

UNITED STATES INTERESTS IN SOUTH ASIA AND GEO-STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR BANGLADESH

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia contains one-fifth of the world's population and occupies a potentially critical geo-strategic position, surrounded as it is by China, Afghanistan, the surging economies of East Asia and the Indian Ocean.¹ Despite these facts, South Asia, historically, received low priority in United States (US) foreign policy formulation for until the end of the Cold War its interests mostly centred on containing the Soviet Union and the expansion of communism in the region.² The Demise of the Cold War, nuclearisation of South Asia in eighties and a huge but growing economy forced US to look at the region with new priorities. The traumatic events of 9/11 once again compelled the US to become deeply involved in the South Asian Region with explicit interests and a new geo-strategic vision.³

This eventual shift in US foreign policy has transformed the geopolitical environment of South Asia, providing new opportunities for South Asian nations to reshape their geo-strategic vision. The US effort to develop a strategic partnership with India, with the apparent intention of containing China's growing influence in the region, is another significant development in South Asian geopolitics. While the US-India strategic engagement has many other dimensions, it has complicated the regional security environment and demands a far-sighted geo-strategic policy and constructive engagement of US by Bangladesh and other South Asian nations. This study takes into account the complex geopolitical environment of South Asia with a view to identifying its significance for the US and establishing Bangladesh's geo-strategic realities. It then focuses on US interests and growing involvement in South Asia and examines their implications in shaping the regional security environment. The study also analyses the emerging concepts of security in South Asia, and finally, makes an endeavour to work out a viable geo-strategic option for Bangladesh.

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1. "A New U.S. Policy Toward India and Pakistan", report of an Independent Task Force, sponsored by the Council on US Foreign Relations, p. 23
 2. M. Abdul Hafiz, South Asia's Security: Extra-regional Inputs, BIIS Journal, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1989, Pp. 132-133
 3. Ron Chepesiuk, Renewed US interest in South Asia: Impact on Bangladesh, Article published in 'Daily Star', Dhaka, 15th Anniversary Special Supplement, February 19, 2006, p. 6

SOUTH ASIA'S SIGNIFICANCE TO US AND GEO-STRATEGIC REALITIES OF BANGLADESH

South Asia's Significance to US

South Asia occupies a critical geo-strategic location in Asia and serves as the strategic link between Middle East, Central, Eastern and Southeastern Asia.⁴ It also effectively dominates the Indian Ocean and has easy access to the huge oil and gas reserves of the Persian Gulf and Caspian Basin. Demographically, the region contains one-fifth of the world's population and ranks among the world's most densely populated regions.⁵ It has a vast and rapidly growing economy. The gradual opening of South Asian markets offers enormous opportunities for global economic powers in trade and investment.

Despite these developments, until the end of the Cold War, US policies for South Asia was episodic and derivative of her other interests such as containing the Soviet Union and the expansion of communism, protection of oil from the Persian Gulf and access through the lanes of the Indian Ocean.⁶ At one point only Pakistan became an ally of the US to combat communism in the Afghan deserts while India remained at bay due to its strategic partnership with the former USSR. As a whole, as a geo-strategic entity, South Asia, failed to make a significant imprint in the US strategic contours and was generally ignored by US policy makers.⁷

In the post-Cold War world order, the nuclear standoff between India and Pakistan and apprehension of nuclear pilferage raised the importance of the region to the US.⁸ But it was the traumatic events of 9-11 which heavily impacted upon the US leadership and made it focus on South Asia, home of over 400 million Muslims and adopt new priorities and imperatives.⁹ In July 2003 Mary Ann Peters, former US Ambassador to Bangladesh, noted, "Terrible attacks of September 11, 2001 sharpened our focus and put South Asia on the counter terrorism map. Counter terrorism is bound to remain a focus of US's South Asia policy for the foreseeable future."¹⁰

Geo-Strategic Realities of Bangladesh

Threats to Bangladesh's security mainly emanate from her disadvantageous geopolitical standing in relation to her neighbours. An all-encompassing

4. Vernon Hewitt, *The New International Politics of South Asia*, Manchester University Press; Manchester, 1997, p. 4

5. "South Asia" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asia.

6. Aftab Alam, *US Policy Towards South Asia*, Raj Publications; New Delhi, 1998, p. 30

7. Ashequa Irshad, "America's Changing Strategic Interests", *BISS Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1997, Pp. 14-15

8. Aftab Alam, No. 6, p.56

9. Ron Chepesiuk, No. 3, p. 6

10. Ibid.

neighbour, India, surrounds Bangladesh from almost all sides. The exception is a narrow patch of border with Myanmar in the south-east. Bangladesh's opening to the south to the Bay of Bengal is also enclosed by long Indian coast lines and the Andaman Nicobar Islands. Hence, the 'tyranny of geography' has virtually rendered Bangladesh an 'India-Locked' country.¹¹ However, despite these constraints, contrary to these challenges Bangladesh's location is considered to be an advantage in that it is a strategic wedge between mainland India and the seven Northeastern states of the Indian Union.¹² This offers enormous strategic and economic opportunities for Bangladesh.¹³

Much of the literature on the subject written by Indians reflect the Indian view of South Asia as a single geo-strategic entity of which it is the sole guardian. In particular, since Bangladesh, is almost sandwiched between Indian states, it is considered by the country to be falling within her internal security rim, thus making it vulnerable to physical Indian incursion. India's occupation of Kashmir in 1947-49 and of Junagar and Hyderabad around the same time; its annexation of Goa in 1961-62 and Sikkim in 1975 are examples of similar hegemonic projections. The Indian Trade Blockade against landlocked Nepal in 1989 is yet another recent example of the Indian attitude towards its smaller neighbours.¹⁴ In all probability, if ever Bangladesh stands between the Indian geo-strategic vision and regional aspirations, it is likely to fall victim to India's power thrusts projection in the region.

In the South Asian geopolitical equation, Bangladesh's relationship with China provides it some leverage to escape Indian predominance. Hence, developing a close relationship with China is vital for the foreign policy interest of Bangladesh. As the, 'Doorway to the Indian Ocean and India's turbulent north-eastern region, including the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, to which China lays territorial claims' Bangladesh is also important for China.¹⁵ Keeping this in view, security analysts feel that Bangladesh may benefit from the convergence of strategic and

11. Brigadier A T M Zahirul Alam, psc and Lieutenant Colonel Abul Kalam Md Humayun Kabir, psc, Security Challenges for Bangladesh in the Twenty- First Century, Bangladesh Army Journal, 28th Issue, January, 2000, Pp. 6-7

12. Brigadier General Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc (Retired), Geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh, Article published in 'Daily Star', Dhaka, 15th Anniversary Special Supplement, February 19, 2006, p. 2

13. Brigadier M Abdul Hafiz (Retired), Strategic Dimensions of Indo-Bangladesh Relations, An Article published in 'Daily Star', Dhaka, July 12, 2004.

14. A. K. M. Abdus Sabur, National Security of Bangladesh: The Traditional Context, in Mufleh R Osmany and Muzaffer Ahmad (eds.), "Security in the Twenty First Century – A Bangladesh Perspective", Academic Press and Publishers Limited; Dhaka, 2003, p. 80

15. Tarique Niazi, "China's March on South Asia", at http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=408&issue_id=3311&article_id=2369717

economic interests of a nuclear power like China. However, the complexities and sensitivities of regional geopolitics suggest that Bangladesh-China relations should be maintained within “acceptable bounds” i.e. neither too warm, nor too cool, without raising any suspicion in our own immediate neighbourhood.¹⁶

US INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES IN SOUTH ASIA

US Interests and Objectives

The US foreign policy strategy for South Asia may be classified under two broad time-frames; the Cold War and the Post Cold War era with sharp differences in policies and priorities.¹⁷ Until the end of the Cold War, many security analysts have argued that the US had no vital interests in South Asia since it posed no overwhelming threat to the US nor did it abound in vital resources.¹⁸ After the end of the cold war, in 1996, an independent Commission on America’s National Interests identified five vital national interests for US, “prevent attacks on the US with weapons of mass destruction, prevent the emergence of hostile hegemons in Europe or Asia and of hostile powers on US borders or in control of the seas, prevent the collapse of the global systems for trade, financial markets, energy supplies, and the environment, and ensure the survival of US allies.”¹⁹

A critical analysis of the underlying intent of these interests clearly suggests that out of five, South Asia has the stake and the roles to play a part in at least four vital US interests, either directly or indirectly. The explicit US interests in the South Asian Region include²⁰ :

- 1. Restraining Nuclear Arms Race and Major Wars.** The first and foremost US interest in South Asia is to prevent any war between India and Pakistan, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction including the means of delivery. Hence, the specific US objective is to cap India and Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and missile programme at current levels and also to prevent diffusion of nuclear material or nuclear weapons, particularly to terrorist groups.

16. Ruksana Kibria, Strategic Implications of Bangladesh-China Relations, Article published in ‘Daily Star’, Dhaka, 15th Anniversary Special Supplement, February 19, 2006, p. 6

17. Ashequa Irshad, No. 7, Pp. 14-15

18. Aftab Alam, No. 6, p. 41

19. Samuel P. Huntington, The Erosion of American National Interests, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 76, No. 5, 1997, p. 35

20 “A New U.S. Policy Toward India and Pakistan”, No. 1, Pp. 23-29

- 2. Integrating Key Nations in the Global War on Terrorism.** Since 11 September 2001, top US priority has been afforded to integrating the allies and key nations around the world to limit and destroy the ability of terrorists to act against the US and its allies. Due to its strategic location, Pakistan emerged as a 'frontline' state of the US led-war on terror. US has also integrated India, Bangladesh and other South Asian nations in combating terrorism both domestically and internationally.
- 3. Expanding Economic Growth, Trade and Investment.** Beside the nuclear and terror issues, the engine driving US interests in South Asia, as anywhere else, is its economic interest. The US sees South Asia, as it sees China, as an area which has the potential to develop into a major market for US goods and investments.²¹ Along with the South Asian nations, the US stands to gain from access to a huge and growing market in South Asia, which houses one-fifth of mankind.
- 4. Promoting Internal Stability and Democracy.** The US has explicit interest in promoting healthy democratic practices and political pluralism in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It also has an inherent interest in maintaining political unity and stability in these countries which will ultimately contribute to their economic growth and market stability. Should any of these countries fall victim to anarchy or ideological extremism, the consequences for the region and also the world will be terrible.
- 5. Expanding Political and Military Cooperation.** US has an evolving interest in improving political and military cooperation with the key nations of South Asia. A strong and friendly India could become a valuable US partner in maintaining stability and prosperity in Asia. Similarly, a moderate and democratic Pakistan and Bangladesh could help in promoting stability in the Islamic world.
- 6. Cooperating on a Wide Range of Global Issues.** The US has continuing interest in gaining cooperation from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other South Asian nations on a broad array of global issues. Such cooperation may include working in areas like curbing the flow of illegal drugs, arms and immigration and impacting on some positive issues like controlling AIDS, supporting family planning, increasing energy production and protecting the environment etc.

21. Aftab Alam, No. 6, p. 42

Implications of US Interests in the South Asian Security Environment

In the last two decades, the South Asian security environment has undergone profound changes due to deeper US involvement in the region.²² Cold War security notions, which divided the region into two blocks – one inclined to the former USSR and the other towards the US, has already diminished. In a uni-polar world, the US, due to impending interests, is gradually shifting its focus from the stable nations of Europe and South-east Asia towards a potentially volatile South Asia. The key South Asian nations have also accepted the influence of US, the lone superpower, in the regional power balance and are eager to develop economic and strategic ties with her.²³

Eventually, almost all South Asian nations are now becoming involved in the US-led global war on terror with shared views and interests. American efforts to defuse the Indo-Pak tensions and nuclear stand off, that have overhung the region for long, is getting prominence. It is increasingly evident that due to that underlying interests, of South Asian nations, including India, no longer consider US influence as a threat to regional security; rather, they consider it a catalyst to regional peace and prosperity. In addition to US efforts, the Norwegian mediation between the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the international initiative on Nepal led by Britain indicate gradual openness and impending changes in the regional security environment.²⁴

US Policy Towards Bangladesh

Bangladesh's relationship with US had a bumpy start as the US did not support the cause of Bangladesh in its War of Independence. During the last two decades, however, several developments have helped to strengthen the US-Bangladesh relationship. In 1991, Bangladesh participated in the US led Gulf War coalition against Iraq. In the same year, a US Marine Task Force helped Bangladesh recover from a devastating cyclone. Visits to Bangladesh by high-ranking US officials in the early 21st century, including the first ever visit by a sitting president, Bill Clinton, in March 2000, further strengthened relations. Former US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, said on his visit to Bangladesh in 2003, "Bangladesh's democracy, Bangladesh's economic progress, Bangladesh's friendship and the Bangladesh people do matter to the US."²⁵

22. Sugeeswara P. Senadhira, Internal and External Factors in Security Studies in Sri Lanka, in Dipankar Banarjee (ed.), "Security in Studies South Asia: Change and Challenges", Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2000, p. 193

23. C. Raja Mohan, Toward Cooperative Security in South Asia, at www.southasianmedia.net/Magazine/journal/6_coop_security.htm. C. Raja Mohan is a Professor of South Asian Studies at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

24. Ibid.

25. Ron Chepesiuk, No. 3, p. 6

Most security analysts agree that a progressive and democratic Bangladesh has the potential to become an important US partner in South Asia.²⁶ Bangladesh's moderate voice in regional and international forums, its significant role in UN peacekeeping operations and the global war on terror, its success in poverty alleviation through its extensive micro-credit programmes and a growing economy, all have contributed positively in drawing the attention of US policy makers. However, perpetual political rivalries, poor governance and massive corruption that have impeded the country's economic growth, threatened democratic stability, dented the image of the country in the eyes of the outside world and undermined Bangladesh's ability to draw the desired benefits from the US-Bangladesh relationship.²⁷

EMERGING CONCEPTS OF SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA

Evolution of New Concepts

Fifty years after the end of colonial rule, South Asia today represents a region riven by mutual suspicion and distrust. The South Asian nations, since their inception, have been threatened due to various internal and external factors and as such have remained obsessed with the notion of security. However, the nature of the threat and the concept of security changed over time and the region has had to adapt to the geo-strategic realities of each passing era. This process of evolution has led to a consensus that narrow military definitions of security are inadequate in dealing with the comprehensive range of questions faced by the region today.²⁸ In addition, globalisation and interdependence constrain the ability of states to act unilaterally and demand cooperative action from all the nations of South Asia.²⁹

The complicity of geopolitics and the wide variety of security issues which encompass the region today demand a holistic approach to the problems and to their probable answers. Such ideas have resulted in the evolution of modern concepts of security such as, collective, common, comprehensive and cooperative security. Out of these, the collective and common security concepts,

26. Major General ATM Jahirul Alam, rcds, psc, Commandant, National Defence College, during an interaction session with AFWC-2006 Course Members at NDC on 27 August 2006.

27. Christina Rocca, US Policy Toward South Asia, Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs, in a statement before the House International Relations Subcommittee for Asia and the Pacific, Washington, DC on June 14, 2005, at www.state.gov/p/sa/rls/rm/2005/47892.htm

28. Major General Dipankar Banarjee (Retired), *Security in South Asia*, Manas Publications; New Delhi, 1999, p. 23

29. Benjamin Miller, *The Concepts of Security: Should it be Redefined?*, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, June 2001, p. 21

have their origin in the west, are relatively old but have proved to be inadequate in addressing the complex and broad array of security issues that confront nations today.³⁰ On the contrary, the Comprehensive and Cooperative Security concepts have their origins in Asia and Asia Pacific are relatively new and among the most commonly discussed security concepts. An understanding and analysis of the comprehensive and cooperative security concepts may help in evolving security concept appropriate for South Asia.

Comprehensive Security

Comprehensive security is one of the most widely discussed security concepts. The term was first formally coined in Japan during the Ohira administration in the 1970s but it also got strong support in the ASEAN and was adopted by countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.³¹ The central premise of comprehensive security is that security must be conceived in a holistic way to include both military and non-military threats to a state's well being. As the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad puts it, "Security is not just a matter of military capability. National security is inseparable from political stability, economic success and social harmony. Without these all the guns in the world cannot prevent a country from being overcome by its enemies."³²

Comprehensive security recognises that military power, in itself, is not sufficient to guarantee a nation's security. It, therefore, emphasises a wide variety of non-military policy responses. Comprehensive security brings into consideration many traditional and non-traditional challenges, internal and external, direct and indirect threats that may endanger the security of states. The concept also includes consideration of economic security, energy and food security, protection against natural calamities, combating terrorism etc.

Cooperative Security

Cooperative security is presently the most commonly invoked security concept in Asia and the Asia Pacific region. It has replaced the Cold War conception of security based on bipolarity, deterrence, and the balance of power with a multilateral process and framework based on reassurance and cooperation. Cooperative security, or to put it somewhat differently, cooperating for peace emphasises a multi-dimensional approach to security. It recognises that factors such as economic underdevelopment,

30. David Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Singapore, 2003, p. 53

31. *Ibid*, Pp. 64-73 Mr. Masayoshi Ohira was Prime Minister of Japan from 1978 to 1980.

32. *Ibid*.

demographic challenges, environmental degradation, transnational crimes and terrorism etc constitute threats deserving attention.

There are three basic ideas at the heart of the concept of cooperative security.³³ The first is the importance of inclusivity, both of participants and subject matter. In terms of participants, the concept envisages inclusion of friends as well as adversaries, state and non-state actors in security arrangements. Secondly, cooperative security believes in the importance of fostering dialogue between regional actors. Thirdly, the idea suggests that contemporary issues of security are no longer amenable to unilateral action, but require cooperative action between states as well as non-state actors.

A Viable Security Concept for South Asia

The issues confronting South Asian nations are divergent and transnational in nature. As such, they cannot be dealt with by any individual state unilaterally. The need, therefore, is to search for a paradigm that will permit a holistic view of security covering all its dimensions and allowing South Asian nations to work together for peace and development.³⁴ The geo-strategic environment of the region and the nature of threats suggest that the comprehensive model of security may provide a practical solution to Bangladesh as it pursues its development and security goals. Such a concept will also allow other South Asian nations to reorient their perceptions of security and work together and cooperate for peace and security with shared vision of development.³⁵

The growing US interests and involvement in the region makes it clear that a stable South Asia with booming economy is in the interest of US as well as the South Asian nations themselves. Due to impending interests, the US is eager to exert its influence in the region in the form of developing strategic and economic partnership with key South Asian nations.³⁶ Hence, integration of the US in a comprehensive security structure will help in curbing mutual suspicion and distrust between South Asian nations and ensure an enduring structure for peace and security. In particular, it will help Bangladesh and other smaller nations overcome undesired Indian domination and other geo-strategic limitations.³⁷

33. David Capie, No. 30, p. 99

34. R C Mishra, *Security in South Asia: Cross Border Analysis*, Authorspress; New Delhi, 2001, p. 5

35. Brigadier General Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retired), *Meeting the Challenges*, Article published in 'Daily Star', Dhaka, 15th Anniversary Special Supplement, February 19, 2006, p. 1

36. Aftab Alam, No. 6, p. 46

37. Dr. Abdur Rab Khan, Research Director, BIISS, personal interview by the author on 18 May 06.

GEO-STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR BANGLADESH

Geo-strategic Options Available

The precarious geopolitical standing of Bangladesh, coupled with its poor economic, industrial and technological state, make it difficult to work out viable geo-strategic options without prejudicing national interests. According to reputed geo-strategists, a usable way out lies in pursuing foreign policy and diplomacy while maintaining a minimum credible deterrence against any direct military threats to national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The simple logic of geography suggests that Bangladesh's security and development cannot be pursued in isolation; rather, it has to be done in cooperation with India and other regional partners. It is also believed that the US's growing involvement in regional geopolitics vis a vis constructive engagement with the countries of the region may provide some leverage to Bangladesh in offsetting India's predominance.³⁸ Within these broad premises, the geo-strategic options that are available are discussed in subsequent paragraphs:

Option 1. Bangladesh adopts a comprehensive security approach to settle all traditional and non-traditional security issues with its neighbours. Bilateral mechanism is preferred as the principal means for resolving traditional security issues while keeping the option open for regional and extra-regional approach to deal with common and non-traditional security issues. The US is constructively engaged and integrated in the regional security environment for countering Indian predominance and overcoming geostrategic disadvantages.

Analysis

- a. The comprehensive security approach will allow Bangladesh to deal effectively with the multidimensional nature of threats that emanate from both within and outside the border. This approach will also allow it to act and cooperate with states as well as non-state actors in dealing with traditional and non-traditional security issues. The broad premise of this concept will also allow Bangladesh to engage with the US in all probable areas of cooperation.³⁹
- b. Bilateral mechanism is the most widely used and effective mechanism for managing bilateral disputes as well as fostering cooperation between the two

38. Brigadier General Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc (Retired), personal interview by the author on 23 Oct 2006.

39. Brigadier General Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retd), No. 35

countries. Hence, Bangladesh and India may develop a permanent bilateral mechanism for management of conflicting issues.

- c. In addition to bilateral negotiations, Bangladesh should also keep options open so that it can deal with non-traditional and common security issues through regional and extra-regional approach. ASEAN, our neighbouring region provides us with a glaring example of the benefits of such generous neighbourhood policy and the success of member nations in settling contentious issues through both bilateral mechanisms as well as the regional security structure.
- d. Most of our geo-strategists feel that gradual integration of US in South Asian geopolitics will create a favourable environment for the small countries of the region who are looking out for practical solutions to security issues.⁴⁰ In particular, it will provide Bangladesh some space for manoeuvre and additional leverage to engage India and Myanmar in resolving bilateral security issues.

Option 2. Bangladesh adopts the cooperative security approach and focuses on regional/extra-regional initiative to resolve non-traditional and common security issues with both close and distant neighbours. The ultimate aim will be to create a favourable security environment in the region where Bangladesh, at a later stage, can settle the traditional security issues with neighbours through a peaceful bilateral mechanism.

Analysis

- a. While the contentious issues between the neighbours can best be resolved through bilateral mechanisms, non-traditional security issues having multi-lateral ramifications may be better resolved by adopting a regional approach. Hence, a regional/extra-regional initiative in line with the cooperative security approach is likely to be effective in resolving common and non-traditional security issues.
- b. Since independence, Bangladesh-India bilateral efforts could not lead to expected results mostly due to lack of accommodation and cooperation on both sides. Particularly, an insular policy outlook and an imposing attitude on the part of India have been identified as the main impediment to achieving both bilateral and regional solutions to security issues.
- c. It is widely believed that economic and technical cooperation is normally a precondition for cooperation in political and strategic arenas. In India-

40. Shireen M Mazari, Director General, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI), during an interaction session with AFWC-2006 Course Members at ISSI on 30 August 2006.

Bangladesh relations, multilateral negotiation and cooperation on trade, environment, water sharing and other non-traditional issues under a regional initiative can provide a foundation for dealing with traditional security issues through bilateral mechanism at a later stage.

- d. In the absence of any extra-regional influence, the success of both bilateral and regional initiatives will be heavily dependent on Indian policy and outlook towards the regional security structure. As an emerging global power, India has to deal with its regional partners through generous, accommodative and cooperative gestures. Such generous policy will not only remove mutual distrust and suspicion but will also help India in obtaining the respect and support of its neighbours which is vital for India's attaining global aspirations.

Suggested Option for Bangladesh

In its quest for a stable security environment and steady economic growth, Bangladesh, has no other alternative but to look for a pragmatic geo-strategic option to deal with close as well as distant neighbours. A critical analysis of geo-strategic realities, trends of globalisation, post-Cold War security environment and growing US interests in the region suggest that Bangladesh adopts Option 1 (Comprehensive Model of Security) to maximise mutual gains and secure vital national interests.

The success of any strategy, irrespective of its nature or substance, largely depends on how vigorously it is pursued or implemented. Belief in the cause, people's support and broad-based national consensus can help the government in developing an enduring national strategy. Once the policy is formulated, a well-laid out working strategy, coupled with skilful diplomacy to rally international support, will be essential in attaining the desired geo-strategic objective.

Working Strategy for Implementing the Adopted Option

National Consensus.

The first step of the working strategy would be to develop national consensus on the adopted geo-strategic option. In particular, the national strategy for engaging US and India should be debated in the Parliament as well as in civil society to arrive at a national consensus for subsequent observance by all political parties, government and non-government instruments of the state. Some important issues on which Bangladesh must have national consensus are discussed below:

1. An objective interpretation and acceptance of the geo-strategic realities of Bangladesh in relation to regional and international developments in the prevailing world order and growing US involvement in the South Asian region.
2. Adoption of Comprehensive Security approach in dealing with close and distant neighbours, regional and global powers, and in particular, US and India.
3. Setting priority on national security and development agenda vis a vis partisan politics and ensuring national cohesion for pursuing the same in national and international arenas.

Integrating US and India in the Comprehensive Security Approach

Once national consensus has been reached, Bangladesh should work for integrating US, India and other South Asian nations under the Comprehensive Security Structure. A likely policy outline is discussed below:

1. The first step would be to identify own and regional expectations of how and what must be achieved out of the Comprehensive Security approach. Identification of traditional and non-traditional security issues and areas of cooperation will lead to setting appropriate priorities and evolving corresponding strategies for engaging US and key South Asian nations.
2. Keeping in view national interests and security concerns vis a vis converging US and Indian interests, Bangladesh will have to carefully work out likely areas where each country may be engaged. Subsequently, the hallmark of Bangladesh's diplomacy should be constructive engagement and integration of the US in areas such as trade and investment, energy production, development of democratic and political institutions, defence and common areas of cooperation such as the environment, terrorism, drug and arms trafficking etc. Similarly, India, as part of a broader rapprochement, may also be engaged in all areas indispensable for comprehensive security.
3. Engagement of the US and India on a wide range of issues as discussed above will gradually pave the way for instituting the Comprehensive Security Structure in the region. But as the SAARC experience has shown, an initiative from a non-influential country may not succeed in achieving the ultimate objectives. A US or Indian initiative will bind them into obligation towards the success of the proposed security structure. Growing US interests in the region vis a vis India's regional power aspirations are likely to integrate them in the impending South Asian security structure.
4. It may be necessary to set up professional groups in Bangladesh as well as in other South Asian countries, who will act as nodal agencies for initiating the

process of dialogue and discussion about the comprehensive security agenda at both Track I and Track II levels. The track II level will comprise civil society representatives and non-governmental think tanks and will be responsible for creating regional consensus on issues of security and areas of cooperation. At this juncture, carefully worked out confidence and security building measures will act as catalyst for broader regional engagements for peace and security.⁴¹ Once a favourable opinion is created, the issues identified may be formalised through Track I or official level dialogues and discussions.⁴²

Strategy for Engaging the US.

1. Christina Rocca, US Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs, observed on June 14, 2005 that “Democratic Bangladesh, with the fourth largest Muslim population in the world, stands as a leading contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide and as a valued partner in the war on terror.”⁴³ The statement vividly reflects Bangladesh’s position in US foreign policy and it is imperative that Bangladesh should exploit this friendly relation with the US to the best of her advantage to overcome her geo-strategic disadvantages and accrue other economic benefits.
2. US development programmes in Bangladesh covers a wide area including trade and commerce, FDI and exploration of mineral resources etc. However, there are some troubled areas about which US has expressed her concern and advised Bangladesh to take appropriate measures.⁴⁴ In the context of the present world there is hardly any scope to ignore the US’s understandable concerns. The following measures may help Bangladesh in constructive engagement with US:⁴⁵
 - a. Bangladesh must maintain her image as the largest and most moderate Muslim democratic country in the world. Transparency, accountability and tolerance in democratic practices and in upholding basic human rights can help in maintaining this image.
 - b. Bangladesh must take effective measures and maintain constant check against terrorism and the rise of religious fundamentalism. Bangladesh should also sincerely cooperate with the US whole-heartedly and become her effective ally in the global war on terror.

41. Major General Dipankar Banarjee (Retired), No.28, p. 306

42. Ibid, p. 26

43. Christina Rocca, No. 27

44. Ibid

45. Major General Md. Abdul Mubeen, ndc, psc, Commandant Defence Services Command and Staff College and Former Director General, BIIS, personal interview by the author on 01 November 2006

- c. Bangladesh must ensure good governance and check corruption as it hurts Bangladesh's potential for FDI, economic growth and above all, impacts adversely on the image of the nation.
- d. US is one of the largest development partners of the country. Hence, Bangladesh should seize every opportunity to increase cooperation with the US in bilateral trade, FDI, ICT and service sectors, in education, research and development etc.

Strategy for Engaging India

In international relations, no state bases its policy on altruism; rather, it is dictated by national goals and interests. Bangladesh's policy towards India has to be determined strictly on the basis of national interests. This should be a corner stone of Bangladesh's foreign policy and many important issues related to peace, security and development should be linked to this relationship. A likely strategy for engaging India is discussed below:

1. Due to asymmetry in size as well as economic and military power, India, no doubt, poses a significant threat to Bangladesh's physical security. At the same time, it presents enormous opportunities for us. Some of our neighbours are already taking advantage of India's strengths and reaping both economic and political benefits. Even its archrival Pakistan is making a deliberate effort to improve its relations with India. Therefore, Bangladesh and India must exploit their geographic and economic complementarities and reap maximum benefit out of cooperation and abjure hostility.⁴⁶
2. Given geopolitical realities, Bangladesh cannot view its security and development aggressively or by seeking to isolate itself from India; rather, it has to pursue a path of cooperation with it.⁴⁷ Therefore, Bangladesh should reach a national consensus and work out a long term strategy for engaging India by remaining above parochial party interests.
3. Remaining firm about its own sovereignty, Bangladesh must also recognise India's role in the War of Liberation and show sensitivity to its security concerns and regional aspirations. In return, Bangladesh may also demand a generous neighbourhood policy in line with the Gujral Doctrine and develop an effective bilateral mechanism for amicable settlement of all disputes.⁴⁸

46. Shyam Saran, India and Its Neighbours, speech delivered at Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses at http://www.idsa.in/speeches_at_idsa/ShyamSaran140205.htm. Mr. Shyam Saran is the former Foreign Secretary of India.

47. Brigadier General Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc (Retired), personal interview by the author on 09 Sep 2006.

48. Major General Dipankar Banarjee (Reld), No. 28, p. 303. The Gujral Doctrine called for a generous Indian approach to the neighbours, if they were ready to respect India's security concerns.

Strategy for Engaging Other South Asian Nations.

1. Centrality of India in the South Asian region looms large in Bangladesh's relations with its other South Asian neighbours. Interestingly, India has always been sceptical about Bangladesh's friendly relations with its South Asian partners, particularly Pakistan. For the same reason, Bangladesh's initiatives regarding SAARC has been viewed by India as an attempt of multilateralism at bilateral issues with the ultimate objective of countervailing India.⁴⁹
2. Bangladesh should accept the reality that no initiative for peace, security or development will succeed without India's sincere support and cooperation. Hence, Bangladesh's relation with other South Asian states has to be transparent and it has to reassure India that such relation is not intended to be countervailing. Bangladesh should also make efforts to integrate India in all sub-regional or regional initiatives for peace and economic cooperation.

Strategy for Engaging China

It has already been mentioned that developing a close relationship with China is a vital foreign policy goal for Bangladesh. But keeping in view the sensitivity of the relationship Bangladesh should pursue a slow but steady expansion of military and strategic cooperation with China, retaining scope for making adjustments so that the relationship can move in the right direction.⁵⁰ It may be prudent for Bangladesh to avoid creating any undue mistrust and suspicion in the neighbourhood, it should not enter into any formal or articulated defence agreement with China though the relationship can be used as a source of strength in bilateral dealings.⁵¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

Keeping in view Bangladesh's geopolitical standing, growing US interests in the region and its impact on prevailing South Asian security environment and emerging concepts of security, the following recommendations are being made:

1. Bangladesh may adopt Option 1, i.e., comprehensive security approach integrating India, US and other South Asian nations based on a bilateral mechanism to deal with traditional security issues with close neighbours

49. Vernon Hewitt, *The New International Politics of South Asia*, Manchester University Press; Manchester, 1997, p. 55

50. Ruksana Kibria, No. 16, p. 6

51. Major General Md. Abdul Mubeen, ndc, psc, No. 45

while keeping options open to deal with common and non-traditional security issues through regional and extra-regional initiatives.

2. The Bangladesh government may consider the suggested working strategy for developing a national consensus and implementing the adopted geo-strategic option.

CONCLUSION

With the demise of the Cold War, US foreign policy's primary focus has gradually been shifting from concerns about a stable Europe and Southeast Asia towards a potentially volatile South Asia. The end of the Cold War, in particular, the tragic events of 9/11, brought the region into the orbit of US foreign policy interests. India's regional and global power aspirations vis a vis increasing US involvement in South Asia offer challenges as well as opportunities for South Asian nations. In particular, growing US interests in the region provides Bangladesh with a window of opportunity for adopting prudent geo-strategic policies involving both India and US, and compensating for its geo-strategic realities.

A critical analysis of prevailing South Asian security environment and emerging concepts of security suggest that Bangladesh should adopt comprehensive security approach to deal with all its neighbours. While traditional security issues with close neighbours may be resolved through bilateral negotiations, the regional and extra-regional approach may be suitable for dealing with common and non-traditional security issues. Constructive engagement and integration of US in the South Asian security environment will help Bangladesh in overcoming geo-strategic disadvantages and counterbalancing Indian pre-dominance. A national consensus on the adopted geo-strategic option complemented by a far-sighted and dynamic implementation policy will surely improve Bangladesh's regional and global standing.

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