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FOREIGN POLICY AND ITS REFLECTION IN THE MEDIA: BANGLADESH DURING THE GULF WAR 1990–91

1. INTRODUCTION

The Gulf crisis and modalities of its resolution exposed the foreign policy of Bangladesh to several challenges and dilemmas as was the case of several other developing countries. The dilemmas were manifest not only in shift of foreign relations but also in dislocations of external economic relations. Iraq was the first Arab country to recognize the independent Bangladesh on 8 July 1972. Since then both had developed a warm relationship. Bangladesh tilted towards Iraq during the last couple of years of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). A major shift in this policy became visible when Bangladesh Government sent troops to Saudi Arabia in support of the international alliance under the banner of the United Nations (UN) the leadership of the United States in the wake of Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. At one level, expulsion of manpower from the Gulf countries intensified economic hardships and generated fear-psychosis among the concerned populace. At another level, a sizable segment of the public opinion, as reflected in the media, was at variance with the foreign policy initiative. Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to raise the question: how acute was the dilemma facing Bangladesh

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foreign policy during the Gulf crisis? It ought to be mentioned here that the Gulf crisis drew together some regional states which were not on friendly terms with one another. Bangladesh - being a non-Gulf state - also rendered its support to the international alliance by taking side against Iraq. The paper examines the background and the nature of dilemmas faced by Bangladesh in responding to the crisis. The topic has been selected as no comprehensive study has so far been undertaken on the issue of Bangladesh foreign policy processes as reflected in the media.

Bangladesh media, both print and electronic, had given wide coverage to the Gulf crisis. Most of the news items published by the western media had occupied maximum space of the newspapers during the war time. By way of providing an understanding of the media and foreign policy linkage, the current piece also seeks to assess the dilemmas facing Bangladesh during the Gulf war. The value position in point of dilemma of Bangladesh foreign policy should be put in perspective. Dilemma in this paper will have a special temporal context and should therefore be judged accordingly in the light of the prevailing perception matrix at that time. Valuation in the post-Gulf war period definitely changed, and the confused and changed scenario gave way to clarity and rationalization.

The first task in this exercise was to select a suitable newspaper for the study. The Bangladesh Observer is generally centrist in its positioning and policy reactions. It continues to be the largest circulated English daily of the country since its inception. The country's ten senior most journalists whom I consulted for selecting the sample publications, all stated that The Bangladesh Observer gave both neutral and maximum coverage of Bangladesh's foreign policy related news during the Gulf war. I selected every alternate third-day issue of The Bangladesh Observer from October 1990 to May 1991 for scanning. The Bangladesh-related news, such as the Government press notes, the reaction of different political parties including, social and religious organizations as well as the common people to the crisis were identified and examined in a systematic manner. Books and articles have also been extensively used as secondary source.

The paper has been divided into five sections which covers the whole gamut of dilemmas and the war. As a background, section two deals with Bangladesh's policy towards the Middle East countrires in general. The third section analyzes the fallout of the crisis on Bangladesh. The fourth section dissects Bangladesh's response to the crisis as published in the print media. The fifth delves into the dilemmas that Bangladesh foreign policy faced in relation to the Gulf war. The sixth section analyzes print media reflections on the issue as published in the largest circulated English daily: The Bangladesh observer.

2. BANGLADESH'S RELATIONS WITH THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES

To deal with Bangladesh's relations with the Muslim states are very significant to understand the genesis of support that Bangladesh proffered to Kuwait during the Gulf crisis. Bangladesh foreign policy is known for its close linkages with the Muslim countries. One of the important foreign policy concerns of Bangladesh was widening and deepening friendly and fraternal relations with the Islamic countries. The constitutional requirements in this regard in Article 25(2), as a matter of fact, reflect such close ties binding Bangladesh historically and culturally with the Islamic countries.

Muhammad Shamsul Huq, Bangladesh In International Politics: The Dilemmas of the Weak States, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1993, p. 235.

2.1 Evolution of Bangladesh's Relations with the Muslim States:

The evolution of Bangladesh's relations with the Muslim states may be divided into three phases.2 The first phase begins with the emergence of Bangladesh and ends with the recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan in February 1974. The second phase begins from the recognition and ends in August 1975. The third begins in the post-August 1975 and it still continues. From the very beginning, the Muslim states of the Middle East and of West Asia misperceived the nature of the 1971 Independence Movement of Bangladesh. They dubbed it as an "internal matter" of Pakistan. They held the opinion that Pakistan, being an "Islamic Republic", was being harassed by anti-Islamic forces from within and without. Consequently Pakistan's clout in the Middle East helped preventing support generation for the Bangladesh cause. much misgivings among the people of these were countries about the legitimacy of this movement. Some even took the 1971 Independence Movement as an act of ruining the Islamic values in a state which had achieved independence in the name of these values. According to one view, "the new state of Bangladesh was ignored by Muslim states because of two reasons: 'bad feeling' created among the ruling elites in 1971 and the nature of the Mujib government which immediately proclaimed itself to be both secular and socialist."3 Immediately after the birth of Bangladesh, none of the Muslim countries recognized it. The situation developed out of the emergence of Bangladesh was not clear to them. The presence of the Indian army on the soil of Bangladesh till March 1972 might have created suspicion about

Akmal Hussain, "Bangladesh and The Muslim World", in Emajuddin Ahamed, (ed.) Foreign Policy of Bangladesh, A Small State's Imperative, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1984, p. 84.

^{3.} Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 82.

the sovereignty of Bangladesh too. The Pakistan Government's threat to cut-off diplomatic relations with the countries recognizing Bangladesh also acted as a deterrent. But with the departure of the Indian army from Bangladesh and the gradual strengthening of the Bangladesh Government, the situation began to change.

The second phase of relationship between Bangladesh and the Muslim countries started on 22 February 1974. Bangladesh participated in the second Islamic Summit Conference which was held in Lahore on 22 February 1974. Before that, Pakistan and Bangladesh recognized each other. Pakistan was closely followed by Iran, Turkey, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The recogition by Pakistan sparked off vigorous diplomatic efforts by Bangladesh to establish friendship with other Muslim countries of the world.

The third phase of Bangladesh's relations with the Muslim countries began with the abrupt change of government of Bangladesh in August 1975. Since August 1975, the successive regimes of Bangladesh along with political and economic reforms paid increasing attention to Islam. In the Constitution of the country some major insertions and deletions took place with a view to desecularising it. With the development of relations with the Muslim world, Bangladesh became benefitted economically as well as politically. One such prominent economic area is employment of Bangladeshi manpower in the Middle East (see Table 1 & 2).

Table-1: Number of persons leaving for abroad on employment and their remittances under wage earner scheme

(Taka in Millions)

Fiscal Year	No. of Persons	Remittances
1986-87	60,545	21363
1987-88	73,677	23039
1988-89	86,745	24774
1989-90	1,10,014	24961
1990-91	96,691	27256

Source: Economic Trends, Statistics Department, Bangladesh Bank, April 1996, Vol. XXII, No. 4, p. 65.

Table-2: Country-Wise Workers' Remittances (Taka in Millions)

Period	Saudi Arabia	U.A.E	Iraq	Kuwait	Qutar	Oman	Iran
1987-88	7075	1948.3	515.5	3010.7	1427.7	1622.2	128
1988-89	7051.2	1968	358.7	3098.5	1441	1436.1	120.3
1989-90	7446.6	1816	278.3	2937.4	1325.8	1334.9	71.4
1990-91	9450	2787.1	53.1	321.4	2122.6	1772.7	92.2

Source: Ibid, pp. 66-67

2.2 Determinants of Relationship With the Muslim States:

The overarching factor that draws Bangladesh and the Muslim states together is the continuing urge for the Islamic 'Ummah.' Every Islamic international gathering be it religious or political and every state visit by Muslim dignitaries are followed by declarations and joint communiques that underscore the need for solidarity in the Muslim world. But beyond the rhetoric, there are

some specific diplomatic and economic interests that solidify the ties between Bangladesh and the Muslim states. A brief outline of these factors follows:

- (a) The Middle Eastern Arab nations have emerged as important donors for Bangladesh following the development of diplomatic ties between Bangladesh and the Muslim states. The loan components of the aid from the Islamic states are relatively more concessionary and easy.
- (b) Stakes of Bangladesh in the Middle East counries have enhanced grdually in view of the remittances by Bangladeshi workers in these countries. The export of manpower, skilled and unskilled, eases the problem of unemployment at home as well as augments foreign exchange earning of the country. The remittance of the Middle East countries has over the years turned out to be one of the major sources of foreign exchange earning.
- (c) Moral and diplomatic support of the Muslim world for problems faced by Bangladesh in conducting her foreign relations is an important determinant. Over the years, Bangladesh has secured unequivocal endorsement of most of the Islamic countries on such issues as membership of the United Nations and the Farakka problem.
- (d) Bangladesh and several other Muslim states are linked by common membership in various international fora like the UN, the Nonaligned Movement, the Group of 77 and more prominently, the 42-nations Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

For all these reasons "strengthening the relations with the Muslim countries is one of the national objectives" of Bangladesh

foreign policy.⁴ Having maintained that it should be pointed out that the Islamic world itself is divergent in its foreign policy orientation, so are the Middle East countries. The Gulf war was the glaring example in this regard.

3. FALLOUTS OF THE GULF WAR ON BANGLADESH

Evidently the most hard hit by the Gulf war have been the Third World oil importing countries and those which have the largest number of expatriates in the Middle East. Bangladesh was not exception and had faced severe economic losses. The immediate economic losses of Bangladesh may be counted as follows: Tk 8,000 crores (80,000 million Taka) including repatriation cost of Tk 125 crores (1250 million Taka), export loss of Tk 420 crores (4200 million Taka), foreign currency loss (wage) of Tk 360 crores (3600 million Taka), additional loss for oil price hike of Tk 1000 crores (10,000 million Taka) and stoppage of annual aid of Tk 195 crores (1950 million Taka) from Kuwait Development Fund.5 While the impact of the disruption of oil supplies to Bangladesh from Kuwait was negligible at the initial stage, the impact of the rise of oil price following the crisis was substantial. According to an official study. Bangladesh's import bill went up by US\$ 400 million due to higher prices of oil and other commodities, and also increased freight charge. The freight charge had registered a 15 percent hike on an average.6 Export earnings on the other hand, were

Professor M. Shamsul Huq, "Our Foreign Policy", Address delivered at the Inaugural Session of a seminar at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Bangladesh Observer, 29 June 1978.

Syed Anwar Hussain, "Biswa Parikrama" (World Review), Weekly Bichitra (Bengali weekly), annual issue 1990-91, p. 65.

Moazzem Hossain and Shakeel Anwar, "Confusing Economies & Gulf Crisis," Dhaka Courier, 14-20 September, 1990, pp. 16-17.

estimated to decrease by at least US\$ 50 million because of total cut in the trade with Iraq and Kuwait -- two major importers of Bangladesh's commodities in the Middle East. Kuwait again was the third major sources of remittance flow to Bangladesh. Over 70,000 Bangladeshis were employed in Kuwait alone, prior to the crisis. Annual remittance flows averaged over US\$ 90 million during 1988-89 and 1989-90 fiscal years. The Gulf countries, particularly the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as a whole, accounted for over 45 percent of the total remittance flow to Bangladesh. The adverse impact of the Gulf crisis on remittance had severe consequences for Bangladesh's with regard to savings and investment gap.

Apart from socio-economic impact of refugee problem, media had focused the Government and UN initiatives concerning the repatriation and rehabilitation of refugees and also their plights during the crisis. International attention has been drawn. And Canada, for example, made an allocation of Canadian \$ 75 million as humanitarian and economic assistance for people and countries seriously affected by the Gulf crisis.7 Bangladesh also submitted a memorandum to the UN Secretary General on economic and financial impact upon the country resulting from restrictions on economic relations with Iraq and Kuwait. As an instance of Government initiative at the initial stage of the crisis, Bangladesh Foreign secretary discussed with the Ambassadors of Iraq and Saudi Arabia about a 'contingency plan' to ensure safe repatriation of Bangladeshis working in Iraq and Kuwait.8 When the first batch of refugee arrived Dhaka in empty hand leaving all valuables behind in Kuwait and Iraq, a painful scenario was depicted in the news media. To quote: "Those nightmarish days in

^{7.} Bangladesh Observer, 21 September 1990.

^{8.} Ibid., 12 August 1990.

Kuwait, long trekking through the desert on a hazardous, escape and agonizing memories in the camps still haunt the Bangladeshis just repattiated from Saudi Arabia. To their disbelief, they found themselves landing at the Zia International Airport in the early hours of Thursday (23 August 1990)." Bangladeshis who were working in Iraq and Kuwait had to cross the borders of Saudi Arab, Jordan and Turkey. President Ershad had visited Diyar Bakir of western Turkey where several thousands of Bangladeshi refugees were stranded. The French Government helped through airlift the emergency repatriation of thousands of Bangladeshis from Jordan. India has also made arrangements to facilitate the transit through India of Bangladeshi nationals returning overland from the Gulf. In India has also made arrangements to facilitate the

In the face of such economic losses, the policy makers wanted favourable international attention. Bangladesh asked for the US backing in getting more help from multilateral sources and stressed on treating it as a frontline state in the crisis.¹² Bangladesh's support to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait was no doubt logical in terms of pre-war economic returns.

Analyzing the cost-benefits, the policy makers of Bangladesh seemed to have calculated the benefits of supporting the international alliance more weightier than the costs of their policy. The costs included rupture of relations with Iraq, illtreatment of

^{9.} Ibid., 24 August 1990.

^{10.} Ibid., 15 September 1990.

^{11.} Ibid., 21 September 1990.

^{12.} King Fahd of Saudi Arabia requested Prime Minister Kaifu of Japan to include Bangladesh among other countries for increased aid to offset the economic pressure, see, Akmal Hussain, "An Appraisal of Bangladesh Foreign Policy in the Gulf Crisis '90-91", Journal of Administration and Diplomacy, Vol. 2, No. 1, January-June 1994, p. 38.

Bangladeshis living in Kuwait and Iraq, harassments of diplomatic officials etc. There was an official protest lodged against Iraqi refusal to allow the Ambassadors, diplomats, and nondiplomatic staffs of the Bangladesh embassy in Kuwait to return home from Baghdad as a violation of the Vienna Convention that guarantee certain immunity to diplomats. Though Bangladesh's diplomatic relations with Iraq predates Saudi relation, in economic terms the benefits are meager. Iraq's total aid commitment to Bangladesh stood at US\$ 135.6 million of which US\$ 66.9 million had been disbursed until 1980-81. Most Iraqi aid came in the form of loan while no fresh commitment was made after the outbreak of Iran-Iraq war.

They also calculated increased economic assistance from Saudi Arabia, the USA and other industrialized countries including writing off outstanding debt, greater opportunity for expatriate Bangladeshi labours in these counries etc.¹⁴ With a grim prospect of declining aid from donors, Bangladesh was also struck with adverse impact of the crisis. Even before the war broke out, the effect on the country's economy had been manifold. The policy makers wanted favourable international attention in the face of huge economic losses. In terms of pre-war economic returns, Bangladesh's support to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait was no doubt logical.

4. BANGLADESH'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

Bangladesh's response to the crisis was almost single-handedly dealt with the then military ruler Hussain Muhammad Ershad.

^{13.} Bangladesh Observer, 18 September 1990.

^{14.} Bangladesh's Finance Minister M. A. Munim met USAID Administrator on 20 September 1990 and requested for writing off a debt of about US\$ 850 million for Bangladesh, see, Akmal Hussain, op. cit., p. 37.

After the fall of Ershad government, the stand towards the crisis was unchanged during the interim government of Shahabuddin Ahmed (6 December 1990 to 9 October 1991). The salients of Bangladesh's response to the crisis are outlined below.

4.1 Quiet Diplomacy:

Initially Bangladesh remained engaged in quiet diplomacy. After the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq on 2 August 1990, a Foreign Office spokesman said "Bangladesh is deeply concerned at the latest development in relations between Iraq and Kuwait. As members of the OIC and Non-aligned Movement as well as a country which enjoys excellent relations with both Iraq and Kuwait, Bangladesh earnestly hopes that the problems that have created and the present situation between them would be resolved through negotiations."15 Bangladesh Foreign Minister Barrister Anisul Islam Mahmud visited several capitals carrying personal message from King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. He visited Jeddah on 29 August 1990 and discussed matters of mutual interests with particular reference to prevailing situation in the Middle East and the Gulf with Prince Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Aviation and Inspector General of Saudi Arabia in Jeddah. 16

4.2 Bangladesh's Effort Towards The Crisis:

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Barrister Anisul Islam Mahmud had visited several Middle East countries at the end of August 1990 to see for himself the situation of Bangladeshis ousted from Iraq and Kuwait. At the first leg of his tour, Saudi King Fahd had

^{15.} Bangladesh Observer, 4 August 1990.

^{16.} Ibid., 30 August 1990.

entrusted Bangladesh Foreign Minister with a confidential diplomatic assignment to mobilize six South and South-east Asian Muslim states for initiating anti-Iraq diplomacy.¹⁷ Being enthusiastic about the offer, Bangladesh Foreign Minister visited Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, the Maldives and Pakistan. This was the first ever instance when Bangladesh had played the role of 'shuttle diplomacy' in an international crisis. During a two-day state visit at the UAE on 22-23 September 1990, the then President Hussain Muhammad Ershad said "six non-Arab Asian muslim countries were working on a peace plan to persuade Iraq to vacate Kuwait paving ways for the restoration of the legitimate government in Kuwait. The process of consultaiton among the six countries - Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, the Maldives and Pakistan are on and I hope we will soon reach a consensus on the issue."18 In a speech at Dhaka on 9 october 1990, the then Foreign Minister said "the peace initiatives by the six countries would supplement the effort and initiative carried out at various levels including that the UN secretary General. Bangladesh's stand on the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq was clear. Bangladesh deman-ded the withdrawal of all forces from Kuwait and restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait without any condition. It has to be done through peaceful means. War cannot be the only solution."19 But the initiative of Bangladesh Foreign Minister could not yield tangible result except for a joint statement of the six nations to the UN for withdrawal of Iraqi forces from occupied Kuwait. Baghdad had not responded positively to this urging. But the UN circulated the joint statement to all member states and heads of the states with due importance.

^{17.} Syed Anwar Husain, "Biswa Parikrama", (World review), Bengali Weekly Bichitra (annual issue), 1991, p. 65.

^{18.} Bangladesh Observer, 24 September 1990.

^{19.} Ibid., 9 October 1990.

Table—3:	Bangladesh's	Effort	to	the	Gulf	War	'90-91

Date	Initiator	Regime	
16 August 1990	President Ershad sent Bangladeshi troops to Saudi Arabia	Jatiya Party Government	
29 August 1990	Foreign Minister takes trip to Jeddha and later on six other South Asian Muslim countries		
21-23 September 1990	President Ershad sent troops to Saudi Arabia	Jatiya Party Government	
26 February 1991	Acting President Shahabuddin Ahmed expressed to help restore normalcy in the Gulf		

4.3 Active Participation:

A major change in Bangladesh's foreign policy was initiated in terms of shifting mediatory role to the role of an ally of a superpower by way of announcement of the government's decision to send "token" force to Saudi Arabia at the request of King Fahd as part of the multinational force in its defence. Having considered the nature of the Gulf crisis, the policy makers in Dhaka made it clear that the open aggression made by Iraq was totally unacceptable both in principle and practice. Annexation of Kuwait by Iraq was a blatant violation of the important principles of Bangladesh's foreign policy. The decision of Ershad Government evoked sharp criticism by opposition political parties who accused the Government of violating the Constitution in sending troops abroad without approval of the Parliament. Article 63 of the Constitution says: "War shall not be declared and the Republic shall not participate in any war except with the assent of Parliament." Refuting the opposition charges, a Jatiya Party (JP) leader said that war had not been declared in the Gulf, and hence

participation of Bangladesh troops in any war did not arise. The JP leader further said that Article 63 of the Constitution did not specify that "prior" approval of Parliament has to be taken for sending troops. Citing examples, the JP leader said Bangladesh had sent troops under the United Nations International Military Observer Group (UNIMOG) for peacekeeping effort in Iran-Iraq war. 20 There was another reason that for the first time in the modern history, all great powers including 85 percent nations of the world were found united against Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Bangladesh's participation in "Operation Moru Prantor" had religious, political and military implications. "It was for the first time that Bangladesh had troops abroad for combat." The question is: what type of foreign policy, and for that matter, domestic policy dilemma was created by this active participation. We are turning to this.

5. BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY DILLEMMAS

5.1 Gulf-friendship and Western Pressure:

Bangladesh, a member of Non-alignment Movement, always maintains "friendsip to all but enmity to none," as one of the major principles of Bangladesh's foreign policy. The principles of Bangladesh's foreign policy conform in essence to the UN Charter and are similar to those inspiring the foreign policy objectives of other states, small or big, weak or strong. But the interpretation and application of these principles appear to vary widely reflecting the wide divergence in the national interests and security perceptions of the various states. In principle and law, all states are

^{20.} Ibid., 24 August 1990.

Lieutenant Colonel Shah Md Sultan Uddin Iqbal, BP, psc, "Experience of the Gulf War", Bangladesh Army Journal, December 1993, p. 23.

sovereign and equal. In practice, they are unequal in all respects. So there are many unresolved paradoxes within the international system, which subsequently pose serious dilemmas and problems for the weaker states in terms of their political and economic security. In the case of Gulf crisis, Bangladesh also faced dilemma as it had friendly ties to Gulf Muslim states and the Western world.

5.2 Relations with Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia:

Bangladesh had always maintained very good relations with Iraq as well as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Even if there were differences among the gulf countries, such divergences were not usually brought to focus. But the Gulf war brought events to such a process that a clear position was to be taken. Iraq had been a friendly country which recognized Bangladesh at a very early stage of Bangladesh's independence. On the other hand, there had been even closer relations including aid dependency with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Kuwaiti Oil Minister visited Dhaka during the crisis. "Kuwaiti Minister for Oil Dr Rashed Al-Ammeri arrives in Dhaka (Tuesday) carrying a special message from the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Jaber Al-Sabah."²²

5.3 Internal Compulsion and External Pressure:

Bangladesh had faced a dilemma over the Gulf policy by sending troops on another count. Bangladesh Government had committed itself to Saudi Arabia to fight on the allied side, while the people's sympathy lay with Saddam Hussain. There was a news that Bangladeshi youths wanted to fight voluntarily for Iraq against the US-led multinational forces. To quote the news item: "scores of Bangladeshi youths gathered before the Iraqi Embassy

^{22.} Bangladesh Observer, 21 August 1990.

in Dhaka on Monday to what they said, volunteer to fight for Baghdad in a possible Gulf war. Witnesses said at least 150 youths and students, most of them in their 20s, submitted their names to Iraqi Embassy on Monday for enlistment as war volunteers."23 Political parties had also vehemently criticized the decision of sending troops to Saudi Arabia. "BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia questioned the constitutional right of the troops to Saudi Arabia. She said Government to send Bangladesh Constitution does not permit sending troops to any country or to engage in any war without the approval of the properly elected parliament."24 Of course, the political parties also reiterated their demand for immediate withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait to help restore peace in the Gulf region. They were, however, bitterly critical about the presence of troops from some of the western countries including the US in the region. They observed that the implementation of the economic sanctions against Baghdad is the responsibility of the United Nations and not that any individual country. The leftleaning Five Party Alliance, United Communist League and Oikkya Prokria (Unity Movement) said that "Bangladesh should not be party to any arrangement without the initiative of the United Nations."25 Saudi Ambassador to Bangladesh Abdul Latif Al-Maimanee called on Awami League President Sheikh Hasina on 5 September 1990 and discussed the Gulf situation. Awami League demanded pull out of the Iraqi troops from Kuwait as well as all foreign troops from the Gulf region including Saudi Arabia.26

^{23.} Ibid.

^{24.} Ibid.

^{25.} Ibid., 18 August 1990.

^{26.} Ibid., 6 September 1990.

5.4 Dilemma Between National Interest and the Commitment to the UN:

Bangladesh was confronted with a serious diplomatic challenge when Baghdad ordered the closure of the Embassy in Kuwait. Since Bangladesh had to evacuate expatriates from Iraq and Kuwait on a mass scale, the presence of the Embassy in Kuwait was necessary to supervise the evacuation operations which could be undertaken successfully and expeditiously only with the co-operation of the Iraqi government. The latter's co-operation could be expected only in the event they compiled with the Baghdad's decrees. The closure of the Embassy in Kuwait was likely to tantamount to according de facto recognition to Iraqi annexation of Kuwait, and ignoring the UN resolution declaring Iraqi annexation of Kuwait null and void. So, Bangladesh faced a dilemma between national interest and the commitment to the UN. Eventually "Bangladesh has decided to suspend the operation of its Embassy in troubled Kuwait as it is no longer possible for the mission to carry out its legitimate functions, a Foreign Office spokesman said in Dhaka on 11 September 1991."27

On the one hand, Bangladesh either closed down embassy or continued to have a skeleton diplomatic staff in Kuwait and on the other, Kuwait's Embassy continued to function in Dhaka. Nevertheless, Bangladesh took a stand that Iraq must vacate Kuwait and restore status quo ante and that the dispute between Iraq and Kuwait be settled through negotiations. Bangladesh was also unable to oppose troops deployment by the United States and the United Kingdom in the Persian Gulf in the first instance as these two countries took unilateral action under Article 51 of the UN Charter and later, when other 26 nations joined the fray.

^{27.} Ibid., 12 September 1990.

Despite being members of NAM and OIC, Bangladesh could not take significant initiatives for the resolution of the crisis.

5.5 Parties Involved in the Gulf Crisis:

Initially Iraq was the invader and Kuwait was the victim. But situation involved the world community directly or indirectly to support either US allies in favour of using force against Iraq. From the start, French disposition was somewhat different from the mainstream international coalition. But ultimately France voted in favour of the UN Security Council resolution No. 678 on 30 November 1990 which authorized the use of force against Baghdad after January 15 should Iraq refuse to withdraw from Kuwait unconditionally. United Gernamy and Japan followed the same policy. The then USSR and China were against the use of force as a policy to resolve the Gulf crisis. But none of the two permanent members of the Security Council voted against the resolution. It showed that their reluctant mood had undergone a qualitative change in the sense that they would not be able to oppose using military force should such a situation arose. The mood of the Arab states which were against President Saddam's annexation and those which have deployed their troops alongside with the US-led multinational forces against Baghdad's aggression was one of "no-war" in the Gulf.28 Anti-Saddam Arab states have reportedly argued that they had sent troops to the Gulf for defensive purpose and not for launching an offensive against Baghdad. Before passing of the UN Security Council resolution, Syria reportedly announced that it would not fight against Iraq. Saudi Arabia in the initial stage expressed its reservation about using its land as a launching pad against any possible attack on

Abu Taher Salahuddin Ahmed, "The Gulf Crisis Enters Its Fourth Month", Bangladesh Observer, 12 December 1990, p. 5.

Baghdad. Iran which wanted Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, reportedly aired that it might resist any hand over of Kuwaiti islands to Baghdad. After the UN Security Council resolution was passed, no anti-Saddam Arab state gave any indication to become a direct party to the war. South Asian countries including Bangladesh, India and Pakistan extended their support to liberate Kuwait. One of the main reasons to support Kuwait by Bangladesh and Pakistan was to defend the holy land of Makkah from the Iraqi forces.

6. GULF WAR AS REFLECTED IN PRINT MEDIA

What we have done so far is to present Bangladesh foreign policy dilemma considering Bangladesh's stake and interest in the Middle East. We intend to focus now on the domestic dimension of the dilemma and this is what the media reflection of foreign policy will be more closely observed. The media coverage of the Gulf war in news, editorial, post-editorial and letter has been classified with three categories - pro-Kuwait, pro-Iraq and balanced and findings presented in Table-4.

Table 4: Orientation of News Item on the Gulf War

Story/Item	Pro-Kuwait	Pro-Iraq	Balanced
News	15	2	10
Editorial	3	0	6
Post-Editorial	1	0	7
Letter	a Day	12	17

Note: The table is prepared by the author's survey of eight months newspaper Bangladesh Observer.

6.1 News: The news items had covered almost the issues of the Gulf crisis including Bangladesh Government versions, stand of different political parties and public opinion, diplomatic and economic crisis. Of the total news, 14 pro-Kuwaiti news had described the opinion of pull out of the Iraqi soldiers from occupied Kuwait land.

Table-5. Classification of News Item on the Gulf War

Nature of the Items	Number of the News Items		
Pro-Kuwait	. 14		
Pro-Iraqi	2		
Anti-US	12		
Official position	19		
Opinion of political parties	5		
Opinion of various forums	3		
Refugee issue	32		
Diplomtic	12		
Others	18		
Total	117		

Official Position: Bangladesh had categorically extended support toward Kuwait and US-led multinational forces. News about the country's official position had been discussed elaborately earlier in the chapter of 'Bangladesh's Response to the Crisis as Expressed in the Media'. After 'quiet diplomacy' in the first phase of Gulf crisis, the policy makers had calculated the cost-benefit and then extended support to Kuwait. The then Ershad

regime had demanded unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from occupied Kuwait. As an instance of warm relation between Bangladesh and Kuwait, Kuwaiti State Minister for Oil Dr Rasheed Al-Ameeri visited Dhaka during the crisis and carried a special message from the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Jaber Al-Sabah.²⁹ Saudi Arab had paid its due dividend by expressing gratitude to Bangladesh After the Gulf crisis was over.

In a letter of Saudi King to the Acting President Sahabuddin Ahmed, King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz appreciated Bangladesh's position in the Gulf crisis and described it as 'constructive'. The King also expressed the hope that Bangladesh would continue to maintain this constructive position for the solution of the problem and for the stability in the Gulf region. Responding to the King's gesture to the visiting Saudi State Minister for Cabinet, Mohammad Ibrahim Masoud, the Acting President reiterated Bangladesh's principled stand on the Gulf issue and said Dhaka would continue to consult and coordinate with other countries to help restore peace and normalcy in the Gulf.³⁰

Stand of Different Political Parties and Public Sentiment: All mainstream political parties like BNP, Awami League, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami and also small parties like JSD (Inu), Democratic League, Progotishil Jatiyabadi Dal, Five-party Alliance, Communist League and Oikkya Prokriya had demanded peaceful settlement of the Gulf crisis. While criticizing the United States of America for attacking Baghdad, they also demanded the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait.³¹ BNP and Awami League have supported UN peace proposal and unconditional

^{29.} Bangladesh Observer, 21 August 1990.

^{30.} Ibid., 27 February 1991.

^{31.} Ibid., 18 January 1991.

withdrawal of Iraqi troops from occupied Kuwait. But Jamaat-e-Islami, capitalising religious sentiment, termed US attack on Iraq as part of conspiracy of superpowers aiming at destroying the economy of muslim countries. Some parties had extended support to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and held responsible Iraqi President Saddam Hussein for the Gulf crisis. Probably they are Saudipatronized. Pir Saheb of Kassemabad Alhaj Maulana Shah Sufi A K M Wahid advised Saddam Hussein to give up his vest for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and to come to a settlement for diffusion of tension in the region. The Pir Saheb observed that Saudi Arabia was compelled the situation creaed by Saddam to call foreign troops to defend the holy places.32 It was to some extent paradoxical that when big political parties were taking stand against Iraq at the central level, their supporters at grass root level were chanting pro-Saddam slogans. It might be the cause that pro-Saddam supporters in Bangladesh, irrespective of party affiliation, thought Saddam as a saviour of the Muslim world fighting alone against a superpower. There is an interesting news about the people's sentiment at rural area that about 37 people were injured in a series of clashes between supporters and opponents of Iraqi President Saddam Hussain in Kazipur thana of Sirajganj district. According to the report, the clashes were ensued at a tea stall when a group supporting Saddam attacked another group of people who argued President Bush would win the war against Iraq.33

General public sentiment went against US when US-led multinational forces attacked Baghdad. Anti-war demonstrators even damaged several cars belonged to various embassies and authorities had to close entry of all public transports to diplomatic enclaves in Gulshan.³⁴ Fearing the worsening situation, about 100

^{32.} Ibid., 21 August 1990.

^{33.} Ibid., 30 January 1991.

^{34.} Ibid., 19 & 22 January 1991.

US nationals left Dhaka during the time. The anti-war/US protests and processions were held not only in the capital or big cities but also in the remote areas of the country. A news item from Kurigram district of northern part of the country states, "Political parties and student organizations here continue to protest against war in the Gulf area. The processionists chanted slogans against war and demanded withdrawal of US and Allied forces from Arab soil. Some processionists are carrying big size photograph of Iraqi President Saddam."³⁵

6.2 Editorials: The editorials of the newspaper 'Bangladesh Observer' had followed the Government stand of withdrawing Iraqi forces from the occupied Kuwait. Initially, editorial comments were for resolving the crisis peacefully by collective Arab initiative. It also hoped that a united Arab will emerge out of it with a renewed sense of solidarity, sinking all the differences and forging an all-Arab foundation of strenght for every imperative reasons of greater challenges it may have to face. '36 But with the huge build up of US-led multinational forces in Saudi Arabia and growing anti-US and pro-Iraqi public sentiment at domestic level, the editorial comments had also changed its moderate role and became critical over the US role. It wrote that the West's aims had been or appeared to have been so expanded that the public in Bangladesh at least have begun to suspect that what the Western powers want is to impose on the Middle East a wider settlement to suit their own interests. It was also viewed that the Gulf crisis was being used as a pretext or opportunity for the realization of remote but long planned objective.37 There were some editorials on refugee problems, austerity measures taken by

^{35.} Ibid., 24 January 1991, p. 8.

^{36.} Ibid., Editorial, 5 August 1990.

^{37.} Ibid., Editorial, 21 Obtober 1990.

the Government and worst consequences of the war. An editorial on the stranded Bangladeshis suggested that the Government should have a long term planning for providing jobs to manpower both at home and abroad, particularly those ousted from troubled Kuwait and Iraq. Bangladesh was severely affected by the crisis as wage earners in Iraq and Kuwait remitted only US\$ 9 million in 1990 against US\$ 90 in 1989.³⁸ The Gulf crisis affected the petroleum supply. Long queue of cars in petrol pumps was a common scene in cities across the country. Suggestions came from Government level that austerity measures should be taken in view of the Gulf crisis. An editorial wrote that austerity and auterky are two allied ideas that have to be provided our guidelines for our behaviors these days when we are having a tough as an aftermath of the Gulf crisis.³⁹

6.3 Post-Editorial: Post editorials had covered various issues like Middle East and Bangldesh Economy, peace initiatives of the UN Security Council, superpower diplomacy and apprehension of Third World War. Intellectuals of the country had expressed their opinions through post-editorials on the Gulf crisis. They strongly advocated for the strong role on UN Security Council to settle the issue. It was felt that international community would have to continue to work in a concerted way towards settling the crisis. Migrant issue was the burning question for the nation as millions of families depended on remittances during that crucial time. The income of Bangladeshi workers in Kuwait and Iraq has completely dried up overnight denting the treasuries of Bangladesh government. In a post-editorial on 'Gulf crisis and Bangladesh economy', economist Selim Jahan discussed the consequences of huge number of repatriated workers those forced out from Kuwait

^{38.} Ibid., Editorial, 27 August 1990.

^{39.} Ibid., 27 September 1990.

and Iraq. Jahan emphasised the presence of requisite flexibility in planning process and the scope for needed measures both at the micro and macro level so that whole plan does not collapse. Socio-economic vulnerability must be identified and socio-economic measures must be taken to remove it.⁴⁰ In another pro-Iraq post editorial, Ahsan Habib criticized the double standard role of big powers. Habib wrote that "... big powers maintain double standard to meet their global expediency. Their leaders are solely motivated by Super Power diplomacy, and rationalize all kinds of actions, good or bad, by seemingly impressive rhetorics. It is neither ethics nor human rights that moved great powers, it is their concerted objectives to eliminate Saddam, the only Arab power to be reckoned with. By doing so, the only viable threat against Israel will be no more, and the super Power will once again have field day."⁴¹

6.4 Letters: The letters column had reflected the public opinion at large with wide range views about the Gulf crisis. Most of them expressed their views for peaceful solution of the crisis, including the refugee problems, criticized the US role and supported Saddam Hussain as an Arab leader fighting against zionist forces. It is interesting to note that out of 30 letters, 12 were pro-Iraq, 17 hoped for peaceful settlement of the crisis and only one letter condemned Iraqi aggression. All the letter writers had expressed their opinion for a peaceful solution of the crisis. They went against the US-led multinational forces attack on Iraq because common perception was in favour of Saddam and of safeguarding the Muslim ummah. Mr O H Kabir from Dhaka wrote that "we are equally friendly to both Iraq and Kuwait. But we always support the right causes. We believe there is plenty of

^{40.} Ibid., Post Editorial, 30 October 1990.

^{41.} Ibid., Post Editorial, 25 November, 1990.

time and scope for Iraq to settle her land, oil and money disputes with Kuwait through peaceful discussion and negotiations. The Arab world must be saved from entering into a dangerous uncertain future."42 Referring to Bangladesh's foreign policy of 'friendship to all but malice to none' and its commitment to the Nonaligned Movement, Lt. Col. (Retd.) H. Ahmed from Mymensigh urged the Government to reconsider the decision of sending troops to Saudi Arabia.43 In another letter, Mr Hafiz Ahmed, a Chartered Accountant from Dhaka, wrote against the US deployment of forces in Saudi Arabia and called for Jihad against them. Mr Hafiz viewed that US entered the holy land for looting oil resources and desecrate Islam and break Muslim solidarity. "So we have nothing to do but declare Jihad against the Jews and their pets who are in Arab lands now for war against Muslims."44 In his letter, Mr. Amber Ali from Khatunganj of Chittagong, criticized the deployment of US forces in Saudi Arabia and questioned where the US, Britain and France during the time of aggression of Israel against the Arab countries?45

7. CONCLUSION

It is evident from the analysis that the Gulf crisis put the foreign policy of Bangladesh to severe strains. As per media reflection, Bangladesh initially found it difficult to adopt a forthright approach to tackle the Gulf crisis. Bangladesh virtually failed to manage the crisis and work out a peaceful solution as per objectives of Non-aligned Movement. Internal political pressures and external compulsions often working at cross purposes, forced

^{42.} Ibid., Letter column, "Invasion of Kuwait", O H Kabir, Dhaka, 9 August 1990.

^{43.} Ibid., Letter Column, "A Pragmatic Step Needed", 27 August 1990.

^{44.} Ibid., Letter's Column, "Islamic Solidarity", 1 September 1991.

^{45.} Ibid., Letter's Column, "Presence of US Forces", 12 October 1990.

Bangladesh to play subservient role to the superpowers, mainly USA. Bangladesh had mobilized herself under pressure from within to solve the crisis within the framework of Non-aligned Movement and Islamic fraternity respectively to keep out the superpowers from the regional conflict to prevent the bloody war and its fallout. Due to intra-regional rivalry in the Middle East itself and also for the adamant attitude of Western powers to initiate military action to teach Iraq an appropriate lesson, Bangladesh, by and large, failed to have a meaningful regional initiative. Bangladesh's initiatives, specially to mobilize six South and East Asian countries against Iraq, could not yield any significant result to solve the crisis except working as an ally of Saudi Arabia and the USA. It was natural that Bangladesh aspired to play an effective role in any regional conflict in the developing country. But as a small and weak nation, it was difficult for Bangladesh to move with a strong determination and purpose to prevent the feuding parties to resort to military action in the Gulf. Despite all justification by the Government for its action neither the slogan of Islamic solidarity nor the evocation of the nonaggression clause could hide the fact that it was Bangladesh's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia and the West which prompted such decision. On the whole, the crisis had revealed that Bangladesh sided with pro-status quo powers be they Islamic or Western and favoured the protection and maintenance of the existing world order. In fact Bangladesh media had properly reflected the paradox of a weaker nation involved in a conflict they neither participate in nor are consulted with but are party to, albeit a reluctant one.

The dilemma of the government was inappropriately reflected in the media which followed the popular line. Saddam became the symbol of defiance against a superpower which is a populist appraisal and the media played along. Some even read Islamic sentiments in the position of Iraq though Iraq never saw itself as a guardian of Islam. It may have reflected the hardline stance of Arab nationalism but it was not certainly a cry for religious barricade. However, in Bangladesh, the media saw images of the traditional fight between Islam and Christianity, a feeling which the Iraqis smartly manipulated in Bangladesh. Iraq, Arab nationalism and Islam were all mixed together in the bag of emotional response and the media, Bangladesh Observer included did not exercise sufficient analytical skill. It was much easier to run with the band and they did so. To the extent, the media acted irresponsibly. Nor did Bangladesh Observer analyzed what the hardline stand and occupation of Iraq would do to the Iraqi people. The subsequent suffering of the people, the senseless death of hundreds of thousands of Iragis, far outnumbered by a massive multinational forces and the final conflict which had little to do with a nationalist position and much more with the personal or clique's position of the power group in Iraq never found space in Bangladesh Observer. Thousands of Iraqis died as a result of bad policy decisions by the Iraqi Government, and this was not even considered in the editorials or otherwise of Bangladesh Observer. Nor did Bangladesh Observer lend any support to the position of the Government.

The economic implications of the war and the negative impact of Iraq's aggressive policy were not criticized. The Government was in fact isolated by a media unwilling to be objective and a people unwilling to be reasonable. Amidst the extreme hyper sensitive mood the Government had little room to manoeuvre and it simply went along and hoped for the best. Whether the media could play a role in toning down anti-US hostility is subject to questions because the proxy Middle East war was also being

played here within local supporters of Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arab and others making their noises heard. Ultimately, the crisis was beyond the scope of media to influence and the Foreign Office to act proactively. It was a case of a small state, dependent on both warring parties, caught in a war, it had nothing to do with.

The public support fuelled by sentimental reasons was generally pro-Saddam though his take over of Kuwait cost Bangladesh much. It was the reaction of an under-educated, oversimplistic and rural-oriented populace swayed by sermons and not logic. Naturally it was at variance with any policy that would be based on enlightened self-interest of a nation state. But the Government, which had always used religious sentiments for its political benefit, had no option because it had not sought enlightened support before either. Thus the Government was caught, like previous Governments, in its own trap. It had a public which was willing to respond to hyperbole, national or international. Such population are not ready for logical positioning and there is no process at work to ensure that. Given that position, to expect public support for a complex cause was asking too much. The people were led by rabble rousers and true to style reacted accordingly. The failure of the policy makers was its inability to educate the people on such issues without bringing in sentimental factors which win elections but not help define international positions. Given the character of the Government and the nature of the state, the space between the people and the other two constructs were natural and to be expected. The people, the Government and the media are all at variance because the communication channels among them are non-existent.