

## Bangladesh: A Playground for Big powers

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to analyze Bangladesh's fundamental situation from its founding to the August rebellion of 2024. The author has used a variety of primary and secondary materials for this course, including interviews with different people, scholarly books, the opinions and views of freelancers stated in various print and electronic media, journals, seminar papers, papers presented in various workshops, etc. Because the study is qualitative, the author assessed the data using both descriptive and analytical methods. Bangladesh is a major participant in the Indo-Pacific due to the Rohingya genocide, the maritime boundary disputes between Bangladesh and India and Bangladesh and Myanmar, and its strategic location at the intersection of South and Southeast Asia, which gives it access to the Bay of Bengal. China and Bangladesh now have a stronger strategic alliance because to the BRI, which has promoted trust and collaboration on a number of levels. Mishra (2018) asserted in this line that the Maldives fiasco clearly demonstrated China's unrelenting territorial expansion. Big powers are also concerned about this issue. All of these achievements were fully realized during Shekh Hasina's administration, but the civil rebellion that followed her rule was abruptly put down because of geopolitical sensitivity and the great power struggle in the Bay of Bengal. The author contends that because of Bangladesh's shifting geostrategic importance, academic IR has developed an interest in the nation despite its small size. The report claims that due of Bangladesh's growing geopolitical importance, major powers are eager to come and aid in its development. Studying IR in Bangladesh is so essential. From the beginning to the present, the author has made every effort to convey the core of Bangladesh's history.*

Located in South Asia, Bangladesh is formally known as the People's Republic of Bangladesh. With 173,857,420 (Worldometer, n.d.) people living in 148,460 square kilometers (57,320 sq mi), (MoFA, n.d.) it is the seventh most populous country in the world and one of the most densely populated.

*Bangladesh's land boundaries are shared with Myanmar to the southeast and India to the north, west, and east. The Bay of Bengal forms its coastline to the south. The hilly Indian state of Sikkim to the north separates it from China, while the Siliguri Corridor separates it from Bhutan and Nepal by a thin margin.*



The largest and capital city of Bangladesh serves as the political, economic, and cultural hub of the country. The busiest port on the Bay of Bengal is Chittagong, which is also the second-largest city. Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh; nevertheless, official papers and government communications also employ Bangladeshi English.

In a discussion of geo-localational relevance, Willem Van Schendel (2009, February) noted that, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the limits of British Bengal were most closely aligned with the Khyber Pass in the west and Singapore in the east. The creation of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905 paved the ground for Bangladesh's ascent to prominence. The All India Muslim League was founded in Dhaka in 1906. Moreover, Richard M. Eaton, (1996, July 31) wrote that A. K. FazlulHuq, the first prime minister of Bengal, backed the Lahore Resolution in 1940. Premier H. S. Suhrawardy had suggested the creation of a sovereign state for Bengalis prior to the division of Bengal. Present-day territorial boundaries were determined by a referendum and the declaration of the Radcliffe Line.

In this line Ghos, (2019) has written that East Bengal surpassed all other provinces in the Dominion of Pakistan in population in 1947. Dhaka was designated as

the nation's legislative capital, and it was called East Pakistan. Bengali nationalism and pro-democracy movements gained traction as a result of the 1952 Bengali Language Movement, the 1954 East Bengali Legislative Election, the 1958 Pakistani coup d'état, the 1966 Six Point Movement, and the 1970 Pakistani General Election. Bangladesh Liberation War (1971): Started because the Pakistani military junta refused to hand over control to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League. India supported the *Mukti Bahini* in their successful military revolt. During the struggle, there was genocide in Bangladesh and a slaughter of pro-independence Bengali people, who were mostly intellectuals. In 1972, Bangladesh, a newly formed state, adopted a secular constitution. In 1988, Islam was designated as the official state religion (Ghos, 2019). The Supreme Court of Bangladesh upheld the constitution's secular tenets in 2010 (Prabha, 1980). Bangladesh's Constitution formally designates it as a socialist state (Baxter, 1997).

Bangladesh boasts the third biggest Muslim population globally, the second largest economy in South Asia, and the fifth most widely spoken native language in the world. Simultaneously, based on the results of the 2022 Census of Bangladesh, Hinduism is the second most popular religion in the country. Of the 165.15 million people living in Bangladesh, 13.1 million identified as Hindus, or 7.95% of the total population (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, n.d.).

Globally also Bangladesh is popular because it supplies the most troops to UN peacekeeping missions (UNPKOs) and keeps the third-largest military in the area (Das Gupta, 2005). In this line Zaman (2016) has analyzed that Bangladesh's participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations has improved the country's reputation for preserving world peace and security. Bangladesh follows the Westminster system and is a unitary parliamentary republic. Approximately 99 percent of people are Bengalis (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia, n.d.).

### Map Expressing Administrative Division of Bangladesh



*In terms of administrative Bangladesh Baxter, (1997) has written that eight divisions, 64 districts, 495 sub districts, and the largest mangrove forest in the world make up the nation. Because of the Rohingya genocide, it is home to one of the world's greatest refugee communities. (Sen, Sailendra Nath, 1997)*

(Source:figure/fig1/AS:544368086192129@1506798873597/The-administrative-division-of-Bangladesh.png)

Bangladesh confronts numerous difficulties, chief among them being political unrest, overcrowding, corruption, and the consequences of climate change. In the Climate Vulnerable Forum, Bangladesh has taken the lead role. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has its headquarters there. It is a founder member of the Commonwealth of Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Not only the military intervention in politics is another crucial issue of Bangladeshi politics simultaneously; the civil takeover of 2024 August has multiple dimension in the political history of Bangladesh that has been studied in this article.

**2. Objectives:** The primary objective of this research is to present the overall situation in Bangladesh from its formation to the August revolt (Civil agitation 2024). However, its specific goals are:

- To briefly outline Bangladesh's political trajectory
- To evaluate the nation's political fluctuations

### 3. Review of Empirical Literatures

Bangladesh, which has been a nation for 53 years, is the only one to have survived a bloody struggle throughout the Cold War era (Buchanan, 2003). Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence turned into a singular Cold War political struggle between the US and the former Soviet Union, wherein India steadfastly backed Bangladesh's independence while the US, China, and Pakistan opposed it. Furthermore, author (2003) has stated that Bangladesh acquired the 1921-founded University of Dhaka, which in turn inherited the July 1947 founding of the first academic field in undivided South Asia—international relations. Since then, Bangladesh's IR research has come a long way. Bangladesh has become a major player in maintaining global peace and security as a result of the expansion of IR research in the nation as well as its increased recognition in regional and global politics. Bangladesh is a small country in South Asia, spanning 147,570 km<sup>2</sup>, which is surrounded by Myanmar on one side and India on three. As this article has already noted, because of this location need, Bangladesh has been portrayed as a "small" or "weak" country (Choudhury, 1992), making it India-locked, or with India playing a major role in Bangladesh's foreign policy initiatives (Hassan, 1989).

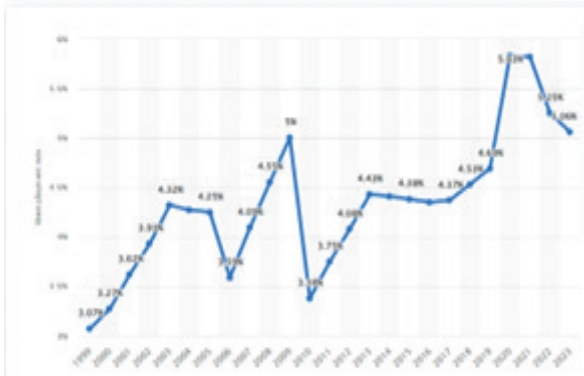
*Someone whose four limbs have all been severed. A person who is defenseless or unable to carry out daily activities, particularly as a result of extreme stress, anxiety, or similar conditions. Something that is not able to work properly or at all: The captured nation was viewed as an economic basket case immediately following the war.*

*Bangladesh's extreme poverty was brought to the attention of the world when American officials labeled the country as an "international basket case" as soon as it was established (Jahan, 1972). Therefore, the initial decades of Bangladesh's existence were mainly spent reconstructing.*

Therefore, the initial decades of Bangladesh's existence were mainly spent reconstructing and rebuilding. Consequently, it did not think twice to foster friendships that extended beyond its Indo-Soviet axis, which was crucial to attaining independence. Bangladesh sought to diversify its sources of foreign aid as soon as possible (Yasmin, 2016); eventually, the Arab World and the United States responded to Bangladesh's demand. Bangladesh has changed in the second decade of the twenty-first century. With foreign help making up barely 2% of its GDP, the nation is no longer dependent on international assistance.

With foreign help making up barely 2% of its GDP, the nation is no longer dependent on international assistance. Bangladesh is ranked by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as one of the five fastest-growing economies in 2019. Since the early 2000s, the phrases "Bangladesh conundrum" (Mahmud, Ahmed, Mahajan, 2008) and "Bangladesh surprise" (Asadullah, 2014) have gained popularity. Bangladesh, according to the economist who calls it "one of the most intriguing puzzles in development," is no longer a hopeless situation. The changes in Bangladesh's social and economic landscape over the past ten years have justified this. The World Bank has classified the nation as a "lower middle income country," however it is on the edge of being a "developing country" in 2024 ([https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/tdr2023\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/tdr2023_en.pdf)).

**Bangladesh: Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2023**



*Some have opined that the alarmingly increasing graph of unemployment is responsible for this uprising. However the statistics does not let to justify this claim because Bangladesh's unemployment rate fell from 4.30 percent in 2022 to 4.20 percent in 2023. Bangladesh's unemployment rate reached a record low of 2.20 percent in 1991 and an all-time high of 5.30 percent in 2020, with an average of 3.78 percent from 1991 to 2023.*

(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/808225/unemployment-rate-in-bangladesh/>)

With all above mentioned significance Bangladesh's geostrategic importance is growing amid these changes. Bangladesh's size, geographical realities of being wedged between India and Myanmar, and the overpowering presence of its massive neighbor India have historically limited its ability to pursue independent foreign policy; however there have been several developments in this area. Bangladesh has discovered a third neighbor, albeit one that has historically been less important to Bangladeshi policy circles. The long-running dispute over the maritime borders between Bangladesh and



India and Myanmar has at last given Bangladesh the much-needed unrestricted access to the Bay of Bengal.

As a result, Bangladesh's geostrategic relevance has increased, and policymakers working on the South Asian region have acknowledged this. In 2014, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Kelly made a statement that is frequently cited (Imam, 2014). This statement is crucial to comprehending Bangladesh's growing importance to the US and its ally, Japan, in the Asia-Pacific region, as they work to counterbalance China's influence in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region. Bangladesh's position in the US-proposed Free and Open Indo-Pacific similarly designates Bangladesh as a "key" actor, as Kelly had previously designated Bangladesh as a major role in the Indo-Pacific corridor (Miller, 2019).

A security debate was launched in 2012 between the United States and Bangladesh, and it was continued in 2017 by the United Kingdom. This was when the folly started. Since India's Navy raised concerns about Bangladesh's militarization with submarines and Bangladesh opened its platform to regional and international powers, there has been a triangular power struggle. In this line Mishra (2018) claimed that The Maldives debacle undoubtedly showed China's relentless advance into the region.

As a result, Bangladesh has become an independent major factor in the South Asian area. It has progressed more in terms of socio-economic development than Pakistan and India. It ranks second in Asia, behind the Philippines, and has the highest score in South Asia for closing gender inequalities. Bangladesh has managed to make a name for itself in international politics despite being one of the world's most densely inhabited and tiniest countries geographically.

Nonetheless, there are drawbacks to small size when it comes to allocating resources to achieve specific goals. Bangladesh's diplomatic and strategic policies are inconsistent. In other words, the nation lacks such specific goals in the fields of foreign and strategic policy, even while it has five- or ten-year development plans to attain economic goals. It was made clear during the August 2017 Rohingya inflow, when Bangladesh was left feeling "friendless" in spite of the fact that all of the major nations were actively interested in Bangladesh. The Indian Prime Minister's state visit to Myanmar during the Myanmar Army's atrocities against the Rohingya people, which forced them to flee and migrate to Bangladesh, was shocking to Bangladesh. Bangladesh's foreign policy is therefore frequently characterized as proactive rather than the result of thoughtful considerations. In Bangladesh's general election in January 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League won a fourth consecutive term. The principal opposition party was the Jatiya Party (Ethirajan & Kelly Ng 2024, January 08). The administration committed to maintaining the nation's rapid economic development in March 2024. But the suppression of opposition party in election had wide range of dissatisfaction.

As a result on August 5, 2024, due to widespread demonstrations against the

Awami League administration, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was compelled to step down and leave Bangladesh for India (Redwan, 5 August 2024). On August 8, 2024, a provisional administration was established, headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus as Chief Advisor. For this, it said that the US-China power struggle in the Bay of Bengal is the reason for everything.

### **The Statement of Problem**

Genocide of the Rohingya, long-standing maritime border conflicts between Bangladesh and India. Because of its location at the meeting point of South and Southeast Asia and its access to the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh plays a significant role in the Indo-Pacific. Because of the BRI, which has fostered confidence and cooperation on several levels, China and Bangladesh now enjoy a deeper strategic partnership. The US has voiced its concerns about Bangladesh's democratic problems. The AL government has been receiving unfettered backing, including financial help, from China and Russia. The AL administration was overthrown by the civil uprising in August 2024, and it was declared illegal on May 10, 2025. Elections are scheduled for late 2025 or early 2026, and commissions for electoral reform and constitutional concerns have been established by the interim administration under Muhammad Yunus. The US, China, India, and the EU are attempting to put down their favored governments through scheduled elections. This study raised worries about the reasons behind big nations' intervention in Bangladesh because of the country's unstable political positioning in this open and precarious race for dominance among major powers.

### **4. Methods of the Study**

This article uses a critical paradigm to examine how nationalism, power dynamics, colonial legacies, and geopolitics have affected Bangladesh and its transitional dispute narratives. This approach may show how political interests and power dynamics affect opinions and choices, thereby exposing regional differences and the influence of past events. The best interpretation of this problem will come from any of the possibilities presented. In order to examine how a conflict has changed over time, the study uses a historical-comparative design (HCD), which tracks how colonial influences, previous treaties, and political shifts have shaped current attitudes. Despite being a qualitative study, the author has assessed facts and data using descriptive and analytical methods, and the historical-comparative approach may entail looking at previous papers, treaties, and regulations. In addition to conducting library research, the author used a range of print and digital media sources, such as tweets, interviews, opinion pieces, viewpoints, thoughts, seminar papers, academic publications, and more, to collect the required data.

### **5. Findings**

#### **The Hasina's government (2009–2024)**

Bangladesh's geostrategic significance has grown since the second decade of 2021

as a result of BRI and IPS, and South Asian policymakers have recognized this. In 2014, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Kelly made a statement that is frequently cited (Imam, 2014). This statement is crucial to comprehending Bangladesh's growing importance to the US and its ally, Japan, in the Asia-Pacific region, as they work to counterbalance China's influence in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region. As an Indian Ocean littoral, Bangladesh offers the big powers an important launching pad to expand their network in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Chinese geopolitical interests in the Indian Ocean are well known. With much of its trade with the Gulf and Africa conducted via the Indian Ocean, Beijing has sought to enhance its presence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has made considerable progress in this regard. In Bangladesh, the United States has become increasingly vocal on democracy issues. China and Russia have been offering unconditional support, including monetary assistance to the AL government, and in the process strengthening it. During second decade of twenty first century Russian interest over Bay of Bengal was seen very vital that extended the tensions with some military factions were sparked by the BDR Mutiny, that Sheikh Hasina's second government had to deal within two months of taking office. Hasina dealt with the threat posed by mutinies and angry

*7 November 1972 Bangladesh Rifles mutiny refers to a mutiny by the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles on 7 November 1972 under the Sepoy-Janata Revolution (solder-people revolution) banner, which led to the death of 25 officers of the Bangladesh Army. (Source: <https://gpilondon.com/publications/the-unsolved-mystery-of-the-bdr-mutiny>)*

*It is possible that the destabilization of the Bay of Bangel is the main cause of this BDR mutation. This theory includes the idea that the main masterminds behind the mutiny were those who were against PM Hasina's government. The masterminds' long-term goal was to incite a civil war between the army and the BDR in order to weaken Bangladesh's defenses and make the nation unstable.*

military personnel with success (Willem, 2009). In order to pursue the remaining Bengali Islamist collaborators of the 1971 genocide, she established the international crimes tribunal. The tribunal's impartiality and fairness have drawn criticism. With this, following an anti-terror campaign, ties with neighboring India have greatly improved. Bangladesh and India are focusing more on connectivity and regional trade.

The Bangladeshi Supreme Court upheld secularism as a cornerstone of the constitution in 2010. The Shahbag protests in March 2013 were a result of the popular opinion that the war crimes tribunal had mobilized in favor of secularism. In May 2013, the Hefazat-e-Islam organization led a massive Islamist mobilization in response (Haroon, 2011, June 24). Willem (2009) writes that the political power struggle defined as the bitter dispute between the BNP and the League, which is sometimes referred to as the "Battle of the Begums," has persisted. Through the contentious Fifteenth Amendment, the Hasina government eliminated the provision of caretaker government in the constitution.

The High Court ruled in 2013 that Jamaat-e-Islami, a hard-line, right-wing



Islamic party, could not register to run for office because their charter violated the constitution. (Al Jazeera, 2013, August 1). In the days leading up to the general election, there was an increase in street violence involving the Jamaat, BNP, and League. In 2014, the BNP abstained from the general elections. The United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United Nations all condemned the elections (Chowdhury, 2014, January 7). Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took the oath of office for a third term.

Bangladesh witnessed a rise in killings targeting secularists and members of minority groups in 2015 and 2016. Twenty people were killed in the biggest terrorist attack to hit the nation in July 2016, when gunmen stormed an exclusive restaurant (NDTV WORLD, 2016, July 2). Many of the assaults have been attributed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, while the Hasina administration maintains that local terrorist groups are more likely to be to blame (Willem, 2009). Following this attack, the security services conducted multiple searches on suspected militant hideouts, and the government implemented harsher measures against radicals. Attacks and deaths by extremists decreased as a result of the measures (Singh, 2020, January 21).

The Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, won another resounding win in the 2018 general elections. The elections were further tainted by violence and allegations of vote tampering, compounding the already weak opposition caused by the exile or imprisonment of its leading figures (BBC, 2018, December 30). Nonetheless, this provided stability and a chance for the Awami League Government to finish important national infrastructure projects like the Dhaka Metro Rail and the Padma Bridge (Mahmud, 2022, June 24). In Bangladesh's contentious general election held in January 2024—which the country's main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, boycotted—Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won her fourth consecutive term (Anbarasan, E. & Ng, K. 2024 January 8).

### **The End of the Hasina Government (2024)**

Under non-cooperation movement and Bangladesh quota reform movement in 2024 protesters' victory march following Sheikh Hasina's resignation in 2024. Protests started in June 2024 in response to the Supreme Court of Bangladesh's decision to reverse the government's decision to back the 2018 Bangladesh quota reform campaign and reinstate a 30% quota for government positions for descendants of independence fighters. Pupils started to believe that their opportunities are limited, regardless of their merit. The government's harsh response to the protest, which started as a protest against the government's reinstatement of the quota system for government positions, combined with the growing popular discontent with a repressive administration, caused the protest to soon expand over the entire nation.

Numerous additional persistent problems, such as the government's incapacity to handle a protracted economic downturn, allegations of widespread corruption and human rights abuses, and the lack of democratic avenues for change initiation, further exacerbated the situation (Lu, 2024, August 7).

The Anti-discrimination students' movement coordinators demanded "comprehensive non-cooperation" and unveiled a one-point demand for the resignation on August 3, 2024 (Parmar, 2024, August 4). Violent confrontations that day claimed the lives of 97 people, including schoolchildren. On August 5, the organizers demanded a lengthy march to Dhaka in order to remove Hasina from office. That day, a sizable contingent of demonstrators marched through the nation's capital (The Daily Star, 2024, August 5). Sheikh Hasina resigned at 2:30 PM BST and left for India (The Kathmandu Post, 2024, August 5).

Waker-uz-Zaman, the chief of army staff, organized a conference on August 5 with leaders from Jamaat-e-Islami, the Jatiya Party (Ershad), and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (The Economic Times, 2024, August 5). He demanded that an interim administration be formed within 48 hours, with the Awami League excluded (First Post, 2024, August 5). It was then reported that Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus had been proposed to lead the transitional administration (You Tube, 2024, August 5). Prominent members of the student movement have also endorsed Yunus' nomination. Yunus accepted the advisory position in the interim administration (Al Jazeera, 2024, August 6). Waker-uz-Zaman also promised a military probe into the previous violent occurrences and issued an order banning security personnel from shooting at demonstrators.

## **Discussions**

Bangladesh is particularly concerned about the tense relations between these two powerful regional nations because it is located right next to both China and India. The US-China power struggle is also getting more intense, which increases the possibility of regional conflict intensifying, which could undermine Bangladesh's recent progress toward leaving the Least-Developed Country (LDC) category by 2026. While the government is focused on political survival, the needs of the common people are being ignored. The AL administration was overthrown by a civil uprising in August 2024 and banned on May 10, 2025. Many participants in this setting bemoaned the lack of progress in regional cooperation and economic integration, which would increase interdependence and mutual understanding while lowering the likelihood of violence. Positively, it was determined that Bangladesh should work to maintain its positive ties with China and India by taking advantage of its strategic location. A major rising geopolitical trend in the region is trade and economic factors. The consensus was that Asia will maintain its high rate of economic growth and maintain its leadership role as the global economic hub in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, a number of delegates expressed hope for a controlled outcome to the ongoing trade disputes between major world powers and stressed the significance of Bangladesh staying relevant in an increasingly fragmented global trade landscape. Additionally, it is anticipated that new social movements and a more diverse range of

voices in society will draw attention to the problems of rising national debt and income inequality and assist in developing just remedies. All things considered, Bangladesh has a rare chance to grow its geopolitical influence in the future thanks to the increasing multi-polarity of the world order.

The country has witnessed a flurry of visits from U.S. and Chinese officials. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu was in Dhaka, where he held a series of meetings with political parties, senior officials, and civil society leaders. Just before, Rear Admiral Eileen Laubacher, the senior director for South Asia at the White House's National Security Council, was in Bangladesh on a four-day visit. She met Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AbulKalam Abdul Momen.

### Bangladesh in the New Geopolitics of Asia

*The South Asian country is being courted by the U.S., Russia, and China among others, and officials are making a beeline to Dhaka.*



(Source: FES: Asia- Friedrich- Ebert- Stiftung. <https://asia.fes.de/news/bangladesh-geopolitics-lab.html>)

A day after Laubacher's meeting with Momen, newly appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang stopped over at Dhaka to meet his Bangladeshi counterpart at the airport. This was his first-ever visit abroad as foreign minister. The visit broke with Chinese diplomatic tradition. It is customary for Chinese foreign ministers to make an African country the destination of their first foreign visit each year, but this year, the new foreign minister touched down in Dhaka first. Although Qin was heading to Africa and the meeting with Momen was not an official visit, the Chinese foreign minister's short halt in the Bangladeshi capital – he met Momen at the airport for less than an hour and in the middle of the night – was significant and did not go unnoticed in diplomatic circles in Dhaka and abroad. Soon after Qin's visit, a high-level delegation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by the deputy head of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee, Chen Zhou, arrived in Bangladesh. The delegation held lectures interpreting the spirit of the 20th CCP National Congress.

Since it emerged as an independent country in 1971, Bangladesh's foreign policy has been based on "friendship to all and malice to none." This strategy has worked well

for the country. However, increasingly, the big powers are pressuring Dhaka to take sides in their rivalries.

In October 2020, then-U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Beigun invited Bangladesh to join the Quad. Describing Bangladesh as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region, Beigun stressed the U.S. commitment to “growing our partnership... to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific.” “Bangladesh will be a centerpiece of our work in the region,” he added.

The U.S. attempt to draw Bangladesh into its Indo-Pacific strategy prompted a Chinese response. In May 2021, Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming warned that “Bangladesh’s relations with China will substantially be damaged” if Bangladesh joins “the small club of four,” i.e. the Quad. Although China has often called on Bangladesh to stay neutral between the big powers, it is wooing Dhaka to join its Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI).

Meanwhile, the United States and Russia have been engaging in a war of words over Bangladesh. In late December, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova slammed the U.S. at a regular press briefing in Moscow. The U.S. ambassador in Dhaka, Peter D. Haas, is “persistently trying to influence the domestic processes in the country,” she said.

Earlier, the Russian embassy in Dhaka had released a statement criticizing “the hegemonic ambitions” of countries that identify themselves as “developed democracies.” “Under the pretext of protecting ‘democratic values,’ work is underway to interfere in the internal affairs of those who are out of favor with the states that consider themselves ‘rulers of the world,’” it added.

Russia’s criticism of the U.S. came amid Haas’ mounting outreach on issues relating to Bangladesh’s domestic politics.

During a visit to the Election Commission of Bangladesh in June, when he met Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal, Haas called for “transparent” elections in the country. Bangladesh hold vote in national elections. But general elections in 2013 and 2018 drew global criticism for massive irregularities, and there is concern now that the ruling Awami League could not hold free and fair elections.

More recently, Haas visited the family of opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader Sajedul Islam Sumon, who has been missing for a decade. Over the past decade, the AL government has jailed hundreds of BNP leaders and activists. Amid an economic crisis, a rejuvenated BNP has been spearheading nationwide mass protests against the government’s mishandling of the economy. These protests culminated in a massive rally in Dhaka, where several BNP leaders were arrested. Haas’ visit to Sumon’s residence came a few days after the Dhaka rally.

Responding to the Russian criticism of its meddling in Bangladesh’s domestic politics, the U.S. embassy in Dhaka tweeted that the United States is always against

interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. Reacting to the Russia-U.S. statements and counter-statements, Momen stepped in to say that Bangladesh does “not want Russia, the USA or any other country to interfere in our internal matters.”

*Surrounding the Indian Ocean is thirty-seven countries, or one-third of the global population. On a map of the Horn of Africa, the Greater Indian Ocean stretches from the South China Sea to the Red Sea. "It covers the whole Islamic arc, from the Indonesian archipelago to the Sahara Desert," he explained. The Indian Ocean, where the Bay of Bengal is located, has become even more significant due to these strategic facts.*

*Bangladesh's location in the Bay of Bengal provides it with geopolitical significance. The noted scholar of geopolitics Robert Kaplan predicted that "the Indian Ocean will be the center of global conflicts" due to its importance as a shipping route to the world economy. The interests and influences of the big powers overlap and intersect in the Indian Ocean. According to Kaplan, the 21st century's "global power dynamics will be revealed" in the Indian Ocean.*

(Source: Kaplan. 2011, February 2).

As an Indian Ocean littoral, Bangladesh offers the big powers an important launching pad to expand their network in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Chinese geopolitical interests in the Indian Ocean are well known. With much of its trade with the Gulf and Africa conducted via the Indian Ocean, Beijing has sought to enhance its presence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has made considerable progress in this regard.

As for the U.S., if in the past Pakistan and India were the focus of its diplomatic efforts; increasingly Washington is turning its attention to other South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. The Burma Act, which authorizes the Department of State and U.S. agency for international development activities in Burma and the surrounding region to support democratic activists, humanitarian assistance, and reconciliation efforts, signals the nature of its engagement in these countries.

In Bangladesh, the United States has become increasingly vocal on democracy issues. In December 2021, it imposed sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion, Bangladesh's elite paramilitary force, and on seven of its current and former officers for human rights violations.

Bangladesh could have played a more assertive role in big-power rivalries. But its internal political frictions, economic crisis, legitimacy crisis, lack of democratic values, and human rights violations have undermined its capacity to take decisions freely and rationally.

Moreover, its economy is highly dependent on the United States; the latter is the single largest market for Bangladeshi goods. Bangladesh is also one of the largest recipients of U.S. assistance in Asia. On the other hand; Bangladesh has a strong economic relationship with China. Beijing's trade, investment, and loans to Bangladesh are worth around \$60 billion – the largest ever pledged to Bangladesh by a single



country. Its economic dependence on these countries limits Bangladesh's capacity to make decisions independently.

While the U.S. is using the democracy stick to get Bangladesh to toe its line, China and Russia have been offering unconditional support, including monetary assistance to the AL government, and in the process strengthening it. While the big powers battle for influence and with the government focused on political survival, the needs of the common people are being ignored. The AL administration fell due to the civil uprising in August 2024. However, the circumstances surrounding PM Hasina's escape have also generated political instability. The power struggle and vested interests of great powers have resulted in a new discourse in the Bay of Bengal and even South Asia.

## 6. Conclusion

Most of the foreign relations experts agreed that Bangladesh needs to make internal reforms to achieve its ambitious economic and geopolitical goals in the coming decades. In addition to satisfying the interests of major nations without sacrificing Bangladesh's sovereignty, equality, and independence, it should look for long-term solutions to the Rohingya refugee issue. If not, this could lead to a lot of problems for the host nation, which is welcoming powerful nations, under the pretense of refugee and minority rights. However, political instability has also been brought on by the circumstances surrounding PM Hasina's exit. In India, Hasina is living in exile. Muhammad Yunus's pro-American interim transition administration is coming under fire. Large nations' entrenched interests and power struggles have given rise to a new narrative in the Bay of Bengal and even throughout South Asia. Following four months of medical care in the British capital, London, Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has returned to Dhaka, increasing pressure on the interim administration to schedule national elections.

In terms of foreign policy, it was underlined that Bangladesh should retain close ties with its two most important neighbors, China and India, while also advocating for stronger regional multilateralism to lessen the possibility of fragmentation from competing commercial blocs. Regional cooperation will be essential to successfully overcoming the numerous challenges that lie ahead, with Bangladesh acting as a vital link between the South Asian and Southeast Asian sub regions. The world's superpowers should abstain from interfering in the internal affairs of small, independent countries. Leaders of small nations should similarly reject the major powers' smooth rise to political dominance and preserve a cautious, autonomous polity while taking into account the fundamental interests of the people. Elections are planned for late 2025 or early 2026, and the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has set up panels for constitutional and election reform. By holding counterfeit elections, the US, China, India, and the EU are trying to install their preferred government. Additionally, parties should stop engaging in unhealthy competition with one another and with themselves. Otherwise, as is the case with Bangladesh right now, powerful interests would find a

way to meddle in local matters.

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