

BOOK REVIEW

Foreign Policy of Bangladesh : A small state's imperative, Emajuddin Ahamed (Ed)

University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1984, ix+151 pages, Tk. 150/-

The challenge of researching and deliberating on the complex milieu of the foreign policy of the countries of the developing world is really formidable because the foreign policy postulates and postures of these countries are hardly spelt out in clear terms. The more so in case of a country like Bangladesh where the two interrelated tasks of ensuring political stability and greater economic growth under enormous domestic compulsions and compelling external constraints severely limit the range of options and manoeuvrability of its foreign policy. Moreover, the ascribed sensitiveness and a perceived notion of secrecy make the documents of foreign policy less accessible for open discussion, leading in effect to an endemic dearth of literature on the subject.

Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation in the wake of the first successful secessionist civil war of the century. The problems that the country faced during the years following its independence are obviously similar to those faced by the bulk of the nations that were liberated from colonial rule in the wake of the Second World War. The country was poor, inheriting a legacy of exploited and neglected economy and it was in a political vacuum lacking in adequate political institutions. The situation was also a peculiar one. At independence Bangladesh along with its uphill task of national reconstruction and development had to face the challenge of preserving the friendship of its "friends in need" on the one hand and procuring

on the other a badly needed cooperation from a greater part of the international community which was hostile to its creation. This was in a situation when the people and leadership were overwhelmed with extraordinarily heightened level of expectation seeking enormous socio-economic upliftment. How was the task dealt with to develop a framework for its external relations, what were the compulsions that determined the principles and objectives of the foreign policy of Bangladesh, what are the core values and interests that the country is committed to preserve and uphold—these are some of the pertinent questions which remain to be answered in order to understand the evolution and basic tenets of foreign policy of Bangladesh.

In this backdrop the community of the students of contemporary history and international relations, academics and policy makers is offered with a collection of essays edited by Emajuddin Ahamed under the title **Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: A small state's imperative**. The book which is the first of a promised series of volumes is an attempt at academic enquiry into the context and content of foreign policy of Bangladesh by a group of distinguished University teachers.

The first article titled "Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: A Framework of Analysis" by Abdul Halim commits itself to analyse the whole set of issues ranging from the aims, objectives and principles of Bangladesh foreign policy to its decision making structure and the nature of its continuity and change—a task which has appeared too wide and too complex to be accomplished within the scope of fourteen pages, as has been done by Halim. The article aptly takes Bismarck's famous quotation—extension of domestic policy is foreign policy—as its premise but goes on to entangle itself into methodological complications by attempting to examine aims and objectives of foreign policy for understanding national interests. The author nevertheless presents useful classification of the aims and objectives of Bangladesh foreign policy which, though elaborated in a very sketchy manner using commonplace rhetorics, by themselves have been able to leave some idea about the addressed problem.

In the second article of the volume titled "Bangladesh and the Policy of Peace and Non-Alignment", Emajuddin Ahamed presents an interesting exercise of one of the key aspects of Bangladesh foreign policy—the policy of peace and non-alignment. The premise of fundamentals of non-alignment and that of the long and short term bases of Bangladesh foreign policy are set in perspective to highlight the factors and forces behind Bangladeshi urge for a policy of peace and non-alignment. In this context Ahamed identifies and analyses three main sets of geo-political and socio-economic considerations behind primary foreign policy concerns of Bangladesh. These are, firstly, safeguarding of independence which dictates a policy of peaceful cooperation and not confrontation, secondly, ensuring rapid economic development which necessitates an environment of uninterrupted regional and international peace and thirdly, friendly ties with all and diversifying its external relations in the context of increasing major and great power rivalry in and around the region. The paper could, however, have been made more comprehensive by the inclusion of some analysis of Bangladesh's role in the post-independent period for international peace as one of the important members of the Non-aligned movement.

Ishtiaq Hossain in his brief paper on Indo-Bangladesh relations touches on the major issues on perhaps one of the most significant part of Bangladesh's external relations. His paper presents an interesting rundown of events and issues in Bangladesh's relation with India almost the same way as Serajul Islam does in his exercise on Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations. Both the essays, however, could be more penetrating and more useful if certain other aspects of these relationships like the politico-strategic setting and perspectives of the parties, their compulsions and dilemmas would have been examined to reveal a comprehensive picture of the most vital aspect of these triangular inter-state relations in South Asia.

An interesting exercise is found in Ishtiaq Hossain's second article of the book which he dedicates to Bangladesh-US relations. In a very short but precise space he brings forth the fundamental issues in

these relations including the US perspectives in Bangladesh emerging from a greater frame of US interests in South Asia. One also very usefully finds an exercise of US-Bangladesh relations during the decade 1971-1981. The paper very rightly underscores the importance of US involvement in this part of the world and places Bangladesh decision-makers to the challenge of keeping their country within the range of US interests.

Akmal Hossain's paper on Bangladesh and the Muslim world raises some very pertinent questions on this vital aspect of current external relations of Bangladesh. The paper starts with an exercise of Islam as a determinant of foreign policy postures in Islamic countries in general. It then presents the story of Bangladesh's relations with the Muslim world dividing it into three properly classified phases. The first phase began with the independence and ended with the recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan. The second is identified as the period before Bangladeshi participation at the Second OIC Summit in February 1974 and the change of government in August 1975, while the period after that till date is analysed as phase three. Finally, the author provides some data on economic aid to Bangladesh from Islamic countries. As it stands, the exercise has only partially addressed the main problems raised in its introduction. Nevertheless, the article will serve as important material for further study to answer some of the questions raised by the author. The part on economic aid would be more useful if the real dependence would have been shown in terms of share of aid from the Islamic countries in proportion to that from the rest of the world.

One of the most successful part of Bangladesh's diplomatic history has been the country's election to the UN Security Council. An exercise of the role played by Bangladesh at the Council is thus pertinent to the understanding of the country's foreign policy. Nurul Momen takes on such an exercise from the perspective of Bangladesh's role at the UN Security Council on the Arab-Israeli issue. The author presents not only an insightful paper on the subject showing the successes and failures of Bangladeshi diplomacy but has also been

able to show the process of complex nature of diplomatic activity around this long-standing issue and to show in the process the inherent limitation of the UN diplomacy. The author, however, appears to have broken his pace at the end of his article as he ends up with identifying the success of Bangladeshi diplomacy with the success of an individual diplomat.

Although the article on Superpower strategy in the Third World by Imtiaz Ahmed seems to be rather remotely fitted in the scope of the reviewed collection, the author presents herein a highly interesting and thought-provoking premise of study and analysis on the subject through depicting an insightful picture of the milieu of related variables.

SARC has by now become one of the major foreign policy concerns of Bangladesh, an exercise on the same therefore takes specific significance. The final article of the book by Emajuddin Ahamed makes a strong case for regional cooperation in South Asia highlighting some of the socio-politico-economic compulsions of the countries of the region and the expected impacts on them. It also deals with some aspects of the India factor in SARC—all quite penetratingly but fitting once again only indirectly within the theme of the volume. This is a part of the lopsidedness in the coverage of the book. Bangladesh's relation with China and the USSR have not been dealt with. It is only hoped that the promised volumes would cover these vitally important areas. But the fact that the country's relation with only one of the Superpowers has been covered leaves a permanent scar on the book, if not a bias.

Well, an absence of a defined framework and structure of the book converging with its theme (as suggested by the title) is conspicuous. Publication of collection of essays is the prevailing trend in the contemporary world of research. But despite the claim that the volume is an outcome of 'specially commissioned essays', while reading the book, one gets the impression that it is hardly one. The reader obtains neither the perspectives of its authors on a single problem nor a set of views on some specific aspects of a well-defined theme. Over and

above, a crucial part of the commitment — a small state's imperative — remains the least addressed part except for few peripheral reference here and there.

Finally, a book worth of its publishers' and authors' name should have contained much less of printing errors and editing short-comings which pitifully irritates the reader.

Having said all these one would do real injustice by not drawing attention to the fact that the editor, the authors and the publishers deserve real appreciation for the first ever effort of this type on the subject in the country. This is a challenge none had ventured to take earlier. The book would undoubtedly provide the crucial premise for further research and stimulate more promising publications in the future. It will be a reading of immense importance to anyone interested not only in the foreign policy of Bangladesh but also in some crucial aspects of South Asian politics in general. A select bibliography and some important documentation would have aided future research further. Perhaps this is too imposing on the editor. But all these are raised with the hope that future volumes would care more for the readers' requirements.

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