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**FOREIGN POLICY OF BANGLADESH:
A REVIEW OF PAST TWO DECADES**

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign independent state on the 16th of December, 1971. The background was dynamic and volatile preceded by nine months of liberation struggle and marked by unprecedented brutal repression unleashed by the occupied Pakistan army causing mass destruction and loss of thousands of lives. The final days of the liberation struggle resulted in an outbreak of armed hostilities between India and Pakistan and ended with Pakistan army's capitulation on 16th December, 1971. While evaluating the foreign policy of Bangladesh an appraisal has to be made of the events mentioned above but we must keep in view the following factors which were equally important in shaping the foreign policy of Bangladesh at that time :

- a. The cold war between Western bloc and the Soviet bloc still persisted in full swing.
- b. Soviet Union and U.S.A. the two superpowers already acquired maximum means of destruction in their possessions resulting in a situation of mutual deterrance but nevertheless total war remained a possibility.

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- c. The United Nations was not in a position of controlling the Cold War and the tension, yet mobilization of world opinion was gaining momentum in favour of peace and *detente*.
- d. It was established beyond doubt that Western Europe and Japan together with U.S.A. and Canada possessed an industrial base well ahead of the communist bloc for indefinite period of time. Pressure was being mounted by public opinion in these countries to help economic development of the newly independent Afro-Asian countries.
- e. This was an era of nationalism for the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The new nations, all engaged in modernizing their economy as rapidly as possible, however, could not do so without considerable outside assistance. In this context the industrialized countries were better placed than socialist countries in terms of volume of assistance. However, it must be recognized that Soviet assistance during that era to a number of Third World countries including India was significant enough to act as a balancing factor *vis-a-vis* over dependence on western world.
- f. This was an era also marked by growing interdependence of nations.

In the backdrop of the above, the foreign policy of Bangladesh had to be evolved in the context of national objectives of Bangladesh which were dependent not only on the contemporary international developments but also on national development and progress taking into account the geographical location of the country.

Following liberation, the economy of the country was in ruins. The enormous loss and destruction that Bangladesh suffered during liberation period had further adverse effect on an economy which was basically very fragile. Independent Bangladesh inherited an economy predominantly agricultural, per capita income being the lowest even by Asian standards, and population already dense and rising rapidly in disproportion to natural resources and capacity to absorb. Rapid increase in population, evolution of rising expectations, the discrepancy between prevailing social disintegration

and need for reconstruction coupled with the problem of massive rehabilitation of thousands of refugees returning from India after liberation, all pointed to aggravation of the existing poverty and creating conditions of internal instability.

The presence of Indian troops, non-recognition by majority of the nations as well as suspicious approach taken by one of the superpowers, namely U.S.A. as to what course the newly born state Bangladesh would take following breakup of Pakistan affected the conduct of foreign policy of Bangladesh during that period. India tilted towards Soviet Union and emergence of Bangladesh with India's help meant for policy makers in Washington extension of the influence of Indo-Soviet axis in this area. That explains coolness of Nixon and Kissenger towards Bangladesh although many senators and congressmen as well as the media strongly supported Bangladesh. Their support positively influenced the U.S. administration to commit substantial humanitarian aid to Bangladesh.

II. FOREIGN POLICY UNDER MUJIBNAGAR GOVERNMENT AND SHEIKH MUJIB

The Bangladesh Government set up in Mujibnagar, in a communication addressed to the Government of India, stated that with regard to foreign relations they would follow a policy of non-alignment, peaceful co-existence and opposition to colonialism, racialism and imperialism in all its manifestation. Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi while making a statement to the Indian Parliament in December 06, 1971¹ on India's decision to recognize Bangladesh cited the above communication of Bangladesh Government as principles of Bangladesh foreign policy. The principles were reiterated when the Mujibnagar Government returned to Dhaka on December 22, 1971. The then Foreign Minister Mushtaq Ahmad clarified on 25th December, 1971 that Bangladesh would pursue a non-aligned and independent foreign policy. Abdus Samad Azad who replaced Mushtaq reiterated the same. Sheikh Mujib returned from Pakistan via London and Delhi on 10th January, 1972. Soon after his return he on several occasions repeated that foreign policy of

1. *Bangladesh Documents*, Vol. 2, New Delhi 1972, pp. 587-588.

Bangladesh would be guided by the principle "friendship with all and malice towards none". Actually this description was first coined by Mujib's political guru (mentor) Hussain Saheed Suhrawardy, when he was the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Suhrawardy, a staunch pro-western was credited for having laid the solid foundation of friendly relations between China and Pakistan and in that context coined the above words.

In foreign policy following independence the priority of Bangladesh was diplomatic recognition. Besides, Bhutan and India, the socialist countries of Eastern Europe were the first to recognize Bangladesh. This was followed by western countries and countries of Asia. The presence of Indian troops in Bangladesh, the question of stranded Bangalees in Pakistan, the problem of stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh, Pakistani prisoners of war—all these required close collaboration with India. The Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi appointed D. P. Dhar as her Special Envoy to deal exclusively with Bangladesh. During his first visit to Dhaka in 1971 D. P. Dhar assured that India would extend all possible help both in short term and long term to reconstruct and re-build the economy of Bangladesh.

Sheikh Mujib on his return gave first priority on withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh and Indian troops were withdrawn by 15th March, 1972. It is extremely doubtful that in his absence this could have been possible so soon. His return also expedited the process of further strengthening the relations with the United Nations which played an important role in the reconstruction and relief operations in Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib's return was also marked by intense diplomatic activities. The Commonwealth Secretary General visited Dhaka on 22nd February, 1972. In the first week of March, 1972 Sheikh Mujib paid an official visit to Soviet Union. This was followed by Mrs. Gandhi's visit to Bangladesh during the same month. By March, 1972 Bangladesh had already been recognized by some Commonwealth countries like Great Britain, Canada and Australia. Direct contacts were made with the Secretary General of the U.N., the President of the World Bank and other U.N. agencies. These steps reflected considerable degree of flexibility as well as desire to distance from

its over dependence on India. In view of the rigid and erroneous stand taken by Bangladesh not to speak directly with Pakistan until she had recognized Bangladesh resulted in virtually complete reliance on India on vital matters affecting interest of Bangladesh vis-a-vis Pakistan. This also created negative impact among some Muslim countries who delayed their recognition of Bangladesh till 1974. The example set by the Soviet Union following the revolution of 1917 to initiate direct talks with western countries including U.S.A. (although not yet recognized) was forgotten. Similarly China and U.S.A. had substantive talks before China was recognized by U.S.A.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's decision to participate in the Islamic Summit in Lahore in March 1974 which was linked with Pakistan's decision to recognize Bangladesh was a milestone in our foreign policy. For the first time after independence Mujib met the leaders of Islamic world, although earlier in September, 1973 he met some of them at the Non-Aligned Summit at Algiers. In these two gatherings Sheikh Mujib emerged on his own right as one of the important leaders of the Third World which had positive impact on the foreign policy of Bangladesh. Earlier, during Arab-Israeli war in 1973 Bangladesh gave full support to Egypt and Syria as well as for restoration of legitimate rights of the Palestinian people which had already earned much respect in the Muslim world. By 1974 Saudi Arabia was the only important Arab country which had not yet recognized Bangladesh and China was the other exception. It may be recalled that China had vetoed admission of Bangladesh into U.N., in 1972 but this veto could have been avoided by asking for postponement. At that time Bangladesh failed to realize the depth of Chinese commitment towards Pakistan. Despite initial negative response from both China and Saudi Arabia Bangladesh was pursuing quiet diplomacy with them and by early 1975 there were definite signals that both Saudi Arabia and China were moving towards recognition. China had earlier, in 1974 endorsed application of Bangladesh for U.N. membership. In retrospect, Bangladesh could look back with good deal of

satisfaction that despite various odds within three years of existence she had made considerable positive gains in the conduct of her foreign policy.

In early 1975 rejection of democratic pluralism and introduction of one party system, suppression of freedom of press, violation of human rights had a dramatic negative effect on Bangladesh relations with the west particularly the U.S.A. Even earlier in 1974 on the question of exporting Jute goods to Cuba U.S. linked the issue with food aid² and Bangladesh had to give undertaking that no further Jute goods would be exported to Cuba. It is interesting that Kissinger during his visit to Bangladesh, (October 31st to November 01, 1974) a few months before introduction of one party state conveyed to Sheikh Mujib that President Ford was very keen to see how Bangladesh could be given more assistance. But introduction of one party system alarmed policy makers in Washington. It was felt there that Bangladesh under one party system would follow the East European pattern and thus would be firmly saddled to Soviet orbit. Under that scenerio, Sheikh Mujib would have no effective control of the affairs similar to President Benes of Czechoslovakia in 1948 when the communist elements seized power, and real power would be transferred to Sheikh Moni, the nephew of Sheikh Mujib and in the eyes of Washington a protege of Moscow.

It may be stated that Soviet Union at that time actively encouraged the formation of one party state and had excellent rapport and confidence in Sheikh Moni and expected that he would eventually succeed Sheikh Mujib. From Soviet point of view after the fall of Vietnam, Bangladesh was ripe to join the Soviet axis openly. As regards Indian reaction this was to be neutralized under Indo-Soviet umbrella in the sub-continent. This was the scenario which Washington dreaded most. That explains why immediately after the change of government in August, 1975 the U.S. government although deploring Sheikh Mujib's brutal killing did not deny support or assistance to the new government.

2. Rehman Sobhan, Politics of "Food and Famine in Bangladesh", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay, December 1, 1979.

The foreign policy under Sheikh Mujib appeared to be somewhat tilted towards the Soviet Union. But Sheikh Mujib was determined that Bangladesh should follow an independent and non-aligned foreign policy and balanced relationship should be maintained between USA and USSR. It was during his period that valuable contacts were made with both Saudi Arabia and China. Mujib was equally sincere in normalizing relations with Pakistan on the basis of just demands of Bangladesh relating to assets and repatriation of Beharis. Sheikh Mujib's government by taking initiative to strengthen ties with the Muslim world sincerely worked to give a broad, balanced and respected shape in the conduct of foreign policy. It was in recognition of this that 12 heads of state and government visited Bangladesh at their own initiative in 1974 which speaks the importance that Bangladesh enjoyed. Sheikh Mujib thought that impact of one party state would be limited to domestic sphere and foreign policy would remain unaffected. Both USA and USSR however concluded that this system would certainly push Bangladesh further towards the Soviet Union whether Sheikh Mujib liked it or not. Before he could reassess the situation he was killed.

III. FOREIGN POLICY UNDER ZIA

Ziaur Rahman came to power through a chain of events. He was not the initiator of the coup of August 15, 1975 nor of the events of November, 1975. He was, however, the beneficiary in both cases. The events of August 1975 and November 1975 had negative effect on the discipline in the ranks of the army. It was successfully projected that Zia did not grab power but power was passed to him naturally following his success in restoring discipline in the army. His leadership was crucial in preventing chaos and anarchy in the army. This impressed the western powers and donor agencies and they were prepared to deal with him sympathetically.

In foreign policy Zia was a fast learner. His approach was pragmatic and he was prepared to adjust according to realities. In essence under Zia there was continuity of foreign policy pursued during Sheikh Mujib's period except that the nuances changed. Initially, Zia appeared to look tough with

India but that was due to domestic reason. This had an adverse effect on Bangladesh-India relations at the beginning but once the domestic situation was under control he embarked on a path of correct diplomacy with India.

When Zia came to power relations were normalized with Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia. Zia took full advantage and accelerated the process of strengthening relations with these countries. Under Zia relations with the western power became more close primarily due to adoption of policy of coolness towards the Soviet Union. But a balancing was done by strengthening ties with China as well as further strengthening ties with the Third World and Muslim countries. To this end Zia made a number of official visits to countries of Africa and Middle East as well as to China and North Korea.

During Zia's period there were positive gains in foreign policy. Two important institutions namely the Islamic Centre for Technical and Vocational Training and Research (ICTVTR) and Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) were set up in Bangladesh as a result of successful foreign policy. The election of Bangladesh to the Security Council against Japan with the backing of non-aligned countries was another example. But the most outstanding contribution made by him was to initiate a formal dialogue on the SAARC, Sheikh Mujib had the vision of regional cooperation³ but in the absence of normalization of relations with Pakistan this was not possible. The first Foreign Secretaries meeting of SAARC countries took place at Colombo from April 21 to 23, 1981 "in pursuance of the initiative taken by His Excellency President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh to consider the possibilities of establishing regional cooperation among the countries of South Asia."⁴ The following month Ziaur Rahman was assassinated but work on SAARC continued.

3. Sheikh Mujib during his first official visit to India as Prime Minister said on arrival in Calcutta on 6 Feb. 1972 that Bangladesh would not be found lacking in cooperation with all concerned so that an era of peace in South Asia could be created. He further elaborated by calling for peace and stability in the sub-continent and said, "Let there be an end, once for all, to the sterile policy of confrontation between neighbours. Let us not fritter away our national resources but use them to lift the standard of living of our people."

4. The Joint Communique issued at the conclusion of First Meeting of Foreign Secretaries, Colombo, April 21-23, 1981.

Ziaur Rahman was portrayed abroad as a strong leader. His introduction of multiparty system and holding of elections both Presidential and Parliamentary—all had good positive impact particularly in the West. M. Shamsul Huq, Minister of Foreign Affairs under Zia describing the foreign policy said, "the cornerstone of Bangladesh Foreign Policy lies in three basic objectives.

- i. consolidation of our hard-won independence and national spirit;
- ii. safeguarding our sovereignty and territorial integrity; and
- iii. securing the much needed international cooperation in the task of national reconstruction and development.

To realize these basic policy objectives, we endeavored to seek friendship of all countries including our neighbouring countries. Our efforts in this direction were governed by these principles:

1. recognition of sovereign equality of all states;
2. respect for territorial integrity; and
3. non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

By pursuing these guiding principles, our foreign policy assumed a constructive and dynamic character and gradually expanded in multiple dimension".⁵

Thus the uncertainty and dark cloud that appeared over the conduct of foreign policy following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib was removed within a short period by Ziaur Rahman. It was due to Ziaur Rahman's personal efforts that Bangladesh could play a mediatory role between Iran and Iraq. During Zia's period Bangladesh was neutral on Iran-Iraq conflict but this was later reversed by Ershad when he leaned towards Iraq. While pursuing foreign policy Zia like Sheikh Mujib gave good deal of importance to views of professionals in the service. Unlike Ershad he valued professional advice.

5. Address by Professor Mohammad Shamsul Huq, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh at the National Convention of Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha (National Womens Association) on 12 January, 1979.

IV. ERSHAD'S FOREIGN POLICY

Ershad's nine years foreign policy was in effect continuation of foreign policy pursued during Zia's period. The most notable development was that the SAARC which was initiated by Zia was formalized in the first SAARC Summit held in Dhaka in December, 1985 and Ershad was the first Chairman. During his Chairmanship President Ershad visited all SAARC countries along with his Foreign Minister. The visit instead of focusing on core issues concentrated more on Ershad's personal image, propaganda and grandeur. The other notable achievement was to secure the presidency of the General Assembly in 1986 for Foreign Minister Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury. But Ershad's government could hardly take credit for this. It was during the previous regime of BNP. in 1981 that the Asian group in New York had endorsed candidature of Bangladesh for the next turn and at that meeting candidate of Bangladesh was Mr. K. M. Kaiser, a veteran diplomat widely respected abroad. Earlier, he lost in tie vote on toss against the candidature of Iraq. Ershad's government had nothing to contribute except to take the advantage.

On the other hand, there were few debacles the way the foreign policy was conducted. The failure over the second attempt to become member of the Security Council in 1988 and Ershad's leaning toward Iraq overturning Zia's policy of even-handedness were some of the negative fall-outs for which both Ershad and his Foreign Minister had to share the blame. During Ershad's period some of the diplomatic posts were manned by army officers and others without any consideration if they had competence or capacity to fill up the posts. In this task he was encouraged by his Foreign Minister Humayan Rasheed Chowdhury who suggested in a note to President Ershad in November 1988 that administration of the Foreign Office be headed by a high ranking officer of the army. He further suggested induction of army officers in the foreign service cadre to make it more what he called dynamic!

It is true that the western powers maintained cordial relations with Ershad which he successfully used to bolster his image in the army, the main bastion of his power. The western attitude was more conditioned by

sympathy for Bangladesh and was influenced by Ershad's policy of introducing more liberal economy and successfully managing natural calamities and disasters like flood in 1987 was 1988. For western countries practising democracy or human rights issues were not paramount until now. Bangladesh always received special importance as a disaster prone country and as one of the least developed countries deserving priority. Bangladesh does not have strategic importance for the west. For the West and particularly U.S.A. it was more important that Bangladesh should agree to curb Soviet influence and should have an open economy which Zia had initiated and of which Ershad took full advantage. In the 80s concern for human rights and practising democracy were secondary factors for USA and the Western world. Ershad by accelerating the process of liberal economy secured the confidence of the West despite the fact that he was autocratic and corrupt to the bottom. It was only when people's movement to overthrow Ershad gained momentum that the west withdrew their support and finally the army also abandoned him. During Ershad's period foreign policy of Bangladesh which was in effect a continuation of earlier policy could be described at best a model of pragmatism except in case of Iraq which was erratic but he rectified this during the Gulf crisis. Fortunately the principles laid down by Sheikh Mujib and Zia remained unchanged during his period.

V. CONCLUSION

The main objectives of Bangladesh foreign policy right from the beginning of independence have been *inter alia* preservation of independence and security, economic well-being of the people and promotion of peace and stability in the region.

Needless to say that an effective foreign policy is largely determined by internal factors and political leadership based on democratic and accountable system of government and good management of economy. In its long term goal Bangladesh formulated a clear and correct approach by conceiving the SAARC. In this world of inter-dependence and vulnerability, it must be realized that partnership with the international community or the Non-

aligned movement or the Commonwealth or the OIC is certainly important but the more important and dynamic for Bangladesh is partnership in the SAARC obviously because of sheer regional consideration. It must not however be forgotten that as geographically and strategically located as Bangladesh and above all being almost totally dependent on foreign aid and assistance its maneuvering capacity is almost nil. As we try to become less dependent we can hopefully gain more strength to exercise fruitful maneuvering and make continuous adjustments, but that is a goal still far away. We have to be realistic and must accept the fact that we are dependent on goodwill and friendship of friendly countries and we should know how to maintain this position. In pursuing our goals we should not be possessed by any delusion of grandeur and self-aggrandizement or self-glorification of our achievements.

The collapse of Soviet regime and socialist system in Eastern Europe although aroused concern of another kind of uncertainty and instability in some of the newly emerging countries in Central Asia and the Balkans, nevertheless, the upsurge of democracy world-wide and within our region have opened greater opportunities for us for furthering political and economic cooperation particularly in the region. It has been our natural expectation that worldwide detente, upsurge of democracy, freedom and concern for human rights everywhere in the backdrop of our historical and cultural context would stimulate overall cooperation in the region which is vital for our progress.

In the present day world the economic alliances are taking shape in such a manner that we can only face them collectively and not individually. As much as we strive for greater economic development realistically we can not make significant progress at this stage on our own but collectively the countries of the region can get better concessions if we are united and agree on increased economic cooperation in some vital areas like waterways, environment, communication, trade and commerce. There is no point in denying that politics and security interact in the conduct of our foreign relations. The stark reality is that increased economic cooperation can not be

substantial in the absence of political cooperation. The SAARC forum is ideal for both political and economic cooperation.

Thus, the hard reality is that only through political and economic cooperation in the region we can strike a better balance and can hopefully strive to become partners and not clients in the new international order prescribed by the industrialized countries. In the final analysis it is only through common approach both politically and economically that we can contain outside control over our destiny and transform the same into mutually beneficial and harmonious relationship and thus become true partners in progress, peace and stability both regionally and worldwide. But to pursue that kind of policy we must have national consensus and bipartisan approach both in tackling our economy and handling the foreign policy since they are inseparable. It is most unfortunate that almost two years after restoration of democracy no effort has been made to evolve that kind of policy and there is no other alternative if we have to survive as a viable nation.