

# China and Beyond: Understanding American Agenda in Bangladesh

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## Abstract



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Bangladesh occupies a significant position in America's South Asian policy. Being a strategically located small state of this region Bangladesh is a natural choice for the US to promote many of its long-term agendas. From aid diplomacy to economic and strategic partnership the US has never rolled back from its commitment to have a robust relationship with Bangladesh. On the other hand, for Bangladesh, this relation has opened up a series of opportunities to promote her national interest. The US offers a large market for Bangladesh's readymade garments. Its strategic relation with America also gives Bangladesh more options to deal with China and India.

**Keywords:** National Security, Border Dispute, China Interest on Bangladesh, Domestic Politics in Bangladesh.

### Introduction

The US and the People's Republic of China are two prominent extra-regional states having political, economic and military relations with Bangladesh. Owing to the Cold War politics both these countries were against the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Both of them were allied with Pakistan during the liberation war of Bangladesh. But with the onset of military regimes in Bangladesh both China and the US have cemented their relationship with this small South Asian nation. Over the years Bangladesh has steadily maintained its relations with both the countries and in this process fulfilled many of its small state's requirements. However, with the changing global and regional scenario both the US and China are now standing eyeball to eyeball to safeguard their ambitions in many fields. A rapidly developing China is competing with the US to claim its position in global order. On the other hand, America is assuming China as a potential threat to its *status quo* and hegemony. As a small state and as an equal beneficiary of both China and the US, it is challenging for Bangladesh to balance these two giant powers without compromising its national interest.

### Objective of the Study

China and Beyond: Understanding American Agenda in Bangladesh.

### Understanding the Agenda

The US initiated the process of bilateral relations with Bangladesh in the Cold War days. After the liberation war, when Indian forces finally withdrew in March 1972, the US recognised Bangladesh as an independent country on 4th April 1972. To initiate a robust relationship the pre-existing consulate-general office was upgraded to an embassy on 18th May 1972<sup>1</sup>. The changing civil-military equation in Bangladesh followed by the assassination of Mujibur Rahman on 15 August 1975, paved the way for solidification of Bangladesh-US relations. The military regimes of Ziaur Rahman and General Hussain Muhammad Ershad capitalised the Cold War politics and enhanced Bangladesh's strategic proximity with America.

During the Cold War era America used aid and economic assistance as measures to flourish strategic relation with Bangladesh. Withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan heralded the victory of the US led Capitalist bloc by putting a halt to the decades old aid diplomacy of the US. This made the US to lose its interest on the aid dependent military regime of Bangladesh. Therefore, during this period of time the US used economic measures to establish and sustain democracy in Bangladesh. In the Post-Cold War period the democratic regimes of Bangladesh have further enhanced economic, strategic and political cooperation with the US. Both the sides strengthened their bilateral cooperation after the Bangladesh visit of President Bill Clinton in March 2000. Under the Excess Defence Articles (EDA) the US delivered four C-BoB aircraft as a gift to Bangladesh in 2002. Both sides also expressed their enthusiasm to pursue the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The agreement would allow entry of the US troops "on mission" without passport and visa. All these developments indicate the deepening strategic cooperation between Bangladesh and the US.

**The Agenda for  
Islamic  
Fundamentalism**

In the contemporary world Islamic fundamentalism has emerged as one of the serious challenges to international peace and security. Globally, it is challenging the traditional notion of state security. This form of non-traditional security threat is truly global as all kinds of states including the super powers are subjected to its threat. Since, 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the US, Islamic fundamentalism has been identified as one of the root causes of terrorism. Thus, to curb fundamentalism in Central Asia and South Asia is the thrust of America's "war on terrorism"<sup>2</sup>.

Along with Pakistan, the US also needs help of Bangladesh to mitigate the problem of Islamic fundamentalism in the South Asian region. Bangladesh has a long history of Islamic fundamentalism, solidified by various military regimes. When British India was partitioned in 1947, East Pakistan was created and became a part of Pakistan on the basis of 'Two Nation Theory'. As a part of undivided Pakistan, the present days Bangladesh came under the influence of Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, after the Liberation War of Bangladesh when Mujibur Rahman took a stab at secularism, it did not last long.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, around 1975 Bangladesh pushed into the path of Islamic fundamentalism and Mujib had to pay his life and life of most of his family members during the coup and counter coups started by junior army officers on 15 August 1975.

After a short period of political instability Ziaur Rahman emerged strong and imposed martial law in the country on 30 November 1976. Zia followed the capitalist path for economic policy, increased the defence budget and started the process of Islamisation in Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> After the assignation of Ziaur Rahman, Hushain Muhammad Ershad became the president of Bangladesh in 1983. Under his regime the Constitution of Bangladesh was amended on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1988 to make Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. Thus, when military interfere into the politics of Bangladesh, Islamic fundamentalism was institutionalised through uneventful constitutional amendments.<sup>5</sup>

The two prolonged military regimes of Bangladesh finally paved the way for democracy to return in 1991. However, till then the institutionalisation of fundamentalism was almost finished and society in general was habituating with radical elements. During the second tenure of Begum Khaleda Zia, the BNP's political collaboration with the Islami Okiyya Jote (IOJ) and the Jamaat-e-Islami had strengthened Islamic fundamentalism and helped the radical groups to operate safely from Bangladesh. It has been revealed that the IOJ and Jamaat-e-Islami have secret collaboration with terrorist outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI)<sup>6</sup>. Further, HuJI has strong linkages with the anti-American dread terrorist organization, the Al Qaeda, as the HuJI leader Fazlul Rahman signed a holy war declaration initiated by Osama bin Laden in 1998<sup>7</sup>. Even after the de-Talibanization of Afghanistan many of the fundamental and terrorist forces have placed themselves safely in Bangladesh. This fundamentalism of Bangladesh along with Taliban and Jihadi activists situated in Pakistan are enhancing anti-Americanism in South Asia<sup>8</sup>. The notorious Al Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri launched Al Qaeda in the Indian (AQCI) the regional wing of Al Qaeda Central (AQC) in September 2014<sup>9</sup>. This development has intensified the activities of extremist organisations such as Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), Ansar al Islam Bangladesh and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) in Bangladesh. It has been reported that amidst COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, AQCI has recruited 'Islamic scholars' from Bangladesh to execute 'lone wolf' attacks against India<sup>10</sup>.

Since the September 11 terrorist attack the US has championed global 'war on terrorism' by engaging in direct combat in Afghanistan. The US has also attempted to implant democracy in Afghanistan since last two decades with a little success. But the challenge from the Talibani regime is still intact for America. Over the years the Al Qaeda elements have expanded their base to other parts of the South Asian Subcontinent. In this context, Bangladesh has emerged as the new hub of Al Qaeda forces who are posing security challenges to India and America. In the South Asian Subcontinent, the US needs Bangladesh assistance to neutralise this problem.

**Agenda of Economy and Energy Security**

With a sizeable consumerist middleclass, Bangladesh is one of the lucrative export destinations of the US. The export-basket of the US put in major items like wheat, fertilizer, cotton, communication equipments and medical supplies. In the last five years Bangladesh has emerged as the fastest growing South Asian economy. As per the assessment of Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh has registered 7.8% GDP growth rate in 2018 and 8.2% in 2019. When the growth rate of giant economies suffered due to COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh succeeded in maintaining more than 5% GDP growth rate in 2020. Its GDP is expected to grow at the rate of 6.8% per annum in 2021<sup>11</sup>. The emergence of Bangladesh as a regional economic hub has added further weightage to the Bangladesh-US economic cooperation. At present America is the largest export market for Bangladesh. The total volume of export to the United States was \$5.5 billion in 2018. The US private sector has also making a smoother way into Bangladesh's market. As a consequence the US has emerged as the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Bangladesh. The US was holding 23% of the total FDI in 2017 and 20% in 2018 in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is a potential option for the energy security of the US. Bangladesh has large amount of gas deposit. The reserve gas deposit has been estimated between 32 trillion to 80 trillion cubic feet<sup>12</sup>. However, Bangladesh requires more sophisticated technology to explore and lift the natural gas from sea bed. The US is not only helping Bangladesh to explore and lift the natural gas, but also investing heavily to boost energy security. At present American multinational energy corporation 'Chevron is the single largest foreign investor, producing some 55% of Bangladesh's natural gas.' The major chunk of American FDI in Bangladesh is in the oil and natural gas and power generation sectors<sup>13</sup>.

**Agenda for Rising China**

Deep rooted Bangladesh-US relations have incorporated the possibility of American containment policy against China. The United States' strategic relations with Bangladesh revolve around China. In the 1990s China has emerged as an expanding power by steadily alarming the US dominated unipolar world order. Energy quest of China over the world in general and in some African countries and Venezuela in particular emulating a development oriented measure to sustain the present GDP growth of 10 percent in the coming years. Current growth rate will very soon enthrone China as the second economically developed country next to the US. Subsequently a possible clash of interest will be unavoidable. China perceives the US as a major threat to its quest for energy security<sup>14</sup>. China's growing involvement in global affairs had mirrored during the *tsunami tragedy* of December 2004. In an exceptional development China provided an aid package of \$ 83 million<sup>15</sup>.

Expanding involvement of China in international affairs and her profound hold upon strategically vital South Asia has been promulgating Bangladesh's role as the containing force of America in this region. The geo-strategic location of Bangladesh is inserting her at the upper hand. Strategically Bangladesh is a potential option for the US to discourage Chinese presence in South Asian region. In the recent years America has extended its 'Open Skies international aviation policy' to Bangladesh. Both the countries have signed the Air Transport Agreement on 30 September 2020 to promote modern civil aviation relationship. As a part of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, this agreement aims at deepening America's stake in Bangladesh<sup>16</sup>. As present China is the largest defence partner of Bangladesh. To break the Chinese defence monopoly over Bangladesh, the US has indicated to be the reliable defence partner of Bangladesh. America has indicated to be a major stakeholder in military modernisation programme of Bangladesh along with its attempts to emerge as a principal supplier of defence hardware<sup>17</sup>. The Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun visited Dhaka on 14-16 October 2020 and had elaborative dialogue with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on various areas of interest. The Deputy Secretary announced the delivery of 100 American-made ventilators to fight against COVID-19 pandemic. He also highlighted the long pending Rohingya issue and praised Bangladesh's efforts to shelter more than 860,000 Rohingya refugees in its territory<sup>18</sup>. Amidst COVID-19 pandemic, this visit reflects American agenda in Bangladesh in its Indo-Pacific strategy. On the other hand China is also carefully observing growing involvement in Bangladesh with utter suspicion. Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jiming in his interview to Global Times on December 2020 designated the growing American involvement in Bangladesh as adoption of cold war strategy of "coercing other countries to join the anti-China camp to interrupt

China's development process"<sup>19</sup>. These developments indicate the seriousness of America and China to maintain a steady strategic relationship with Bangladesh.

### **Bangladesh's Predicament**

Both China and the US are significant strategic partners of Bangladesh. Since 1975 China has been accepted by Bangladesh as an extra-regional contender against the regional disparities of South Asia and the projected fear of India. At present China is the largest trading and defence partner of Bangladesh. Over the years China has emerged as a reliable partner in Bangladesh's infrastructure development projects. China got the \$250 million airport terminal construction project over India in 2020. This approval was cleared by Bangladesh to reciprocate China's tariffs removal on 97% Bangladeshi products. Likewise, the US is a crucial global aid donor for Bangladesh. Its economic aid and assistance to Bangladesh is significant for the latter's socio-economic development. In the financial year 2007-08 the total US assistance to Bangladesh was 88,790 thousand of dollars<sup>20</sup>. The US also provides Bangladesh more options to deal with China. Like China, Bangladesh has also defence cooperation with the US. This is reducing Bangladesh's one-dimensional dependence on a particular country.

Though the present Awami League regime does not share a healthy historical bondage with China, over the time both the countries have endorsed pragmatism to wipe out their thorny past. After assuming power Sheikh Hasina paid a visit to China in September 1996. This visit helped China to nudge bilateral relation with Bangladesh beyond the constraint of regime-centrism. In recent time China has shown enthusiasm to further "*comprehensive friendly relationship*"<sup>21</sup> with the newly established Sheikh Hasina regime. The nature of this relationship will endorse cooperation in the fields of political, economy and military security. Furthermore, while discussing with visiting Chinese delegation from Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) on 8 February 2009, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni emphasized further Chinese involvement in the fields of 'power generation, relocating sunset industries and developing infrastructure in Bangladesh including new friendship bridges'<sup>22</sup>. During this conversation SIIS President Yang Jiemian emphasized the importance of a "the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and relocation of Chinese small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh". The new Sheikh Hasina government has reiterated its support to *One China Policy*. As both Bangladesh and China are committed to a wide economic and defence relationship, in the coming days they are going to strengthen their "*comprehensive friendly relationship*".

### **Conclusion**

As both China and the US equally crucial for Bangladesh, it has less option to be used as a containing agent of the US against China. China is a time-tested strategic partner and regional-balancer of Bangladesh. At the same time the US has steadily played a significant role in the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. As a small state Bangladesh has to maintain a peaceful and cooperative relations with both China and the US. This is the foremost challenge before the present Sheikh Hasina government to appease both China and the US and to maximize Bangladesh's national interest.

From Bangladesh's perspective a comprehensive relation with China is conducive for her national interest. Bangladesh still has many knots to untie with India. The fear of Indian-domination always works in China's favour to have strategic relations with Bangladesh. In a changing scenario the solidifying Indo-US relation may further compelled China to tighten its cooperation with Bangladesh. On the other hand, the US is a potential option for Bangladesh to drag more attention from China. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the penetration of the US and China to the region have augmented the strategic magnitude of Bangladesh.

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