

Ghulam Quader

**THE CHALLENGES OF SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT:
A VIEW FROM BANGLADESH**

INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War and the demise of Soviet communism marked a security boon for the West. No hostile power poses a direct military threat to the US and its allies; the shadow of nuclear disaster has receded to a considerable extent; and the ideological confrontation against liberal democracy and free market system is over. A race for markets and technological-industrial ascendancy has brought economic issues to the centre stage of global politics while the currency of military power appears to have been significantly devalued. In this transformed world there have been growing imperatives for new thinking on approaches to international security. The main emphasis of a great deal of response to these imperatives has been on a comprehensive approach to security, and hence on social, economic and political factors alongside military, as the contributing elements of security. A notable aspect of this rethinking process is the thrust on development highlighting the dualism of political democratization and economic liberalism.

Maj Gen Ghulam Quader is Director General of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS). This paper was prepared for the seminar on International Security organized by the Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 11-16 July 1994.

For the concept of security, and for that matter, the "guns-vs-butter" debate, however, there is no scope of black and white or zero-sum approach. For all practical purposes, an integrated approach taking into consideration the inter-linkages and complementarities of socio-politico-economic strength with military capabilities appears more in conformity with the realities of today's world. By a historical coincidence, the end of the Cold War has also marked a global triumph of democracy as the unrivalled political system holding out the promise of stable and strengthened civil society. The euphoria of the triumph of democracy is also associated with new dangers in the form of a renewed stampede for self-determination and nationalist assertions which nearly in all four corners of the world are unleashing the horrors of long simmering ethno-religious and national conflicts. Western Europe and North America have agreeably been able to eliminate war as a means of settling disputes. But regional conflicts continue incessantly in various parts of the world including central and eastern Europe and several Third World regions, particularly Africa. The way escalation of violence tends to result in the break up of multi-ethnic states like Yugoslavia is a global security concern.

Despite notable progress in disarmament in recent times, the fears of nuclear proliferation, both horizontal and vertical, continue unabated. There are by now increasing evidences that the end of the Cold War has not necessarily eliminated the prospect of a dangerous rolling back to militarism and new waves of arms race and trade in various regions of the world. Growing disparities in economic, technological and industrial development between the North and South are compounding the forces of instabilities and frictions in international relations. The crisis of underdevelopment and global poverty coupled with the likely failures of the developing South as well as newly democratizing eastern Europe to deliver economic growth, social progress and political stability may cause early frustrations over the triumph of democracy. All these define too complex and too volatile an outline of international security scenario to be coped within any narrow conception of security. The clear imperative is to take into cognizance the

inter-connections of military strength with various other building blocs of security - political, social, economic and environmental.

In this paper, problems of the security and development of a Third World developing country like Bangladesh are viewed in this context of challenging the narrow conception of security, based traditionally on military power. The objective here is to highlight the importance of the socio-economic and political factors not merely in the context of debate on development but also on security of Bangladesh.¹ The purpose is not to understress the need for military preparedness for the protection of national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, but to highlight the linkages between issues of development with those of security.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES

Developmental challenges of Bangladesh as a least developed country enormous and all-pervasive. Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries of the world—nearly 120 million people surviving in a deltaic land of barely 144 thousand square kilometres. Population density per square kilometre in 1992 was 830, one of the highest in the world. At the present growth rate the doubling date of the country's population is projected to be as early as the year 2020.² With per capita GNP of barely US \$220 in 1991, only 36.6% adult literacy, 52 years of life expectancy, and with 78% of the people in the status of absolute poverty, the country

1. The debate on comprehensive approach to security, to be sure, is hardly new. See, for example, Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, (Boulder, Colorado, 1991); Yezid Sayigh, "Confronting the 1990s: Security in the Developing Countries", Adelphi-Papers 251, IISS, London 1990; Robert McNamara, *The Essence of Security*, (New York, 1986). For such studies on Bangladesh, see, M. Abdul Hafiz and Abdur Rob Khan (eds), *Security of Small States*, (UPL, Dhaka 1987); Md. Nuruzzaman, "National Security of Bangladesh: Challenges and Options", in *BISS Journal*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1991; Iftekharuzzaman (ed), *South Asia's Security: Primacy of Internal Dimension*, (Academic Publishers, Dhaka 1994); and Iftekharuzzaman, "The India Doctrine: Relevance for Bangladesh", in Shaikat Hasan and M. G. Kabir (eds.), *Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy*, (Bangladesh Society of International Studies, Dhaka, 1989).

2. UNDP, *Human Development Report 1994*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1994.) Table 23, p. 175. Unless otherwise indicated, data quoted in this part are taken from the same report.

is ranked globally 146th in terms of human development and 159th in terms of GNP. Bangladesh is indeed typical of experiences which have led the UNDP to call for a transition from the narrow concept of national security to an all-encompassing concept of human security through sustainable human development.³

Because of the low level of human and technological development, the overwhelming majority of the huge potential manpower remains a burden rather than a contributing factor to the development process. The failure of the country to develop human resources—increasingly recognized as the most vital factor in success elsewhere as in East Asia—accounts significantly for Bangladesh's continued underdevelopment. The most notable of Bangladesh's resource base—rich alluvial farm land—is ravaged almost invariably each year by recurrent natural disasters including devastating floods and cyclones which also damage the weak infrastructural, economic and industrial bases. On the other hand, the country suffers from severe shortage of water during the dry season which is not only damaging the agricultural production base but also disrupting the ecological balance. The problem is compounded by continued unilateral withdrawal of water in the upstream of several international rivers of the Himalyan basin which Bangladesh shares with its neighbour, India. While India's insistence on bilateralism on an essentially regional problem accounts for continued deadlock on the issue, Bangladesh's sufferings mount in all aspects of national life—social, economic, political and environmental.

The country inherited at independence substantial external economic dependence which continued to grow in the face of a shrinking domestic productive base. In the context of low income, massive poverty and chronic underdevelopment, the level of internal resource mobilization is obviously low. On the other hand, it is also a society of sharp social inequalities. Abject poverty pervading the society is contrasted by conspicuous inequity

3. UNDP, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

in the distribution of income and wealth.⁴ To catch up with the global trend, Bangladesh has introduced radical economic reforms including complete trade liberalization. But the country is yet to reap the benefits of free trade to a great extent because of discriminatory trade practices followed by some of its trade partners which continue to impose non-tariff barriers often based on perceived notion of labour laws. To render the situation worse, the growing dependence on external aid has been, in the ultimate analysis, denying the prospect of self-reliance.⁵ Ironical though, the main beneficiary of this dependence is the expanding and strengthening network of the aid-sustained elite while the vast majority of the poor continues to be disadvantaged. All these contribute to pervasive social and economic frustration and alienation, which add to the weakening of the socio-political fabric and thus undermine the prospect of intrinsic vibrancy of the state.

POLITICAL DIMENSION

A country with a glorious history of struggle for national independence and democratic values, Bangladesh started off well in 1971 with all the promises and openings for an accountable democratic system. Within four years of independence, however, massive transformation shattered the political landscape creating the stage for authoritarian tendencies leading eventually to a long phase of autocratic rule either under civilian, military, or so-called civilianized military rule. The most important factor that accounts for the failure to ensure a democratic order in the country for nearly the whole of two decades of independence is the undeveloped state of political institutions. A large number of political parties are active in the country, but very few of them are strictly organized, well-knit and spread up to grass-roots levels having definite policies and programmes of action.⁶

4. World Bank, *Bangladesh: Selected Issues in External Competitiveness and Economic Efficiency*, 1992.

5. See for details, Rehman Sobhan (ed.), *The Decade of Stagnation: The State of Bangladesh Economy*, (UPL, Dhaka, 1991).

6. See for details, Emajuddin Ahamed, "Crisis of Democracy in Bangladesh" *The Bangladesh Today*, (Weekly, Dhaka), vol. 2, no. 16, 1985.

Factionalism and parochial interest tend to be more significant factors in party politics than issues of national importance. Because of long years of authoritarian rule, the judiciary, particularly the lower courts have failed to function with full independence; the media has experienced severe state control; and the sovereignty of the parliament has been significantly curtailed. Against this backdrop, towards the end of 1990 a massive popular upsurge resulted in the fall of autocracy. For the first time in post-independence Bangladesh, nationally and internationally acclaimed free and fair elections were held leading to the formation of a government that held all the promises of sustaining the process of democratic transition in the country.

The new government introduced some major political reforms and constitutional amendments aimed at the establishment of an accountable government. The presidential form of government which incidentally came to be regarded as the instrument of authoritarian practices was replaced by re-introduction of the parliamentary form of government. Expectations ran high that fresh opportunities were created for institutionalization of democracy in the country. The new government, with the challenges it inherited as legacies of autocratic rule, was hardly expected to achieve miracles—neither political, nor economic. Still it started off with happy notes. Politically, it led to the process of restoring the democratic order with a genuinely workable multi-party government with the presence of a formidable opposition. And despite recurring challenges that persisted, it presided over a tenuous sustenance and stability of the political order. Economically, it embarked in a big way on a process of radical reforms for liberalization in conformity with the current trends in the international economy.

It was soon realized, however, that the issue is not merely the nature of government or simple introduction of radical economic reforms, but also of effective governance and constitutional guarantee of the limited and accountable nature of the executive authority. The experience of the post-authoritarian period, comparatively brief though, has shown how

conspicuously the political parties have failed to rise above narrow partisan interests and to cooperate with each other for attaining the greater national objectives. They quickly involved themselves in zero-sum games leading to bitter disensions and polarization. The political parties have thus far failed to attain consensus on vital issues of national interest. The setbacks on the political front have critical implications for the economy in terms of production and investment prospect. Thus, the failure of the political leadership, both in the government and outside, to demonstrate the commitment and capability to sustain the democratic process at the expense of immediate parochial gains appears to have alienated them from the masses, thereby accentuating societal frustration and instability.

MILITARY DIMENSION

As indicated earlier, the end of the Cold War has marked a shift from the confrontational and conflictual to cooperative, if not collective, international security. The reduction of tensions between the two blocs are expected to favour democratization of international security framework. The impact of changes at the central balance has not been smooth and same everywhere. The process of departure from conflict to cooperation in a number of regions remains enormously difficult. South Asia is one such region which is yet to benefit in any considerable measure from "peace dividends" in terms of substantial cut in defense spending. Conflicts and disputes in this region have always had their own internal dynamics rather than external. These are related to historical memories, mutual mistrusts and regional geo-politics including the whole set of bilateral issues originating from the time of British withdrawal from the sub-continent. Arms build up in South Asia is extremely skewed with the two large countries, widely believed to have nuclear weapons programmes, accounting for the lion's share (nearly 95%) of the region's defense spending. South Asia is considered to be the only region where two actively antagonistic countries are in possession of nuclear capabilities. Bangladesh as a small country with very limited defense capability have all the reasons to feel insecure. Defense

spending of Bangladesh in absolute terms continues to be insignificant (barely 2%) compared to the regional total as shown below in the table. Bangladesh's policy of arms procurement also reflects truly defensive strategy and is defined by the minimum requirements of replacement, modernization and training. As a signatory to the nuclear NPT, Bangladesh is strongly against nuclear proliferation in South Asia.

Table showing comparative defence expenditure of Bangladesh and its South Asian neighbours.

Country / group	Def. exp. as % of GDP (1990-1991)	Def. exp. as % of exp on health & education combined (1990-1991)	Import of non-nuclear arms as % of national imports (1991)	Armed Forces (1990)		
				per 10000 people	per teacher	per doctor
Bangladesh	1.4	41	6.4	1.0	0.3	6
India	3.1	65	12.0	1.5	0.3	4
Nepal	1.6	35	-	1.9	0.4	35
Pakistan	6.5	125	8.3	4.9	1.5	9
Sri Lanka	4.8	107	0.8	3.8	0.4	25
All developing countries	3.5	60	2.0	4.0	0.6	19
Least developed countries	3.5	-	-	3.2	1.2	88
Industrial countries	3.4	33	-	8.7	0.8	4

Source : UNDP, *Human Development Report 1994*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1994, table 21, pp. 171-2

In terms of source of military threat, no other country merits more importance in Bangladesh's foreign policy and security consideration than India. Bangladesh is literally India-locked in physical terms, and is handicapped by a number of outstanding issues with that country many of which are critical to the survival, stability and development of Bangladesh. Consider, for example, the issue of sharing of water resources on which progress remains elusive because of India's insistence on bilateral approach to a regional problem. Hence, threats to Bangladesh's security, stability and development are perceived to originate to a great extent from India, although territorial aspirations in conventional terms may be ruled out. The main

security concern of Bangladesh in conventional terms, therefore, is to prepare for the defense of the country from any possible external security threat including from India. This is a purely defensive strategy based on the idea of preparedness for any eventualities.

In this context, the main objective of Bangladesh's security policy is to protect the country's independence and territorial integrity from all sorts of physical (military) threats by building a well-trained and equipped professional defense force. The armed forces of Bangladesh is also expected to contribute to the strengthening of the process of institutionalization of democracy in the country. The Bangladesh army, it may be recalled, played a positive role in the process of restoration of democracy in 1990 and subsequently in the holding of free and fair election under the interim government. The armed forces are also expected to contribute to the national efforts to establish a stable, vibrant and resilient social, political and economic order. The army also complements the efforts of the government in the development of infra-structures and management of natural disasters in which the armed forces as an institution has the better training, experience and equipment to more successfully operate. It contributes to the foreign policy goals of the country through the widely acclaimed international peace keeping role that the Bangladesh Army has been playing in various parts of the world. Bangladesh is also committed to defending the cause of democracy in international relations and principles of the UN Charter, as in case of its participation in the UN-sanctioned multinational forces in the Gulf War.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

The linkage between security and development is integral. In case of Bangladesh chronic political instability and socio-economic under-development coupled with its external vulnerabilities are critical to the country's security debate. Security in the ultimate analysis is freedom from threat to one's survival, and therefore, it is the ability to maintain

independent existence and to preserve the core national values. In Bangladesh security has always been viewed in more than strict military terms. In the post-Cold War era there is a renewed emphasis on the inter-connection of military security with various aspects of the national life—political, societal, economic and environmental. The stronger is the society, polity and economy, the lesser is the vulnerability of the country to any security threats. Hence, our understanding of a secure Bangladesh is that in addition to ensuring sufficient preparedness to defend the independence and territorial integrity of the country, Bangladesh must be able to build a stable, prosperous and resilient political and economic system.