

SMALLER NEIGHBOURS, LARGER OPPORTUNITIES: BANGLADESH-NEPAL RELATIONS UNDER LENS

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Abstract

The post-Cold War global politics has presented new wave of challenges, led by globalization and complex web of interdependence in particular, to the policy makers and urges a rethinking of foreign policy for every state, no matter what their positions are in the international power structure. Bangladesh's foreign policy, traditionally shaped through the Cold War environment and dictated by the India factor, also demands serious adjustments given the renewed dogma of global affairs and emerging threats. Today, even the smaller neighbours are considered to be significant in attaining a state's foreign policy objectives since competition over material benefits are getting tougher and no state can endure its progress in all respects without the complement of others. Bangladesh and Nepal, both sharing strong historical attachment and similar realities, are two smaller neighbours who have immense opportunities, never been focused in their foreign policy with due sincerity. This is a very little effort to investigate the foundational strengths of Bangladesh-Nepal relations and their key areas of possible cooperation. However, this essay also unveils the very reason why Bangladesh could barely grant Nepal a noteworthy position in her foreign policy and vice versa.

Given the context of the present world, more globalized and interdependent in nature, it has become a critical task for the states to pursue their foreign policies. The mission is even more challenging for the smaller states like Bangladesh or Nepal who are mired in the power structure of both the international and regional system, given their limited sovereignty in decision-making process and lesser domestic capabilities. However, fashioning a foreign policy, as the political art of highest order to guarantee state security and continuous well being, has remained equally significant irrespective of every state.

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In case of the foreign policy of Bangladesh, the opportunities lying with her smaller neighbours were frequently overlooked, while great deal of importance were given to the larger powers almost in an unidimensional way. The changing dynamics of the global politics urges serious modifications in these regards. In support of this argument this paper attempts to explore the potentiality of bilateral cooperation with the smaller neighbours taking Bangladesh-Nepal bilateral relations into account. This small endeavour focuses particularly on trade, transit, water-sharing and energy security aspects where the spectrum of opportunities are broader for Bangladesh-Nepal bilateral partnership, while cooperation prospects in the areas of tourism, environment, education and security have been discussed in a limited scope.

Bangladesh-Nepal relationship is one of the least discussed bilateral relations compared to the massive opportunities it carries. These two countries share some common realities when it comes to the question of trade and foreign policy. India and China are two decisive factors in case of both bilateral and multilateral relations of Bangladesh and Nepal. These giants account the lion's share of regional trade in one hand and have significant influence over South Asia because of their geopolitical certainty. However, the large consumer market and geographical location of Bangladesh and Nepal also put them into a crucial position together in regional and international setting, where apart from India and China, United States, Japan, United Kingdom or European Union are the key actors into the play. The paper, thus, also complements with the common characters and realities of Bangladesh and Nepal in international and regional settings that provide them strong foundations for bilateral partnership, while unveiling the reason of discontinuous and limited cooperation remains as an integral part of this research endeavour.

Globalization and Foreign Policy Challenges for Bangladesh

The objectives of domestic policy are pursued vigorously through foreign policy, as Prince Otto von Bismarck identified foreign policy as the extension of domestic policy.¹ This inside-out aspect of foreign policy involves proper understanding of domestic needs and opportunities alongside clearer articulation of national interests. On the other hand, the outside-in aspect of foreign policy, where the international environment sets limits to the devising of foreign policy objectives, requires continuous policy modification and adjustment while the core national interests

¹ Md. Abdul Halim, *Principles of International Relations*, Dhaka: BRAC Printers, 1984.

remain the same. Therefore, successful foreign policy of a state necessitates the consideration of the above two aspects.

Over time, two oft-repeated vague accounts – ‘friendship towards all and malice towards none’, and ‘principled stand on the question of external intervention in internal affairs’, merely shaped the foreign policy objectives of Bangladesh.² These accounts are not only illusionary but also eccentric in the twenty-first century-world context. Today’s foreign policy decision-making process should invariably take into account the changing realities, both in the domestic and global surroundings. Bangladesh requires a foreign policy that can actively and rapidly respond to the challenges like poverty, population, food and energy security, health, education, human rights, social justice, terrorism, arms and drugs trafficking, migration, environmental degradation and disaster management in the post-bipolar settings. Such expanded activities would also serve to broaden the scope for bilateral and multilateral relations of Bangladesh with the state and non-state actors.

Traditionally, the key foreign policy objectives of Bangladesh have been self-preservation, maintenance of territorial integrity, economic advancement and amplification of national power, where India remained the central consideration, being its biggest neighbour in terms of geographical expanse, population, economy and military. Beyond the region, the Cold War imperatives shaped much of Bangladesh’s foreign policy objectives given the easier availability of foreign aid. However, in the new world order non-alignment could no longer serve Bangladesh’s foreign policy and thus it is suffering hard to adapt herself with the globalized world. Presently, trade and investment are two key concerns of Bangladesh’s foreign policy, while Diaspora population, specifically in terms of foreign remittances, remains another emerging consideration.³ Yet Bangladesh lagged behind in establishing herself as an important contributor to the preservation of world peace and promotion of global prosperity as a Muslim-dominated country with immense

² Nurul Momen, “Some Reflections on the Strengths and Weaknesses of Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy”, in M. G. Kabir & Shaukat Hassan (eds), *Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Society of International Studies, 1989.

³ According to the Bangladesh Economic Review 2011, foreign trade and investment accounted 34% and 24.7% of Bangladesh’s GDP respectively during the fiscal year 2010-11, while foreign remittances accounted 11.5% of GDP during the same period.