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Bangabandhu's Bangladesh Foreign Policy: An Analysis from International Relations Perspective

Md. Toufik Ahmed^a  and ASM Ibnul Hasan Even^b

^a Department of International Relations, University of Rajshahi

^b Senior Assistant Secretary, Cabinet Division, Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka

Abstract

In the intricate milieu of the Cold War, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect of Bangladesh, played a pivotal role in shaping the foreign policy of the newly independent nation following the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, which was of utmost importance in establishing Bangladesh's identity and securing international recognition. This article investigates the foreign policy of Bangladesh during the tenure of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman through the perspective of International Relations. However, Bangabandhu's foreign policy efforts and activities have been assessed utilizing secondary data. The study finds that Bangabandhu was quite successful in creating and implementing Bangladesh's foreign policy in securing national interest of Bangladesh, which is still applicable in Bangladesh's current situation in conducting international relations.

Keywords: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Foreign Policy, Bangladesh Foreign Policy

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Correspondence author: Md. Toufik Ahmed

Email: toufikahmed.ru@gmail.com

Introduction

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, is widely regarded as the pioneer and architect of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Since its establishment as a sovereign nation in 1971, Bangladesh has endeavored to implement a foreign policy that has been influenced by the vision and leadership of Bangabandhu. Despite the challenges of rebuilding a war-torn and impoverished nation, Bangabandhu was able to gain recognition from around the world in a remarkably short period of time. Through his extraordinary leadership, he was able to develop warm relations with major powers, despite leading one of the smallest countries in the world. The basic elements of his foreign policy were based on the principles of friendship with all, malice to none, and friendly co-existence [1].

Leaders play a crucial role in the realm of international politics as they actively participate in the formulation and implementation of foreign policies. Throughout the history of international politics, numerous leaders have made significant contributions that have had a lasting impact on the trajectory of their respective countries [2]. Moreover, the actions and policies pursued by these leaders have not only influenced their own nations but have also had far-reaching consequences on the regional and global stage [3]. For instance, when examining the events of World War II, it is impossible to overlook the role played

by Hitler, or to analyze Soviet policy in the 1930s and 1940s without considering Stalin's influence. Similarly, the abolition of the apartheid system in South Africa would not have been possible without the leadership of Nelson Mandela, and an understanding of Chinese foreign policy necessitates an examination of Mao's contributions. Likewise, an analysis of Russia's foreign policy would be incomplete without taking into account the impact of Putin's leadership [4].

The development and execution of foreign policies are contingent upon the political philosophy of a country's leadership and its approach to international relations. The effectiveness of a nation's foreign policies is not solely contingent upon the development of robust policies, but also necessitates the presence of strong leadership. In actuality, the success of a country in the global arena is dependent upon the level of congruence between its foreign policy and leadership. Bangladesh is no exception to this phenomenon. The charismatic leadership, towering persona, and unwavering bravery of Bangabandhu were instrumental in shaping Bangladesh's foreign policy, which prioritized peace.

Bangabandhu endeavored to establish a more robust relationship with the global community while upholding a stance of positive neutrality in the realm of international politics. Through his proactive approach to foreign policy, Bangabandhu sought to protect the national interests of Bangladesh. Additionally, he displayed a keen desire to derive maximum benefits from cooperative efforts among nations. Notably, Bangabandhu exhibited unwavering solidarity with oppressed individuals and nations. Furthermore, he harbored a strong aversion towards armed conflicts and emphasized the importance of peaceful resolutions to international disputes. These fundamental principles of Bangabandhu's foreign policy continue to hold relevance in the contemporary context of Bangladesh.

Conceptualization on Bangladesh Foreign Policy

Foreign Policy can be defined as the strategic approach taken by a nation in its interactions with external actors, with the aim of advancing its national interests on the international stage. The primary objective of foreign policy is to safeguard a country's interests beyond its own borders, encompassing activities such as negotiations, treaty agreements, participation in international forums, and other matters pertaining to the nation's economic, geopolitical, and strategic concerns [5]. It is important to note that foreign policies are not formulated based on abstract principles, but rather on practical conceptions of national interests that arise from immediate causes for national policy [6]. Crabbe posits that foreign policy is composed of two fundamental components, namely the identification and formulation of national objectives, and the strategies and mechanisms employed to attain these objectives [7]. In essence, foreign policy refers to the set of policies and strategies adopted by a sovereign state to attain its desired objectives in relation to other nations. Bangladesh, a South Asian country that gained independence in 1971, has developed and maintained its own foreign policy towards foreign states.

Article 25 of the constitution of Bangladesh indicates the foreign policy of Bangladesh as follows [8]: The State shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes, and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter, and on the basis of those principles shall –

- (a) *strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament;*
- (b) *uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; and*

(c) *support oppressed peoples throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism.*

Methods

This research is of a qualitative nature and is primarily grounded on an extensive examination of pertinent literature obtained from diverse secondary sources, including research articles, newspapers, online publications, websites, and relevant books.

Bangabandhu and Bangladesh Foreign Policy

This article aims to examine the foreign policy of Bangladesh during the tenure of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from an International Relations perspective. The primary objectives of Bangabandhu's foreign policy for Bangladesh encompassed the protection of its security, the preservation of its territorial integrity, the achievement of socio-economic advancement, the upholding of its ideology, and the sustenance of its cultural identity and national pride.

Balancing strategic and economic interests

Foreign policy-making is a complex process that involves a combination of unchanging realities and evolutionary developments in response to specific demands and pressures [9]. The foreign policy of Bangladesh was formulated during the Cold War era, a period marked by power politics and a bipolar global order. In navigating this challenging environment, Bangabandhu, the leader of Bangladesh, adopted a middle path of non-alignment in order to challenge the prevailing bipolar order of the Cold War. Bangladesh's strategic choice to adopt a non-aligned foreign policy was motivated by a desire to avoid the pitfalls of aligning with any major power without careful consideration. Such a move would have potentially provoked other powers and exposed Bangladesh to vulnerabilities. Instead, Bangabandhu emphasized the importance of pursuing a policy of "friendship to all and malice towards none" in order to maintain a balanced approach to diplomacy that would safeguard Bangladesh's strategic and economic interests.

By adopting this approach, Bangladesh aimed to establish itself as an independent and neutral player in the international arena, free from the constraints and pressures of aligning with any particular power bloc. This allowed Bangladesh to maintain its autonomy and pursue its own national interests, while also fostering positive relationships with a wide range of countries. During the cold war era, the foreign policy of Bangladesh was primarily influenced by the imperative to effectively navigate the power dynamics inherent in the bipolar order, all the while ensuring the protection of its own national interests. The adoption of a non-aligned stance and a commitment to maintaining friendly relations with all nations played a crucial role in shaping Bangladesh's diplomatic strategy during this time.

Bangladesh, being heavily reliant on international aid, made concerted efforts under the leadership of Bangabandhu to enhance its foreign relations with the global community. Consequently, Bangladesh successfully established cordial relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as their respective allies, while maintaining a non-aligned stance towards the superpowers. Bangabandhu eloquently expressed the nation's aspirations, stating, "We are a small country. We seek friendship with all and harbor ill will towards none [10]." In order to assert the independence of Bangladesh and garner international attention, Bangabandhu actively engaged with governments worldwide. The period between 1972 and 1974

can be rightfully considered a remarkable era in Bangladesh's diplomatic endeavors, as the government of Bangabandhu achieved the exceptional feat of securing diplomatic recognition from a majority of nations across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, implemented numerous diplomatic endeavours to strengthen its relations with the world community. These events encompassed his trip to Washington, his involvement in the Non-Aligned Conference hosted in Algiers in September 1973, and his endorsement of Islam, Arab nations, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during the 1973 conflict between Egypt and Israel, despite his promotion of secularism. In addition, his involvement in the Islamic conference convened in Pakistan in 1974 was both practical and fruitful. Bangabandhu's personal engagement in his foreign policy endeavours facilitated the enhancement of bilateral relations with Russia, Eastern European nations, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and Commonwealth countries.

Supporting the oppressed against the oppressor

Bangabandhu's foreign policy was distinguished by his resolute endorsement of marginalized populations globally, who were actively involved in righteous endeavors against imperialism, colonialism, and racial discrimination. He believed that the world was divided into two parts: oppressors and oppressed, and he aligned himself with the latter [11]. His foreign policy was aimed at promoting world peace and supporting exploited peoples globally. He was a vocal opponent of apartheid in Africa, foreign occupation in Asia and Africa, and Latin America. He expressed solidarity with the people of Palestine and supported their independence. In 1973, he condemned Israeli aggression in the Middle East. Additionally, he sent a medical team to Egypt and Syria to provide aid to war victims during the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Bangabandhu possessed a discerning comprehension of the extensive exploitation and oppression endured by the global South at the hands of the global North. Consequently, he placed great emphasis on fostering cooperation among developing nations, commonly referred to as South-South cooperation. Against the backdrop of the politically polarized world order during the Cold War era, Bangabandhu directed his attention towards establishing a framework for global peace and confronting emerging security challenges through an alternative platform known as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The involvement of Bangladesh in the NAM is widely regarded as highly consequential, as it serves as the philosophical bedrock of Bangladesh's foreign policy.

Supporter of neoliberal Institutionalism

Neoliberal institutionalism posits that the international system operates in an anarchic manner, lacking a central authority to regulate state behavior. However, it argues that cooperation is still possible due to the complex interdependence among states [12]. In this context, international organizations (IOs) serve as platforms for nations to collaborate and pursue absolute gains rather than relative gains. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, embraced neoliberal institutionalism and played a crucial role in advancing Bangladesh's foreign policy through active participation in various institutions. Consequently, Bangladesh acquired membership in esteemed global institutions including the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and various other international entities.

It is imperative to acknowledge the emphasis placed by Bangabandhu on the principles of multilateralism and pluralism within the foreign policy of Bangladesh. It is widely recognized that a substantial portion of Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts were concentrated within the framework of the United Nations. The UN played a pivotal role in the establishment and sustenance of Bangladesh's international relations. Furthermore, Bangladesh perceived the UN as a safeguard for its security and sovereignty. As a result, Bangabandhu's foreign policy was established on the tenets of neoliberal institutionalism, with the objective of facilitating Bangladesh's utilization of the benefits provided by international organizations.

Bangabandhu's foreign policy in the realm of security

The field of International Relations has been predominantly concerned with War and Military Security, both in theoretical and practical terms, over the course of several decades. This has led to a perception of other countries as potential competitors, resulting in a persistent threat perception and the consequent preparation for defense against other nations [13]. The competition among states for power and prestige has created a security dilemma, leading to a disproportionate allocation of resources towards military spending, despite the existence of pressing global issues such as poverty, hunger, health challenges, and malnutrition. The absence of inter-state conflict could be achieved if all nations were to adopt Bangabandhu's peace-centric foreign policy, which advocates for the promotion of friendship and cooperation. This approach to foreign policy serves to diminish distrust and the likelihood of war. A pertinent example of this can be observed in the hypothetical scenario where the United States were to adhere to this principle, thereby preventing any invasions in Afghanistan or Iraq. Additionally, it is worth noting that while India and Pakistan have historically prioritized rivalries, warfare, and the development of nuclear capabilities, Bangladesh has chosen a distinct path. Bangabandhu placed significant emphasis on ensuring human security, particularly in terms of food security, rather than an excessive focus on military expenditures.

In the realm of international relations, the adoption of a peace-centric foreign policy by all nations would eliminate the occurrence of inter-state wars. This is because such a policy promotes friendship and cooperation, which in turn reduces distrust and the likelihood of conflict. For instance, if the United States were to embrace this principle, it would have refrained from invading Afghanistan and Iraq. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has taken a different path from its neighboring countries, India and Pakistan, which have been preoccupied with rivalries, wars, and nuclear capabilities. Bangabandhu, the founding father of Bangladesh, prioritized human security, particularly food security, over excessive military expenditure.

Bangabandhu's foreign policy and World peace

Bangabandhu's ideology serves as the fundamental basis for Bangladesh's pro-peace foreign policy and national security vision. His aspiration for peace on the global stage led him to establish world peace as a fundamental principle of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Emajuddin Ahmed has posited that the pursuit of peace in Bangladesh is not exclusively motivated by a yearning for serenity, but also by strategic deliberations for the advancement and safeguarding of the nation. This assertion is supported by empirical evidence and underscores the multifaceted nature of peacebuilding efforts in the country [14]. Bangabandhu astutely asserted that only a peaceful environment can allow the nation to fully reap the benefits of hard-won independence and mobilize its strength and resources to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, and unemployment.

The peace-oriented approach adopted by Bangabandhu, as expressed in the constitution of Bangladesh, signifies the nation's commitment to fostering harmonious coexistence with its neighboring countries and

the global community at large. Bangladesh firmly upholds the principle of resolving conflicts through peaceful means, thereby ensuring that it does not pose any threat to international peace. Bangabandhu's aspiration for Bangladesh to emulate Switzerland in the Eastern region further underscores the country's intention to maintain a neutral stance in global political affairs [6].

Bangabandhu's foreign policy in action: Success

Bangabandhu's unwavering dedication to foreign policy ultimately resulted in the recognition of Bangladesh as an independent nation by nearly 120 countries within a span of three and a half years. It is worth noting that Bangabandhu's astute leadership, sagacity, and personal rapport with global leaders played a pivotal role in achieving this triumph. The most significant accomplishment of Bangabandhu's foreign policy was the repatriation of Indian soldiers to their homeland, allowing the nascent nation to focus on its developmental endeavors. Bangabandhu made concerted efforts to foster a close relationship with India, recognizing that Bangladesh's interactions with its neighboring countries hold paramount importance not only in terms of national security implications but also in relation to our economic interests.

The cultivation of harmonious relations between Bangladesh and its neighbors, particularly India, is an indispensable facet of Bangladesh's foreign policy. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh, and his Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, engaged in a bilateral accord referred to as the Peace and Friendship treaty in March 1972, which encompassed a duration of twenty-five years. This treaty played a crucial role in establishing strong relations between Bangladesh and India. In accordance with the ethos of fraternal ties, Bangabandhu further cemented the bond by signing the significant 'Land Boundary Agreement (LBA)' with the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, on May 16, 1974. The primary objective of this agreement was to resolve the longstanding land boundary dispute between the two neighboring nations.

During his visit to Algiers in 1973 to attend the NAM conference, Bangabandhu significantly enhanced Bangladesh's international reputation. His primary objective was to expand and strengthen Bangladesh's ties with other developing nations. Despite the United States' initial opposition to Bangladesh in 1971, the Bangabandhu government achieved remarkable diplomatic triumphs, notably highlighted by Washington's recognition of Bangladesh in April 1972. Furthermore, Bangladesh actively pursued amicable relations with Western bloc countries, which swiftly emerged as the primary providers of humanitarian aid and economic assistance.

The foreign policy of Bangladesh was formulated by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who advocated for "Friendship to all and malice towards none." This fundamental notion continues to influence the ambitions of Bangladesh. Aligned with Bangabandhu's foreign policy, Bangladesh should adopt a position of neutrality and give utmost importance to economic progress in the age of globalisation and liberalised markets. Bangabandhu always advocated for the rights of marginalised citizens, and the Bangladesh government has emulated his actions by offering sanctuary to the oppressed Rohingya people from Myanmar.

Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's vision of creating a "Switzerland of the East," Bangladesh has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to promote regional economic integration in South Asia and establish itself as a key hub for transit trade in Asia. The successes that Bangladesh currently enjoys can be attributed to the foresight and relevance of Bangabandhu's foreign policy. Therefore, it is

reasonable to argue that his foreign policy was ahead of its time and remains pertinent to the present context of Bangladesh. The foreign policy of Bangladesh was formulated by the esteemed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who advocated for "Friendship to all and malice towards none." This guiding principle continues to shape the aspirations of Bangladesh. In line with Bangabandhu's foreign policy, Bangladesh must adhere to a stance of neutrality and prioritize economic development in the era of globalization and free markets. Bangabandhu consistently championed the rights of oppressed individuals, and the Bangladesh government has followed in his footsteps by providing refuge to the persecuted Rohingya people from Myanmar.

Drawing inspiration from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's vision of creating a "Switzerland of the East," Bangladesh has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to promote regional economic integration in South Asia and establish itself as a key hub for transit trade in Asia. The successes that Bangladesh currently enjoys can be attributed to the foresight and relevance of Bangabandhu's foreign policy. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that his foreign policy was ahead of its time and remains pertinent to the present context of Bangladesh.

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