bangladesh in the fiscal year 2021 was 6.9 percent (The World Bank, n.d.), reflecting sustainable economic growth. Bangladesh seeks to strengthen

ties with India and China to maintain economic growth. Thus, the study focuses on Bangladesh's structural and foreign policy considerations vis-à-vis India and China.

A Cause-and-Effect Relationship: Bangladesh and India

The cultural, linguistic, and historical ties and close physical proximity to India have made Bangladesh politically and economically rely on India, which are considered structural elements (Ali, 2018). From a neoclassical perspective, India is a systemic reality directly influencing Bangladesh's international relations. Before the partition of 1947, Bangladesh was part of United India, despite the verisimilitude of political and territorial division, the geographical attachment of 54 common rivers and 90% of the common border, the cultural and linguistic closeness with Eastern India and some states of North-Eastern-India illuminate Bangladesh emotional kinship with the country regarding its foreign policy and decision making in international relations.

Bangladesh uses its linguistic and cultural ties with West Bengal (The eastern part of India) as a tool for foreign policy, which can be characterized as 'soft power' (Kumar, 2014). The application of soft power using linguistic and cultural affinity was seen in the first 'pink-ball-test' between Bangladesh and India in Kolkata. In November 2019, Indian Premier Narendra Modi invited Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to watch the day and night test match between India and Bangladesh cricket team. In light of that event, Sheikh Hasina discussed bilateral issues (Teesta Water Sharing Agreement and India-Bangladesh's historical relationship) with West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on her visit to India ("Prime Minister to Visit Kolkata Friday", 2019).

Even though there is a massive trade deficit, India imposes non-trade barriers to Bangladesh, such as lab tests, requirements in packaging, border customs, and limited facilities for storing and packing goods. Moreover, the informal trade between India and Bangladesh also rallies with existent trade deficits (Sidel, 2007). Accepting the reality of the geographical surrounding of India, Sheikh Hasina signed the transit deal with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi by opening the Ashuganj port for the trans-shipment of goods to Agartala. However, signing the transit deal may strengthen the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN-MVA). The focus on the BBIN-MVA agreement would be a pragmatic alternative for Bangladesh to establish trade relations with Bhutan and Nepal to achieve its economic security from India (Kumar, 2016).

Bangladeshi pressure groups' interest in India-Bangladesh relations lies in the economic calculations and trade facilities within India. The geographical proximity to India has created investment opportunities in hydroelectric energy for Bangladesh (Pulla et al., 2020). Moreover, Bangladesh's largest agribusiness industry, PRAN-RFL group, and cement company Lafarge have lucrative opportunities regarding their cement, plastic products, processed foods, and beverages supply capabilities. Here, business relations with Tripura must be emphasized because of Bangladesh's high export of fish, soap, cotton, cement, and ready-made-garments. Additionally, India has extended its loan system to Bangladesh through Exim Bank India for several infrastructural development projects such as energy, railways, transportation, ICT (Information and Communication Technology), and education sectors (Muni, 2021). Therefore, the government's main development agenda and public-private business interests tactfully influence determining the foreign of Bangladesh towards India.

A Cause-and-effect relationship: Bangladesh and China

The formal relationship between China and Bangladesh was established in 1975, but this relationship's roots can be traced back to ancient times. Though it's a much-debated issue, that's precisely when the relationship started, presumably, and it was twenty-five hundred years ago when the relationship got moving. But the historical analysis suggests the relationship between the two countries began with trade through the ancient Silk Route; traces have also been found that the Chinese visited Chittagong port during Han Dynasty for the same purpose (Kamruzzaman, 2021). China-Bangladesh relations have evolved from time to time based on the nature of the South Asian politics

Bangladesh-China relations have shown coalescence based on development projects. Like China, Bangladesh has also become an advocate for development through investment. Bangladesh is preparing to develop itself without giving a threat perception to its neighboring countries. Bangladesh has repeatedly desired to pursue up-to-scratch relations with China (Sarker, 2014). This section focuses on the effect-and-causal argument on China-Bangladesh relations.

Geographically Bangladesh is located at the border of South and Southeast Asia and is also a pivot point of the Indian Ocean. South Asian neighborhood, on the other hand, carries substantial geopolitical value for China's regional ambitions. Therefore, structural-level concoctions of South Asia are closely linked to China-Bangladesh relations. China's South Asian policy is more or less directed towards marine objectives, and for several years now, China has been investing in ports around South Asia (Yu et al., 2019; for more details, see Table 1). Linked to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Project, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has started the use of submarines in full swing at the Indian Ocean to protect their geopolitical aspiration (Barnes and Baldino, 2018).

Table 1: China's investment in Seaports in South Asia

| Year | Region | Investor | Name of the port | Host state |
|-------------|---------------|--|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 2003 | South Asia | China Overseas Port Holding | Gwadar | Pakistan |
| 2008 | Bay of Bengal | China Merchants Port Holdings Co. Ltd. | Hambantota | Sri Lanka |
| 2014 | Bay of Bengal | China Harbor Engineering Company Ltd. | Port Colombo | Sri Lanka |
| 2014 | Bay of Bengal | China Harbor Engineering Company Ltd. | Kyaukpyu | Myanmar |
| 2015 | Bay of Bengal | China Communications Construction Company Ltd. | Chittagong | Bangladesh |

Source: (Compiled by the authors)

China also intends to get access to Bangladesh's port because it would allow China to come very close to India and challenge India in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, Bangladesh signed an MoU with a Dutch company (as a strategic maneuver) regarding Patuakhali port. Likewise, Bangladesh has also initiated the Matarbari Deep Sea Port project with the assistance of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which will be completed by 2025 (Shawon, 2020; Khan, 2016). Despite these developments, China has a keen eye for the seaport of Bangladesh to compete with India. Similarly, Bangladesh is also looking for rapid development, which necessitates significant foreign investments. Given the dilemma of the situation,

Bangladesh having close ties with China might impact its economic-based relationship with India. Nevertheless, Bangladesh still allowed China to invest US\$9 billion to modernize Chittagong Oort (Chung, 2018). Therefore, Bangladesh strategically kept its future relationship with China secured.

The development of common interest is integral to Bangladesh's foreign policy discourse, and China also shares this idea of peaceful development with Bangladesh (Mannan, 2019). The Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflow of Bangladesh has expanded over the years; China has become the most significant FDI source of Bangladesh in terms of the gross flow of \$940 million for the fiscal year 2022 ("China's biggest source of FDI", 2022). With a profound desire to become a middle-income country by 2021 and a high-income nation by 2041, Bangladesh seeks significant investments and grants with comfortable conditions (Hossain, 2017). Simultaneously China goes well with an economic partner of developing states, and for Bangladesh, China appears to be a suitable partner (Hassan, 2018). With the landmark visit of Chinese leader President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh in 2016, 27 MoUs and agreements were endorsed, costing around 13.6 billion USD. China has expressed keen interest in investing in infrastructure, IT, roads, highway and maritime infrastructure, energy and agriculture, and sustainable development projects (Chung, 2018).

Apart from that FDI, the Chinese government has loaded an eye-catching amount on various development projects in Bangladesh. China's exports to Bangladesh, which was 1.90 billion USD in 2004, after a gap of 10 years, increased to 10.10 billion in 2015, which can be said to have increased almost ten times. But in that sense, the growth of imports compared to exports was much lower. But the expectation remains as China committed to considering 97% of Bangladesh's imported goods duty-free (Sakib, 2020). However, the export-import ratio indicated colossal trade deficits, and it continues.

For Bangladesh, acquiring economic development is the government's highest priority, which demands amplified connectivity with neighbors with enhanced FDI. Moreover, it also brings secured external sovereignty and domestic stability. To realize such a vision, Bangladesh has set up Forces Goal 2030, a comprehensive plan to upgrade its armed forces, and vision 41 for economic opulence, which targets GDP of FY31 and FY41, 9.0 and 9.9, respectively (Hussain, 2020).

The ruling power of Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina has articulated its policy so that both Dhaka and Beijing can work together for enhanced economic development. And such a hint was available from the Bangladesh Awami League Election Manifesto of 2018, wherein it was stressed multiple times to strengthen Sino-Bangladesh relations (Election Manifesto of Bangladesh Awami League, 2018). Besides the government loan, Bangladesh has also approached major banks in China for financial assistance. Table 2 shows some loans granted by the Chinese government to Bangladesh in development sectors.

Table 2: Some notable loans granted by China to Bangladesh from 2015-2020

| Year | Loan for | Amount of Loan (USD) |
|-------------|--|-----------------------------|
| 2020 | 1. Electricity grid | \$970 million |
| | 2. Dhaka-Ashulia elevated Expressway | \$1155.18 million |
| | 3. Digital connectivity | \$837 million |
| | 4. Water plant in Rajshahi | \$276.25 million |
| | 5. 6 TV stations for BTV | \$9125.12 million |
| 2019 | 1. Karnaphuli River Tunnel | \$689.35 million |
| | 2. Info-Sarkar | \$151.64 million |
| | 3. Single-point mooring in Maheskhali | \$550.67 million |
| | 4. Telecom Network upgrade | \$224.96 million |
| | 5. Rail project in Padma Bridge | \$2667.94 million |
| | 6. Upgrading the power network over Dhaka | \$1402.93 million |
| 2018 | 1. Padma Bridge rail links project | \$2.76 billion |
| | 2. Digital Connectivity | \$837 million |
| | 3. Padma rail link project | \$3.14 billion |
| 2017 | 1. Padma Bridge Rail Link (Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga) | \$2.18 billion |
| | 2. Padma Bridge Rail Link (Bhanga-Jessore) | \$1.14 billion |
| | 3. Dual Track (Dohazai-Cox's-Bazar) | \$1.18 billion |
| | 4. Dual Track (Dhaka-Chittagong) | \$3.97 billion |
| | 5. Double line (Joydevpur-Ishwardi) | \$897 million |
| | 6. Railway workshop in Rajbari | \$200 million |
| 2016 | To invest in power plants, a seaport, and railways | \$24 billion |
| 2015 | Nine projects suggested by Bangladesh | \$7.48 billion |

Source: Compiled by the authors from different newspapers

In addition to the government’s loan, Bangladesh is also a member of the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB), a reliable partner for Bangladesh in infrastructure development projects. Table 3 indicates some projects that the bank has already approved, and according to AIIB, five more projects have been proposed by the Bangladesh government, but they are under inspection. Bangladesh aims to connect with South Asia, and for that purpose, they have joined the BCIM-EC project (see Figure 2), which promotes 3-Ts: Trade, Transport, Tourism (Uberoi, 2016) and BRI.

Table 3: Projects approved by AIIB

| Year | Project Name | Amount (USD) |
|------|---|--------------|
| 2016 | • Distribution System Upgrade and Expansion | 185 million |
| 2017 | • Natural Gas Infrastructure and Efficiency Improvement | 60 million |
| 2018 | • Bangladesh Bhola EPP | 60 million |
| | • Power system upgrade and expansion | 1 million |
| 2019 | • Municipal Water Supply and Sanitation Project | 100 million |
| | • Transmission Grid Expansion Project in Dhaka & West Zone | 200 million |
| | • Dhaka Sanitation Improvement | 160 million |
| | • COVID-19 Active Response and Expenditure Support (CARES) Program | 250 million |
| 2020 | • Rural Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Human Capital Development Project | 200 million |
| | • COVID-19 Emergency and Crisis Response Facility | 300 million |

Source: (Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank)

Figure 2: Connectivity Map of BCIM-EC project



Source: (Rahman, 2014)

Security is another highly prioritized policy area for Bangladesh. The security of Bangladesh is prioritized in three layers: first, to modernize its armed forces with advanced training and equipment to maintain sovereignty; second, to fight terrorism and use the military to maintain an independent, peaceful foreign policy. Its implementation can be seen with ‘Forces Goal 2030’ (Mushtaq, 2018). This goal aspires to transform Bangladesh’s military into a three-dimensional force capable of conducting multi-platform warfare. As this target needed a proper backup, China again supported Bangladesh (currently, Bangladesh is the second-ranked state to buy weapons from China). From 2008 to 2018, Bangladesh secured its military modernization with 1.93 billion USD provided by China. Bangladesh has already

purchased submarines, helicopters, tanks, and multiple rocket launcher systems, including 2 Ming-class submarines from China (Barua, 2018).

Behavioral Source of Foreign Policy of Bangladesh

Prudent policies and the vision of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, also widely known as Bangabandhu, have made Bangladesh one of Asia's fastest-growing economies. Bangabandhu had two goals: first, to become self-sufficient, and second, to transition from a heavily reliant foreign aid economy to one more competitive global marketplace. Bangabandhu's foreign narratives of 'coexistence' and 'friendship to all' have left a lasting legacy of strong trading relations with other countries. Bangabandhu's equitable torch lighting of Bangladesh's economy appears to be a major strategy for guiding the country to its current affluent state. According to these premises, Bangladesh owns several considerations that behave as an interfering factor in the formulation of foreign policy, which is referred to as a behavioral source of foreign policy in this article.

Considering the exploration of Bangladesh's overall relations with India and China, it is evident that the country possesses particular structural and state-level influence when formulating foreign policy. The situation in Bangladesh demonstrates an extraordinary democratic zeal for growth, which is unquestionably a solid indicator when attempting to determine the cause of the behavior. Through a well-balanced foreign policy, these interfering behavioral sources have played a valuable role in accomplishing long-term goals. This section aims to highlight behavioral authorities that intervene in the process of making foreign policy decisions.

Priorities in Policy Implementation

The implementation approach of a country shows its political values and represents the actual agenda of foreign policy. The problem and the policy implementation process offer the overall ambition of the state's foreign policy. Bangladesh's state-level policy implementation describes the existing social problems in the perception of political leadership. Most of the issues identified are addressed by using development as a mantra.

The 'Vision 2021' of 'Digital Bangladesh' reflects the aspiration of the ruling party Awami League (AL) Bangladesh, through two perspectives; the solution to every public problem is development; and winning the trust of foreign investors for development (Mazumdar & Alharahsheh, 2020). It can be seen that, more or less, all policy outcomes exhibit developmental aspects. This rhetoric has given the international government legitimacy based on development-supportive government and the confidence to win the elections (Mazumdar & Alharahsheh, 2020). Furthermore, the government has connected *Digital Bangladesh* with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received the ICT Sustainable Development Award in 2015 from International Telecommunication Union ("Sheikh Hasina receives ITU Award", 2015).

Furthermore, in the case of security policies, the government has also adopted various development techniques to make them more easily implementable. Development reforms came through the transformation of Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) (earlier known as Bangladesh Rifles [BDR]) for combating the rebels. In the year 2019, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina endorsed a project under the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council that will upgrade BGB into a three-dimensional force. Earlier, the Bangladesh government announced BGB Vision 2041,

which indicated the development of BGB and borderline security as this project would bring the 442-km border with Myanmar and India under the surveillance of BGB (Abdullah, 2020).

The Leadership

According to the Forbes report of 2020, Sheikh Hasina ranked 39th out of 100 in the world ranking of the world's most powerful women (Forbes, 2020). As the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, she has earned respect from both the conscious nationalist citizens of Bangladesh and the party. When considering Sheikh Hasina's political perception from various perspectives, it has been highlighted that her personality positively reflects her actions.

Firstly, her thoughts on power elements are apparent and balanced by projecting soft power through specific goals. She has utilized international platforms to create the perceptions she has been promoting. At the 66th session of UNGA, she proposed a model called "People's Empowerment and Development" ("PM's 'peace' model accepted in UN", 2012), which was very appreciated and adopted by the UN as a resolution. Her strategy is to maintain cooperation just as much as needed to execute Vision 2021 and Vision 2041; for that, she holds hope in India and China (Khondker, 2017). Secondly, she has effectively balanced the national economic interests vis-à-vis regional powers. It is encouraging to observe that Bangladesh avoided engaging in international conflict while retaining its focus on economic growth and development (Ruhullah & Qodir, 2020). For instance, while the recent confrontation between India and China at LAC occurred, Bangladesh kept itself from engaging with it.

Third, Sheikh Hasina has shown commitment to regional economic growth. Under her administration, Bangladesh has warm-heartedly accepted initiatives like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Myanmar (BBIN), South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation, and Asian Highway. In addition, she has partnered with China, India, and Russia to build several power plants in the country. In 2017, she brought two Chinese Ming Class submarines costing 203\$ million under Goal 2030 to modernize Bangladesh Armed Forces (Ashraf & Rana, 2017). On the other hand, Bangladesh kept Teesta water-sharing deal unremarked. It also followed the long-term 'Comprehensive Defense Pact' with India proposed in the same year (Rezaul, 2017).

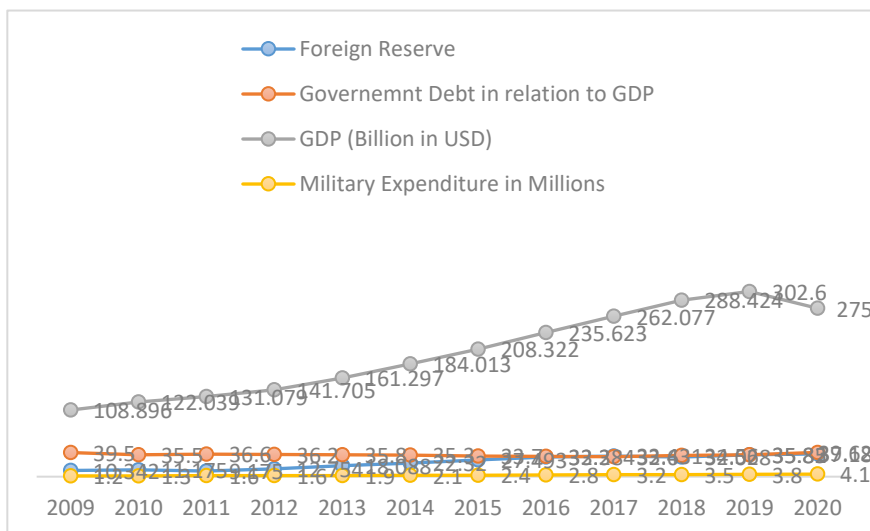
It is observed that Sheikh Hasina has followed the development-based peace approach during her 12 years of administration. Not only has she achieved foreign policy objectives, but she has also retained a successful image in the international arena. She was awarded United Nations Champions of the Year 2015 under the UN Environment Program (UNEP) ("Hasina receives Champions of the Earth award", 2015). She recently received the Vaccine Hero Award, WITSA Global ICT Excellence, DCD APAC Award, and GovInsider Innovation Award in 2019 ("Sheikh Hasina so far receives 37 int'l accolades", 2019).

Culture of Strategic Planning

Strategic hedging has been one of the strategic cults of Bangladesh for the last 12 years. Hedging is a strategic concept that intentionally provides Bangladesh with a way to seek economic and political benefits and opportunities to achieve protection for its further development (Karim, 2022). In a neo-classical realistic view, it might not be incorrect to posit that, just as India has a preface in Bangladesh's development,

so has China. Considering the South Asian political arena, the India-China relationship is the basis of regional balance. That is why regional tension plays a significant role in Bangladesh’s foreign policy. In such a conflicting situation, the pre-eminent measure to take for navigating forward for Bangladesh is strategic hedging. Bangladesh has shown significant economic growth in addition to enhancing its military strength. Figure 3 shows Bangladesh’s economic development in the past few years.

Figure 3: Bangladesh – Foreign reserve, GDP, military expenditure, and government debt of (Million USD)



Source: World Economic Outlook (2022).

In addition to economic affluence, the Bangladesh military is developing. According to the latest 2020 military ranking by Global Firepower, Bangladesh grasps the position 46th position out of 137 countries. However, compared to its neighbors (Table 4), Bangladesh’s military power remains modest to ensure security and balance.

Table 4: Comparing the Military Capability with neighboring states

| Military: Sector-wise | India | Myanmar | Bangladesh |
|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| GFP Ranking | 4 | 35 | 46 |
| Submarines | 16 | 1 | 2 |
| Defense Budget | 61,000,000,000 USD | 2,650,000,000 USD | 3,800.00.00 USD |
| Active Personnel | 1,444,000 | 406,000 | 160,000 |
| PPP | 10,065,500,000,000 USD | 348,000,000,000 USD | 700,000,000,000 USD |
| Air Power total strength | 2123 | 276 | 177 |

Source: (Gourtsilidou, 2020)

Most of the military spending in Bangladesh is due to this security dilemma, as India and Myanmar both are aware of their security and military strength, which alarms Bangladesh. Bangladesh relied heavily on China for military reform notably; between 2009 to 2015, six surface ships enhanced Bangladesh Navy, and in 2018, 23 K-8W trainer jets. In 2014, nine K-8W made Bangladesh Air Force a sophisticated security force. However, Bangladesh has not taken part in any confrontation but kept it limited inside security purposes (Choudhry, 2022). The contemporary Bangladesh-Myanmar relationship, owing to the Rohingya issue, became very tense as Myanmar violated the airspace of Bangladesh in mid-September of 2017 three times and again in mid-July 2018. Bangladesh did not take any military action but rather used international platforms to counter Myanmar (Islam and Wara, 2022).

Conclusion

The political structure of South Asia magnifies the significance of Bangladesh progressively. China and India's competition/rivalry seem to expand the scope of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Capitalizing on this competition, Bangladesh has also utilized the issue in its domestic political culture, which is visible through its foreign policy. Due to this strategic orientation, Bangladesh has effectively maintained its relationships with China and India. The country's foreign policy is development driven. Furthermore, under the administration of Prime Minister Hasina, Bangladesh has advanced economic integration to a more practical level by promoting regional development and connectivity.

Finally, the strategic thinking culture that safeguards Bangladesh also serves as an intervening influence in international affairs. The balance between hard and soft power is what Bangladesh intends to achieve to prevent any regional and/or international confrontation, hence, enhancing the country's military and economic capabilities. After presenting and evaluating foreign policy actions from the perspective of neoclassical theory, it can be argued that Bangladesh, through the practice of adjustment, has developed a relatively strong position in the international paradigm.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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