

Major Determinants of Bangladesh Foreign Policy

Abstract

In this age of global interdependence, where no nation can live in isolation, every state must maintain some sort of relation with other states. This is usually done by pursuing foreign policy. In keeping with this basic fact of state practice, Bangladesh also pursues a distinct course in her relations with the external environment. In the present research paper an attempt has been made to find out the determinants of Bangladesh foreign policy, its decision making structure and the nature of its continuity and change. These are important for understanding the base on which Bangladesh formulates its foreign policy.

Keywords: Interdependence, Foreign Policy, External Environment, Determinants, Variables.

Introduction

The determinants of foreign policy are simply factors, sources or variables which influence the nature, style, objective and strategy of the foreign policy of a country. It is expected that for a rational decision the foreign policy decision maker would take into consideration all or some of the relevant factors at the time of reaching a particular decision, or responding to a particular situation. A study of the determinants gives us an understanding of the reasons behind a particular decision or the options available to a decision maker in a particular situation.

The principal peaceful means to pursue goals and objectives of a foreign policy is diplomacy. Diplomacy is the interstate communication of dialogue¹. The dialogue between independent states—the machinery by which their government conduct it and the network of promises, contracts, institutions and does of conduct which developed out of it—is the substance of diplomacy². Foreign policy is the legislative aspect and diplomacy is the executive aspect of managing foreign relations. Communication has brought changes to roles and functions of policy makers and diplomats³. Heads of governments, foreign ministers, and bureaucrats now can meet personally with their counterpart abroad. The policy making and negotiating roles have merged to a certain extent. While the administrative functions of the diplomat in the field have expanded his negotiating role probably decreased.⁴

The determinants of foreign policy are broadly of two types domestic and external. The domestic variables act as a capability or constraint for the foreign policy of a country depending on their nature. Any factor might be boon for one country and bane for another. Domestic factors can be divided into tangible and intangible. All tangible factors have some intangibility and all intangible factors have some tangibility. Tangible factors can be measured by analysts and intangible can be evaluated⁵.

Aim of the Study

The present study has been pursued to fulfill the following objectives

1. To look into the historical aspects of Bangladesh's foreign policy related to its principle, objectives and determinants.
2. To know the internal and external determinants those are vital for Bangladesh's foreign policy.
3. To examine the trends and direction of Bangladesh foreign policy during different regimes.

Tangible Domestic Determinants

Geography

Geography of a state is the most permanent variable of its capability. Although the theory of the geographical determinism of foreign policy has undergone changes consequent to the technological



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development, but even then the influence of geographical factors on foreign policy of states remain considerable⁶. It is not possible for any state to ignore its 'geographical realities i.e. facts of location, territorial space, boundary and terrain etc.' There are four geographical factors – size, topography, location and climate which affect the foreign policy of a country⁷.

Population

The second tangible factor of national capability is population and human resources⁸. Large population may be a source of strength or weakness depending on the ability of the state to support it at tolerable standards of living, and the capacity of the state to provide productive engagements to the talents and energies of the human resources⁹. In developed countries large population is a source of power, but in developing countries large population is a burden and hindrance in fast development¹⁰.

The population explosion is a great problem for Bangladesh. Over-size population is a bane, not a boon for Bangladesh¹¹. The unusually high population in terms of land-man and natural resources ratio has resulted in migration from Bangladesh, in search of better conditions of life to neighboring regions towards the close of the nineteenth century. After the formation of East Pakistan heavy in and out migration began, but the reason was more religious and political than economic. The migration in this period changed the demography of Tripura, an Indian province. After the liberation of Bangladesh, the migration from Bangladesh into Assam, mainly due to economic reason heavily increased. It is one of the problems between India and Bangladesh in the perception of New Delhi.

Natural Resources

Natural resources include minerals, flora and fauna, waterfall and soil fertility. Natural resources are assets, and what constitute assets varies according to time and place. Raw minerals require labour, technology, capital to convert it into actual utility. If a state has minerals it has the potential to be an industrial power. The presence of exploitable non-human natural resources are neither essential nor a guarantee for economic development is proved by the development experiences of different countries. H.W. Arndt in his book – *Economic Development: The History of an Idea*, has shown that there is an inverse relationship between the availability of non-human natural resources in a country and its industrialisation. The country with abundant natural resources suffers from 'the temptation of lotus eating'¹².

The forests of Bangladesh are important natural resource. Different industries like newsprint, matchbox, pencil timber are based on the forest¹³. Wild honey and bee wax are collected from the Sundarban forests. In the rivers and creeks of Sunderban, shells, conches, skins of lizards, reptiles and crocodiles are available. The area is abound by fish. Quick growing foreign trees and commercial plants like rubber and coffee are being planted to generate more resources¹⁴.

National Economy

The strength of a country is determined by its national economy. The status of a country as developed and developing is basically on the basis of its national economy. A developed state is generally self-sufficient for its basic needs, financially strong and technologically advance. This becomes a leverage for the foreign policy of the state. An economically underdeveloped country is a weak power. It is dependent upon others for its needs. A developing economy has negative balance of payment to cope with, that it has to borrow from international money market which further weakens its economy, and consequently its bargaining power in diplomacy is weakened.

Bangladesh is the largest among the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Doubting the economic viability of Bangladesh as an independent state, Henry Kissinger called it the basket case in the final stage of the Bangladesh liberation war. Taking into consideration the extreme nature of challenges before economic development of Bangladesh, some optimistic economists have termed it as a 'test case of development'¹⁵. The economy of Bangladesh has four fundamental ailments which have been termed as 'Ominous Convergence':

1. Rapid Population Growth
2. Ecological Vulnerability
3. Large Number of Absolute Poor and
4. Deeply Rooted Domestic And External Macro-Economic Problems¹⁶.

The status of Bangladesh as LDC is a great handicap on her foreign policy. The economic dependence of Bangladesh upon the developed countries, even for maintenance as a state, demands that its foreign policy must keep the benefactor countries always interested in it¹⁷. Bangladesh can take only that much independent decision which is tolerated by the development partner. The structural problems of the national economy, food deficit and urgency of development of the Bangladesh economy, demand very active economic diplomacy to get foreign assistance, promote export and attract foreign investment. The weakness of the economy has made the economic diplomacy of Bangladesh more important, than the political-security diplomacy. Through aid diplomacy Bangladesh procures different kind of foreign assistance from different sources for its survival and economic development. The weak economy projects have a bad image of Bangladesh in the international public opinion¹⁸.

Military Capability

Foreign policy of a country is greatly influenced by its military capability. Military capability includes the size of the armed forces, arms and equipment of the forces and the quality of the manpower of forces. The size of the armed forces includes army, airforce and navy. Arms and equipment must be considered in terms of quantity and quality, modernity and sophistication, fire power and delivery power. The quality analysis of the manpower in defence forces can be done on the basis of training, discipline, morale and character. Military capability of a country also depends upon the level of

self-sufficiency in arms production as well as the arms imports from other countries¹⁹.

Military forces of Bangladesh were organized after independence from the deserters of the armed forces of Pakistan, who were posted in East Pakistan and participated in the War of Liberation of Bangladesh and the Bengali repatriated soldiers from West Pakistan. There was a clear chasm between the 'freedom fighters' and 'repatriates' in the forces. The freedom fighters got politicised on ideological line in the process of liberation war²⁰.

Bangladesh armed forces are an important institution influencing the foreign policy and diplomacy of the country²¹. The military men have played active diplomatic roles during the different regimes in Bangladesh²². The armed forces were one of the important players in foreign policy decision making and its implementation due to the nature of these regimes²³. Bangladesh used diplomatic posting as a strategy to minimise troubles from disgruntled elements in the forces²⁴.

Constitution

The Constitution of Bangladesh defines the broader guidelines of Bangladesh's foreign policy and its objectives. The constitution is a determinant of foreign policy and diplomacy of Bangladesh. Part 2 of the constitution which deals with the 'Fundamental Principles of State Policy' in article 25 defines four principles which may be called the ideals of foreign policy of Bangladesh government. It is incumbent on the government of Bangladesh irrespective of the nature of the government, to keep into consideration these principles in their foreign policy. The four guidelines of the foreign policy of Bangladesh are :

1. 'Respect for national sovereignty and equality.'
2. 'Non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.'
3. 'Peaceful settlement of international disputes.;
4. 'Respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter²⁵.

The constitution in article 25 identifies three general aims which ought to be followed by the government of Bangladesh. Through the inclusion of these principles Bangladesh expressed its solidarity with the foreign policy aspirations of the developing countries, and also its support to the struggling peoples who were still colonies at the time of Bangladesh liberation. The constitution expects that every government in Bangladesh should

1. 'strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament.
2. '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'.
3. 'support oppressed peoples throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racism²⁶.'

Intangible Domestic Determinants

Historical Legacy

Foreign Policy of a nation as a part of its overall national policy is a continuation of the world view that national leadership holds and which has

been evolved over a period to time²⁷. In the case of Bangladesh it is necessary first of all to remember that this country is relatively a new entrant into the comity of nations, having emerged as an independent nation around four and a half decades ago, to be precise on December 16, 1971. Historically speaking, therefore, to understand the impact of historical legacy on Bangladesh foreign policy one has to go beyond its period of independent existence²⁸.

Bengal (of which East Bengal was a part) has long tradition to fight against domination. Although Bengal's participation in the first war of independence in 1857 was not noteworthy, there is ample evidence to show that the imposition of British rule was resisted by the native rulers as well as the people. Nawab Sirajudollah's heroic battle against the foreign invaders-the British East India Company, the revolt of the Indigo plantation workers and the consciousness that it generated among the intelligentsia created a situation which later on developed into a powerful movement against British imperialism. Anti-imperialism remained an important plank of East Bengal's struggle for autonomy when opposition to imperialist-sponsored military alliances and pacts was a consistent theme of that struggle. In fact as the struggle against Pakistani domination got momentum in East Bengal, the anti-imperialist edge became sharper since the general belief among the leadership of the struggle was that Pakistan's military dictatorship was being sustained by the imperialists-the USA and other western powers.

Historically, therefore anti-imperialism could be an important determinant of the foreign policy of Bangladesh. In other words Bangladesh was expected to bear in mind that by pursuing an anti-imperialists foreign policy, she would be acting in conformity with a historical legacy.

Ideology

The constitution of independent Bangladesh adopted nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as elements of state ideology²⁹. The four doctrines were propagated by the Awami League as Mujibism (Mujibism)³⁰.

Bangladeshi nationalism was the dominant viewpoint in the post-Mujib era from August 1975 to June 1996. In the realm of foreign policy it implied opening up and development of good relations with China, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other Islamic countries. Bangladeshi nationalism has again become ruling ideology in 1996 under Sheikh Hasina³¹. Her coming into power heralded a new era of relationship with India based on reciprocal faith and confidence. In 2001, Khaleda Zia again came to power and maintained good relations with China, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia or other Islamic countries which have matured and proved beneficial to Bangladesh irrespective of regimes³². Now again Bangladeshi nationalism viewpoint is dominant under Sheikh Hasina present regime.

Leadership

Image of a particular situation in the mind of leadership is very important determinant for the foreign policy of a country³³. Decision makers act according to their perception of reality, not in response to reality itself. The elite image constitutes a

number of inter-related perceptions : (1) of the external environments – global, regional and bilateral; and (2) of the internal environmental – military capability, economic capability, political structure, interest groups, and competing elites³⁴. From these perceptions emanates the elite's definition of their state's foreign policy. These images taken together constitute a world view, which creates a general psychological framework for decision making. The difference between image and reality is partly due to physical impediments to the flow of information and partly as a result of the distortion of reality caused by attitudes, values, beliefs or faulty expectations.

Every society, regardless of its form of government, has pyramidal elite structure comprising primary, secondary and tertiary elites and below them the masses. Every state has governmental elite, bureaucratic elite (including military as a vertical subsection), commercial-industrial elite, religious, intellectual, labour, agricultural, racial or ethnic and in some cases particularistic elite—each consisting primary, secondary and tertiary layers. These elites pressurise the top government elites to define the national interest in terms compatible with their own interests. The most influential among the groups of elites are most benefited through the diplomacy of the country³⁵. In Bangladesh, the leadership has played an important role for the pattern of foreign policy during different regimes.

External Determinants

Regional Factor

The most important external factor for Bangladeshi foreign policy is its big neighbour India. Every state's first priority in foreign policy is its neighbourhood³⁶. In the perception of Bangladeshi security analysts few countries have to face the 'tyranny of geography', as it is faced by Bangladesh³⁷. Dictates of geo-politics have rendered Bangladesh literally India-locked³⁸. India is the pre-eminent power in the South Asian region. This fact makes India an important determinant to be taken into account by the foreign policy decision makers of all the regional states including Bangladesh.

India watches carefully the foreign policy pursued by Bangladesh. It is difficult for any government in Bangladesh to take a foreign policy decision, which is considered hostile and antagonistic to its national security by India³⁹. No government in Dhaka can go beyond a limit in its pronouncement and posture against India. Bangladesh is forced by its location to maintain at least normal if not closer relations with India. Its location has seriously circumscribed its manoeuvrability. India factor is and will remain an important concern in the minds of Bangladesh foreign policy decision makers. It influences its politico security diplomacy both at bilateral and multilateral level⁴⁰.

Islamic Factor

Islam is an independent determinant for the foreign policy and diplomacy of Bangladesh⁴¹. The process of opening up of bilateral relations with the Islamic countries was initiated by Sheikh Mujib which grew and matured during the post-Mujib regimes, and

is maintained on the same pattern under Sheikh Hasina.

Bangladesh has hosted many official and semi-official conferences and congregations of the world Muslim dignitaries since 1982⁴². As the second largest Muslim state in the world and as the leader of the LDCs among the OIC countries Bangladesh has a position in the Islamic world. The present regime of Sheikh Hasina is also a great believer that the role of Islam, as a determinant in Bangladesh foreign decision-making is very prominent and essential.

Aid Dependency Factor

Aid requirement has influenced the direction of Bangladeshi foreign policy. The western countries are the major donors of Bangladesh both multilaterally and bilaterally. Bangladeshi diplomacy is concentrated outside South Asia in West and the Islamic world, because they are the important donor states. The value of aid by a particular donor given to a particular recipient depends largely on the image of the recipient and its utility for the foreign policy of the donor. For creating goodwill among the donors Bangladesh has identified its foreign policy with the West and the Islamic world⁴¹. In its pronouncements on international issues and diplomatic moves Bangladesh always keeps into consideration not to annoy the aid donors.

Dhaka cancelled exports of jute bags to Cuba when America insisted for it in 1974 in exchange of its food aid⁴². Dhaka did not condemn the Camp David Agreement, the American attack on Granada and Libya keeping in view the American sensitivity. It followed the American foreign policy line on Afghanistan and Kampuchea. In recent years, Bangladesh has announced some of its important foreign policy decisions from abroad. General Eshad announced his decision to establish diplomatic ties with Democratic Kampuchea from China, during his November-December 1982 visit. These instances show that aid dependency factor is an important external constraint on the foreign policy of Bangladesh.

Impact of Global System

The international political scene confronting the new nation of Bangladesh in 1971 was characterized by antagonistic and even confrontationalist relationship between major powers of the world. Bangladesh had to charter the course of her foreign policy in a manner so as to protect her freedom under the pulls and pressures of antagonistically divided international world. Anti-imperialism, being a crucial ingredient of her national liberation struggle and the fact that powers generally characterized as imperialist—the Western World led by the USA had opposed her emergence as independent sovereign political entity, were important determinants influencing her foreign policy orientations. Her commitment to non-alignment, support to anti-colonial struggles in different parts of the world and signing of friendships and cooperation treaties with the Soviet Union and India were logical consequences of her comprehension about the kind of role that different major powers had played in her liberation struggle. China's hostility towards Bangladesh's independence

had determined the nature of the latter's relationship with the former, which remained cool for a considerably long time, and China did not recognise Bangladesh till Pakistan did it after the Lahore Conference of the organisation of Islamic states. There fore, the role of major powers in very essential external determinant for the formulation of Bangladesh Foreign Policy.

Conclusion

The variables which determine the nature, style, objectives, instruments and strategies of Bangladesh foreign policy are of general nature. They can be applied to analyse the foreign policy of any Third World country. The tangible domestic factors like geography, population, economy and natural resources of Bangladesh have more negative aspects than positive. They act as constraints rather than capabilities of Bangladesh foreign policy. The defense establishment as a capability grew during the post-Mujib period but it is not strong enough to play an important role in the foreign policy decision making. The Constitution of Bangladesh acts as a determinant of its foreign policy because it defines the guiding principles and objectives of Bangladeshi foreign policy.

The external variables of foreign policy are very important particularly for the least developed countries including Bangladesh. The pre-eminent state in the South Asian regional sub-system is India which surrounds Bangladesh from three sides. The situation is perceived by ruling elites of Bangladesh for the purpose of foreign policy decision making as 'India factor'. The approach of the regimes of Zia, Ershad and Khaleda Zia towards India was to minimize or if possible remove the influences of India upon the foreign policy of Bangladesh. The Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Peace and Friendship became redundant for all practical purposes. Common national ideology and similar world view was the basis of the bilateral treaty which changed after the violent removal of Mujib regime. Dhaka's perceptions of the international and regional issues were divergent from New Delhi in many cases during the post-Mujib era. The Bangladeshi approach towards India again became positive and its perception's on regional and international issues became similar or at least non-hostile to the Indian perceptions with the advent of the Awami League into power.

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