

Fifty years of Bangladesh-US Relations: Pathways and Trajectories

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In International Relations, two things are almost self-evident about bilateral affairs - that the relations between any two countries are not unilinear, and that under no circumstances is the relationship between the two countries determined by bilateral issues only. Experts of International Relations also remind us of a statement of British Prime Minister (1850-1860) Henry John Temple. Temple said, "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual." These general principles of international relations apply equally to Bangladesh-US relations.

The multidimensionality of relationships

In the last 50 years, Bangladesh-US relations have gone through ebbs and flow. The progression has not been in a unilinear manner. However, considering this trajectory in broad strokes, it is safe

to say that these two countries have come closer. During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the U.S. administration took a stand against it, but soon after the emergence of independent Bangladesh, the United States joined the United Nations Relief Program in Dhaka (UNROD) as a major donor, quickly recognized Bangladesh and demonstrated interest in improving relations with Bangladesh. Most of the aid that Bangladesh received in 1973 came from the United States and this trend continued until 2000. But since immediately after their independence Bangladesh's foreign policy was oriented towards the then Soviet Union. The United States wasn't hesitant to express its discomfort and occasionally exert pressure.

One of the objectives of the US aid, grants and other assistance to Bangladesh was to contain the Soviet Union's influence. The US didn't want Bangladesh to become solely dependent on the Soviet Union (USSR) for support, especially bearing in mind that the USSR was one of the key allies of Bangladesh during the war. Humanitarian considerations notwithstanding, strategic considerations shaped the US policy towards Bangladesh. However, this crucial assistance didn't create a close bond; unease prevailed until the August 1975 coup d'état which removed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from power. Brutal assassinations of Mujib, his close confidants, and members of his family (except two of her daughters who were abroad at that time) mark

the changes in political landscape. After the coup, Bangladesh's foreign policy became Westward-looking.

Since then, Bangladesh's domestic politics experienced several changes. However, the Westward foreign policy has continued under multiple military rules, and several elected civilian regimes. Yet at times, differences between these two countries surfaced. For example, in 1974, the United States decided to suspend food aid under PL-480 over the sale of jute products to Cuba. Due to the flood situation in Bangladesh and the government's distribution policy, the famine ensued. Suspension of food aid was prompted by a policy which was not targeted towards Bangladesh, but the decision was inappropriate. In the long run, it has been detrimental to the image of the United States.

The last two decades have seen differences despite the closeness of the relationship. Few examples are worth mentioning - despite the US request, Bangladesh declined to send troops to the Iraq War, the US criticized the removal of Professor Yunus from the post of head of Grameen Bank in 2011, the US expressed dismay about the execution of those convicted as war criminals in 2013, and the Bangladesh government's decision to ignore US efforts to ensure a participatory election in 2014. On the other hand, Bangladesh has expressed dissatisfaction with the cancellation of GSP benefits in 2013. Sheikh Hasina, the current



head of Bangladesh's government, has repeatedly alleged that the US was behind her defeat in the 2001 elections.

In Bangladesh, there is widespread belief that the CIA was linked to the August 15, 1975 coup. There are disagreements among researchers on this issue, but absence of definitive documents, testimonies, and evidence has kept the debate alive. Some point to the post-coup warmer relationship between these countries as evidence of US involvement. Additionally, M Rashed Chowdhury, who was convicted in a Bangladeshi court for the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, is currently living in the United States with political asylum. The Bangladesh Awami League government has always expressed ire over the issue and urged the US government to send him back to Bangladesh.

Recently, the relationship has become somewhat tense, although neither party explicitly acknowledges it. The US decision not to invite Bangladesh to the Democracy Summit in December 2021 and the imposition of sanctions on Bangladesh's elite

police force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and seven current and former officials of the RAB for serious human rights violations is the immediate cause of the strained relationship. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina not only questioned the rationale for the sanctions but also the measure as an 'abominable move.' The Government of Bangladesh is reluctant to reform the government, a condition the US has insisted as a requirement to lift the ban.

In Bangladesh, there is a perception that the United States seeks to exert unwanted influence in the country's domestic politics, and that it began after the 1990s. But, in fact, US lawmakers have been closely observing Bangladeshi domestic politics since 1971. It is well known that in 1971 while the Nixon administration was supporting Pakistan, US lawmakers such as Edward Kennedy, were vocal in favor of the independence movement. Although immediately after the independence, Bangladesh received very little attention in Washington D.C. and the US government continued to provide unequivocal support to the regimes of General

Ziaur Rahman (1975-1980) and General H. M Ershad (1982-1990), and concerns about democracy in Bangladesh were expressed by US lawmakers. In 1988, at the request of the opposition parties in Bangladesh, especially the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a Democratic lawmaker from New York and a staunch supporter of human rights around the world, Stephen Solarz proposed to add an amendment to the Foreign Aid Act in the House of Representatives in 1988. The resolution mentioned five specific steps regarding democracy in Bangladesh and said that the President should take these into consideration while providing aid to Bangladesh. These conditions included credible elections, freedom of expression and independence of the judiciary. A congressional hearing was held on 14 April 1988.

It can be said that since then, at different times, US lawmakers have been expressing interest in the domestic politics of Bangladesh. There have been congressional hearings on several occasions, and lawmakers have urged the

executive branch to act. After 1990, the U.S. Department of State and the US envoys to Bangladesh have commented on the democratic process in Bangladesh and have acted in conjunction with other development partners of Bangladesh. These comments and actions have upset one group or the other, and there has been criticism of such statements.

Development of economic relations

Despite the differences on political issues, the relations between the two countries have not only continued, but flourished, especially in the economic sector. Until the early 1990s, when Bangladesh was dependent on external aid for its development and revenue budgets, the United States played a major role as Bangladesh's development partner. As Bangladesh's economic structure transformed, the role of the US changed too. It can be easily discernible from the overall nature and scope of the development cooperation between Bangladesh and its development partners. During the 1970s-1980s, 42% of development assistance received by Bangladesh was commodity aid, 32% food aid, and 26% project aid.

In 1981-1990, project aid was 51%, commodity aid was 31% and food aid was 17%. In 1991-2000, 70% were project aid, 20% commodity aid, and 10% food aid. This change is also reflected in the case of US assistance to Bangladesh. It may be recalled that in the first three decades (1971-2000) of Bangladesh, the United States provided the largest amount of bilateral aid. The amount declined between 2001 and 2019 when Japan and Britain provided more aid. Bangladesh's economic growth, change in the sectors where Bangladesh needed cooperation and above all, Bangladesh's shift to secure loans from multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, European Union's institutions, Asian Development Bank, Japanese

International Development Association (JAICA). In 2009-10, 85% of Bangladesh's development assistance came from the multilateral bodies and the United Nations. Consequently, investment and trade has taken precedence in the US relationship with Bangladesh. In 1980, the United States provided the Generalized System of Preference (GSP), which allows duty-free entry of Bangladeshi goods to the United States, to Bangladesh. Trade between the two countries has more than doubled in the last decade. In 2010, the total trade was \$ 4.89 billion, in 2015 it stood at \$ 6.84 billion; in 2019 the trade between the two countries was \$ 9 billion. In 2021, the volume of this trade exceeded \$ 10.6 billion. In 2021, the United States became the largest importer of Bangladesh Products, amounting to 8.30 billion dollars.

U.S. companies have become the largest foreign investors in Bangladesh; until 2021 U.S. companies invested a total of \$4.3 billion, which is 20% Bangladesh's total Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). The investment was \$14.39 million until 1996, \$30.85 million until 2001; \$56.95 million in 2010; \$497 million in 2019. These numbers show the pace of the growth of U.S. investment. Bangladesh's largest export product is readymade garments (RMG), while the United States is the single largest export destination for readymade garments.

Security and Strategic Cooperation

Security and strategic cooperation between these two countries in large measures started in the 1980s. Subsequently, this cooperation has increased further. This cooperation grew significantly after 2001. The post-9/11 situation, especially the US-launched "War on Terror", precipitated the security cooperation as the US considered Bangladesh a Muslim-majority country and Bangladesh experienced the rise of

Islamist militant groups. Besides, as South Asia became an important hub for combating international terrorism, U.S. attention to Bangladesh increased, leading to further security cooperation.

After the establishment of RAB in 2004, the United States trained and provided weapons to the force until 2018. Joint exercises of the US Marines and Bangladesh Air Force in 2007, the visit of top generals of the US Special Operations Command (SACOM) and Pacific Command (PACOM) to Dhaka in 2009 are some of the examples of such cooperation. In 2013, the two countries signed the Counter Terrorism Cooperation Initiative. This cooperation has increased further after the terrorist attack on the Holey Artisan Cafe in 2016.

The visit of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Dhaka in 2012 and the signing of the Partnership Dialogue Agreement between the two countries demonstrated that both sides are keen to add a new dimension to the relationship. To date, there have been eight security dialogues and eight partnership dialogues between the two countries. In 2013 and 2015, the United States gifted two Coast Guard cutters to the Bangladesh Navy to enhance Bangladesh's maritime security. The growing security cooperation has engendered some debates in the country. It is viewed to draw Bangladesh into the orbit of the US. Nevertheless, security cooperation evolved.

It is also worth noting that the four domains of cooperation – political issues (including democracy and labor rights), development cooperation (including food aid, cooperation to combat climate change after 2000, humanitarian cooperation such as covid vaccines), trade and investment and security cooperation – have been pursued concurrently.

Global political context of the relationship

Global political considerations, especially the Cold War rivalry with the USSR, was one of the determining factors in the US decision not to support Bangladesh independence in 1971. Long standing tilt towards Pakistan, ongoing efforts to improve relations with China in conjunction with deterring the Soviet Union's growing influence in South Asia shaped US policy. But it was not only in 1971 that global politics influenced the United States' approach to Bangladesh. Instead, Bangladesh's relationship with the United States has largely been shaped by how the United States viewed Bangladesh in the context of global politics; similarly, Bangladesh has determined its nature of engagement with the US in light of the existing global political order.

The global politics of the past 50 years can be divided into three distinct phases – the era of the Cold War (1945–1990); the unipolar world system with dominance of the United States (1991–c.2009), and the era of the rise of China and the emergence of a multi-polar world (c. 2010 – to date). Bangladesh emerged at the height of the Cold War. During this period, particularly after 1975, Bangladesh's foreign policy has leaned towards the United States as a part of its westward shift. The US approach towards Bangladesh was defined by the country's economic status – viewed as a poverty-stricken developing country and with the mindset that Bangladesh will continue to be the "basket case" seems to have influenced policymakers. This is what puts development aid as the key feature of the relationship. Bangladesh also needed the support. However, in the mid-1980s, discussions on the state of democracy and civil rights began to feature in the policy discourse.

In the 1990s, two aspects of the US approach should be noted - Bangladesh was considered a

Muslim-majority country and thus it was subsumed within the broader policy towards the Muslim world; secondly, there was a lack of interest in developing relations with Bangladesh separately, instead South Asia policy was the driving force and Bangladesh was viewed as a small nation with little importance. Two other factors also had a role in the US approach - the collapse of the Soviet Union and warming up of US-India relations. Since the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s, India-US relations have improved significantly. Strategically, the US had considered India as the emerging power in South Asia which is aligned with US interests and ideology. Although the signs of China's rise were evident, the US apparently did not consider China a major threat. India was considered as the counterweight to the growing influence of China. The democratic credential of India was a key factor in US consideration. The US repeatedly insisted that it would rather see India as the regional power. Thus, India's dominance in the region began to grow. India's own version of the Monroe Doctrine – that is South Asia is its backyard and should be left by global powers to India - became the overarching framework of the India-Bangladesh relationship. This greatly influenced US policy towards Bangladesh.

It is pertinent to mention that since 1947, U.S. foreign policy on South Asia has been largely made on an ad-hoc basis. In the 1979-1989 periods, due to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and the US involvement in the Afghan war supporting the Mujahideen, the US had a robust presence in Pakistan. However, as the Afghan war ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, the region fell victim to the benign neglect of the United States. US policy towards South Asia became India-centric as well. As for Bangladesh, the beginning of democracy in Bangladesh and economic growth, US policymakers had very little to be

concerned with.

The situation changed dramatically after September 11, 2001. Viewed as a "moderate Muslim-majority country", Bangladesh was expected by the US to be a partner in the so-called "war on terror." Bangladesh responded positively to the US posture. In some measures, this became a watershed moment in the politics and security arrangements in South Asia. An attack on the Indian parliament in December 2011 provided Indian policymakers the opportunity to bring security to the forefront of its domestic and foreign policy and portray itself as a victim of transnational terrorism. India was not an exception in joining the "War on Terror" bandwagon and used the context to its political advantage in the region.

Although Bangladesh-US security cooperation increased over the following five years, an unease of US policymakers was discernable, thanks to the BNP government's hesitation in dealing with the Islamist militant groups. The presence of the Islamist in the ruling coalition accentuated the discomfort. It was further enhanced by the BNP's moral and reportedly material support towards rebels in India's southeastern states. It is perceived that the BNP government faced some pressure from the US. Presumably, India had influence on the US attitude towards Bangladesh. Consequently, the US approach towards Bangladesh contributed to the destabilization of domestic political equilibrium.

It is against this background that the United States emphasized trade relations with Bangladesh. As America's influence in global politics was on the decline, the Obama administration (2009–2017) sought to reshape the US role in a multi-power world system, but its success was limited to stop further erosion not regaining its erstwhile dominance.

Despite a closer relationship after 2009, occasional differences emerged, some of which I have mentioned previously. The major issue of contention appeared in 2013-14 as Bangladesh was heading to an election after the ruling party removed the caretaker provision from the constitution – a guardrail against the potential manipulation of the electoral process. The United States, along with many other members of the international community, called for a free, fair, and participatory election. Yet, when the Bangladesh Awami League went with a unilateral election, the US accepted it without much protest; democracy and the human rights question didn't receive as much attention. Several reasons can be offered for the US reaction to the 2014 election. First, the Obama administration's South Asia policy, like previous administrations, was largely India-centric. While Pakistan and Afghanistan were treated differently, the remainder of the countries in South Asia was seen through the regional stability prism and India was considered as serving US interests. Secondly, the United States did not see China's rise as a global challenge. Obama intended to work with China on global issues. However, the Obama administration felt the need to focus on Asia-Pacific. The third factor was tied to this focus, particularly the 'Asia Pivot' policy. The administration expected that the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) would come to fruition, which would strengthen the US position in Southeast Asia, therefore, Bangladesh was not considered geopolitically important. Fourth, the United States and western countries were hoping that even after the 2014 election weak democracy would continue, and that the next election would be as fair and participatory as possible.

But by then China had focused on increasing its global influence globally and increased its presence in South Asia. Russia also succeeded in

gaining strength. Consequently, the US began to face challenges in the global arena. Obama's successor, Donald Trump (2017-2021), was unwilling to take any initiative to deal with this situation; instead, the Trump administration's unilateralist policies contributed to the further erosion of the US's global standing and influence. America's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in January 2017 paved the way for China's monopoly in the region. Its impact can be seen in Bangladesh as well. Bangladesh joined the Conference on the Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2014. At the heart of this initiative are China and Russia. In 2016, Bangladesh joined China's Road and Belt Initiative (BRI).

China's BRI and the rivalry between China-India-US in the Indian Ocean increased Bangladesh's geopolitical importance. The reasons for new geostrategic importance of Bangladesh were due to the access to the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal, and China building naval ports in Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. These ports provide China a commanding control on the sea lane connecting Asia to other parts of the world. The growing geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh was recognized by US policymakers in 2017. In 2017, Bangladesh was described as geopolitically important due to the bridge between South and Southeast Asia. But these analyses remained on paper as no particular action was taken by the administration.

In late 2019, at the end of the Trump administration, the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) was devised to counter China's assertive moves. It came at the heel of the revival of the four-nation security dialogue or Quad. The US had been requesting Bangladesh to join the IPS since 2019. Bangladesh's hesitation in taking a clear position, let alone joining the IPS, is viewed by Washington as an influence of

China. Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka Li Jiming's statement in May 2021 is noteworthy in this regard. Ambassador Li said Bangladesh's participation in the Quad would "significantly damage" Dhaka-Beijing relations. Earlier, Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Feng made a similar statement during a meeting with Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid.

It is evident that US expectation of India's role in countering China's presence and influence in Bangladesh and in the region did not come to fruition. Moreover, India's dominance in the region has not been positive, and India's domestic political changes have become increasingly uncomfortable for the United States.

It is in such a context the Biden administration has taken a different approach regarding Bangladesh. The main aspect of this policy regarding Bangladesh is to be directly engaged with Bangladesh. This approach is consistent with the Biden administration's global or regional foreign policy. The United States looks forward to Bangladesh's participation in the proposed Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to further expand areas of economic cooperation. On the other hand, hesitation on the part of Bangladesh to join such a multinational system is more political than economic. There is a perception in Bangladesh that this is part of an effort to form an alliance against China. Bangladesh is least interested to be aligned with any measure which will strain its relationship with China. The US has expressed interest in signing two defense agreements with Bangladesh. These are the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition Cross-Servicing Agreement (AQSA). These are part of a policy to increase the U.S. presence and influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

In a similar vein, Biden has said even before being elected to office that democracy and human rights will be the focus of his government's foreign policy. In the case of Bangladesh, the impact of this policy is that the United States has already brought the issue of human rights and democracy to the fore. The continuous erosion of democracy in Bangladesh for the past years and telltale signs of growing authoritarianism has put Bangladesh in the spotlight. America's continued insistence on upholding human rights, and the absence of various elements of the democratic system, suggests that the Biden administration is likely to put more emphasis on these issues in the coming days.

Conclusion

Despite ups and downs in Bangladesh-US relations in the last 50 years, the two countries have become closer for respective parties' interests and the scope of relations have expanded. The United States

has transformed from a development partner of Bangladesh to a trade partner. At the same time, the United States has come forward to deal with various disasters in Bangladesh and continues to provide food aid. The increase in US security cooperation with Bangladesh has been positive for Bangladesh and has continued despite differences on the political front.

Due to the increasing geopolitical and geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh, it is imperative to take a new approach in the bilateral relations. Bangladeshi policymakers need to appreciate the changes.

New economic and security structures are emerging in the Asia-Pacific region, Bangladesh must be proactive in taking advantage of these structures and give priority to the future national interests of Bangladesh. For this, a new dimension needs to be added to the relationship with the United States. It is not only a matter of

foreign policy, but also a change in the country's governance and domestic politics that has become necessary. Without upholding human rights, participatory governance, and institutional reforms, it will not be possible to deal with the new geopolitical realities. Bangladesh's avoidance of these issues is detrimental to its own interests – in both short and long terms.

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