NATIONAL SECURITY OF BANGLADESH: THE TRADITIONAL CONTEXT

A. K. M. Abdus Sabur

I. Introduction

Security studies as an academic discipline has travelled a long way from its single-minded emphasis on the security of state primarily by military means in the Post-War period to human security through human development and humane governance in the Post-Cold War period. Nonetheless, even in the changed context, the state-centric security concerns with their emphasis on military aspect did not disappear altogether. For some countries and, over time, traditional security concerns continued to dominate the security preoccupations. In other cases, traditional and non-traditional security issues became intertwined. Bangladesh is one of those countries faced with a wide range of severe challenges in the field of security intertwined both traditional as well as non-traditional issues. Threats to its security, as understood from traditional point of view, never disappeared and, occasionally, manifested vividly. Constrained by poverty, backwardness, underdevelopment, human deprivation, nascent turbulent democratic process, misgovernance, environmental degradation and so on, the country faces even more severe threats in the field of non-traditional security.

Notwithstanding the security challenges of gigantic proportion, security studies as a comprehensive discipline is far

Security in the Twenty First Century

from being developed in Bangladesh. The issues mentioned above are being discussed but, mostly, separately. Studies on the issues in comprehensive, cohesive and synthesised ways are rather scanty. More importantly, academic endeavours, in this regard, often fall short of keeping pace with the ever-changing context at the national, regional as well as global levels. In the circumstances, there persists a constant void in the field of security studies, both traditional as well as non-traditional ones.

The focus of the present article would be the traditional context of national security of Bangladesh. While the ongoing Introduction is the Part I of the study, Part II is devoted to theoretical perspectives on the traditional context of national security designed to facilitate subsequent discussions. Part III would deal with the threats to the national security of Bangladesh with a focus on the sources of threat, their nature and magnitude. Part IV would explore the ways and means of facing the threats to the national security of Bangladesh. Finally, Part V, would be an attempt to shed some light on the outlook for the future.

II. Security Studies: Reflections on Theoretical Perspectives

1. Security Studies: Emergence and Development

The origin of security studies is often associated with the twin stimuli of nuclear weaponry and the Cold War and regarded as a product of the Post-World War II period. While there are some powerful arguments in favour of such an assertion, there has not been a total void or intellectual vacuum regarding scholarship on national security or war during the period in between the First and Second World

Wars. The most notable work of the period on the subject was A Study on War by Quincy Wright published in 1942.³ It has been the outcome of a project undertaken in 1926 and included works by a host of renowned scholars of the time. It dealt with the legal, moral, economic, political, biological, psychological, historical, sociological, anthropological, technological, and philosophical aspects of war. The book was "as notable for its inattention to problems of national strategy and national security as for its dispassionate portrayal of war as a malfunction of the international system."⁴

Except for a few scholars, the study of military force as an instrument of state-craft for promoting national security tended to be neglected. This was the crucial difference between security studies before and after 1940. The onset of World War II brought a radical transformation in scholarly emphasis regarding security studies wherein national security became a central concern of international relations scholars and, importantly, for them, it called for explicit consideration of force as it related to policy in conflicts among nation-states.⁵ To a significant extent, this has set the tone for the security studies in the subsequent period.

While during the first decade following the World War II, national security continued to be dealt with within the broader framework of international relations and foreign policy, it was gaining more and more prominence in national policymaking, academic endeavours as well as public interest. Of particular interest is the fact that by the end of the first Post-War decade, a rich literature on national security came to exist. Prominent universities and renowned scholars, particularly those dealing with International


⁵ Ibid., pp.237-38.
Relations/Political Science in the developed world came to pay increasing attention to security studies. While the first decade since the World War II can be regarded as period of the formation of security studies as an academic discipline, the second Post-War decade is regarded as the "golden age" of security studies. During the first decade, scholars were well aware of military instruments of state-craft, but security studies was not yet as preoccupied with nuclear weaponry and deterrence as it would become later on. Unlike the previous decade, the "golden age" was dominated by nuclear weaponry and related concerns, such as arms control and limited war. Whereas earlier research questions considered what security is, how important it is relative to other goals and the means by which it should be pursued, the new focus was on how to use a particular set of weapons as instruments of policy, given the risk of any nuclear exchange.

During the Post-War period, since the "golden age" of security studies as mentioned earlier until very recently, the subject remained an almost exclusive domain of International Relations and dominated by Realist/Neo-realist school of thoughts. The focal point of Realist/Neo-realist school was the security of state, while the preferred term was national security. What the realists were referring to has been the security of the territorial (rather than nation-) state, the principal actor in the Westphalian universe. In this regard,

7. bid., p.123.
military threats to national security dominated all others in the eyes of most security specialists.

Thus, security, both in theory and practice, as visualised by the Realists/Neo-realists remained a state-centric enterprise with single-minded emphasis on military security. International system has been considered as being anarchic wherein security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can state safely seek such other goals as tranquillity, profit, and power.\(^9\) Thus, the axiom of the "primacy of national security" among the responsibilities of government was created.\(^10\)

All these have reflected on the definitions of security. One of the early definitions of security emphasised that "a nation is secure to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values, if it wishes to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by victory in such a war".\(^11\) A more succinct definition of security by Arnold Wolfers, "Security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked"\(^12\) became the standard definition of security. 'Core values' or 'acquired values' in the context of national security are essentially interpreted as the independence and territorial integrity of a state that must be protected and preserved.\(^13\) Wolfers further explained that security rises and falls with the ability of a nation to deter an attack or to defeat it.\(^14\)

14. Ibid.
Security Studies has traditionally devoted less attention to the goals of security than to the means by which it is pursued. One possible explanation is the tendency among the security scholars, as we have evaluated the definitions above, to treat national security goals as "given". With regard to the means, the tendency is to focus on one set of means, that is, military state-craft. A number of scholars have identified the essence of the subject as the study of the threat, use and management of military force.  

All these have reflected on the salient futures of Realist/Neo-realist concept of security as summarised below:

1. Nation states are the basic building blocks of the international system with unlimited sovereignty;
2. Primary function of a nation state is to survive and enhance its power in an anarchical and conflictual international system;
3. Competition between states to maximise one's interests often at the expense of others;
4. Development of individual state's capability (military and other) to ensure security.

While the Realist/Neo-realist school of thoughts overwhelmingly dominated the security thinking in the Post-War period, there have also been other schools of thoughts. These schools, while did not directly challenge the state-centric notion of security and did not deny the role of military state-craft in ensuring security, made attempts to broaden the notion of security as well as the means to achieve it. Security analysts belonging to these schools favoured and developed concepts, such as, international interdependence, non-power influence, and transnational configurations, in order to advance the understanding of global complexities and interdependence.

One of the outcomes of such efforts has been the concept of 'Common Security' promulgated in the Palme Commission's 1982 report. Its emphasis was on the attainment of security by "common action". However, the growing number of references to Common Security (alternatively labelled "security partnership", "mutual security" or "co-operative security") in political statements and academic literature was not matched by rigorous theoretical analysis of the implications of the concept. According to some accounts, all these referred to little more than co-operation among states, including that among adversaries. Perhaps, a more radical extension of the idea took place under 'Collective Security' that envisaged the transfer of power from the state to supranational authorities.

While the source of Realist/Neo-realist school of thoughts was Westphalian ideas of nation-state, its overwhelming domination in Post-War security thinking was based on the bipolar division of the world and the East-West Cold War. That is why rethinking the meaning of security in the bipolar world yielded only marginal results and could not go beyond the state-centric notion of security.

A new wave of rethinking the meaning of security has been set in motion in the wake of the end of Cold War and the accompanying structural changes of monumental proportion. This gained momentum during the 1990s. The new security agenda came to include a whole gamut of diverse issues like, intra-state conflict, ethno-religious violence, landmine, terrorism, democracy, human rights, gender, crime, consequences of underdevelopment, poverty, hunger.


19. Ibid.
deprivation, inequality, diseases and health hazards, human development, economic security, market, water, energy, emigration, environmental degradation and so on. As a matter of fact, a process of ‘securitisation’ of a wide range of diverse issues is in the offing, while simultaneously, a degree of caution with regard to how far the process can go also persists. The whole gamut of diverse issues that followed the departure from the traditional meaning of security came to be broadly defined as “non-traditional security”.20

One of the significant developments of the concept or rather a host of concepts of non-traditional security has been the concept of human security. It emphasises the security of individuals and different levels of collectives as against the security of state. With regard to the means the concept emphasises on human development and humane governance as means of achieving security as against military statecraft.21 However, in the changed context, the state-centric security concerns with emphasis on its military aspect did not disappear altogether, in some case, both persisted with equal urgency, in others, even military security continued to be the prime concern.

2. Traditional Context of Bangladesh Security: Reflections On Theoretical Perspectives

As evident from the foregoing discussions, Western bias has dominated strategic literature, security studies in particular. According to one estimate, ninety percent of the works on the field emanate, mostly, from US and a few European academic and research institutions.22 This has


ensured that the prevailing thinking on security reflects the concerns, predicaments, perceptions as well as the interests of the developed countries. In the circumstances, the development of theoretical perspectives that would respond to the predicaments faced by and reflect the perceptions and interests of the developing countries in the field of national security has always been a highly challenging task.

Response to such a challenge by the third world analysts mostly constituted efforts at indigenisation of Western security perspectives to suit them to the needs of the developing countries. While a degree of creativity has been displayed in this regard, security thinking in the developing countries, in the ultimate analysis, remained significantly influenced by Western ideas. Bangladesh is not an exception.

Like in most of the developing countries security studies in Bangladesh is a relatively new discipline. At the initial stage, mostly university teachers from the departments of Political Science, International Relations, History and others came to pay attention to security studies. In course of time, some of them have chosen security studies as one of their major areas of preoccupation. Until the establishment of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) in 1978, there was no specialised research institute dealing with the subject. By now, a number of institutions, including some private ones, are devoted to security studies. With the broadening of the scope of security studies, some institutions devoted to research in socio-economic fields as well came to deal with non-traditional aspects of security and, thus, enlarging the security studies community in the country. However, BIISS still remains the leading actor in security studies in Bangladesh and most of the security analysts in the country have been in one way or the other related to BIISS endeavours in this regard.

As indicated, by now, a comprehensive and complex theoretical perspective on security has already evolved. This

has, to an extent, reduced academic attention on traditional security or transformed the issue into a part of broader security agenda. However, for the sake of our current study, we would concentrate our attention on the theoretical perspective on traditional security relevant to Bangladesh.

With regard to traditional security or security as such, some basic questions are of crucial importance. Whose values might be attacked? Which are these values? Who, why and by which means might attack these? How to measure the fear? How to ensure security? These are just a few of the relevant questions and the number could be enlarged further and further. However, through a succinct analysis, the issues pertaining to the traditional context of national security could be summarised in six distinct questions as follows: Security for whom? Security for which values? Security from whom? Security from what threats? Security by whom? Security by which means? In the subsequent analysis, we would concentrate our attention on these and relevant issues.

**Security for whom?** In the traditional concept of national security, the referent object is the state. The state in the developing world, including Bangladesh, is being constructed according to the Westphalian image and the influence of Westphalian ideas on traditional security is overwhelming and appears to be natural. Thus, security, in traditional terms, means primarily the security of the territorial state though the preferred term remains national security. In this regard, the security of individual depends on the security of the state.

**Security for which values?** As the referent object in the traditional concept of national security is the state, the minimum core values that should be secured or defended also pertain to the state. While discussing the definition of the security that implies to the small states, including Bangladesh, Talukder Maniruzzaman, asserts that it is both "simple and conventional". Security would mean the protection and preservation of minimum core values: political

---

independence and territorial integrity. Political independence means state sovereignty: internal independence and diplomatic autonomy. Territorial integrity means exclusive territorial control and inviolability of borders. These remain at the centre of traditional security thinking.

**Security from whom?** Threats to national security may emanate from a multiple sources, internal and external as well as state and non-state actors. However, the traditional concept of national security is concerned with threats emanating only from other states. Threats emanating from other sources fall within the purview of non-traditional security. With regard to Bangladesh, analysts in the field, by and large, ignore the possibility of any conventional security threat to Bangladesh emanating from distant powers. It is notwithstanding the fact that, over the recent years, such a threat has increased dramatically at the global level. Iraq has succumbed to an invasion by the Anglo-American led coalition and, Syria, Iran and North Korea are facing a similar threat. In case of Bangladesh, the regional context is of paramount importance and the analysts almost unanimously focus on the possibility of such a threat, however remote it may be, only from the country's immediate neighbours.

**Security from what threats?** The traditional concept of national security is concerned with direct i.e. military threats to security that may impinge on the sovereignty or territorial

---


integrity of a state. This may vary from direct military assault to intimidation through the purposeful display of force. In this regard, while the comparative military strength of the potential adversary is important, its policy and the security implications of this policy are even more important in measuring the magnitude of the threat.

**Security by whom?** The responsibility of ensuring security, as visualised by traditional concept of national security, lies with the state. Such a monopoly of state in ensuring security is determined by a host of factors. The referent object of security is the state. State, as envisaged by the Westphalian model, is the only legitimate wielder of force. Therefore, when the threat is viewed as being military one and directed against the state, it is only natural that ensuring security becomes the right as well as the responsibility of the state alone. However, popular participation in facing traditional security threats is also an important point that would be discussed elsewhere in the paper.

**Security by which means?** In the traditional concept of national security, since the threat is viewed as direct or military one, emphasis is put on facing the threat by military means. In this regard, most popular idea is maintaining a level of force that would deter aggression or as it is called deterrence capability. That, however, does not mean a fetishist approach towards armament and military capability, particularly with regard to countries like, Bangladesh, facing much superior military powers.

Small states or the states facing much superior military powers need to be innovative and devise alternative means while dealing with security challenges. Limited war capability and the lack of potential resources vis-à-vis a stronger potential adversary makes the weaker side to visualise the security objective as being defence not offence. Therefore, its goal is not the pursuit of power but the preservation of the little power it possesses. Thus, the problems of a country like Bangladesh have been first, how to avoid, mitigate or postpone a conflict and, second, how to resist a superior force once a conflict has developed. The two problems relate
respectively to the sphere of diplomacy and military strategy - the two main instruments of foreign policy. Implicit in this is a paramount role of foreign policy and diplomacy in avoiding, mitigating or postponing a conflict.

In this regard, the objectives of foreign policy and diplomacy are twofold. On the one hand, the task of diplomacy is to resolve the disputes and conflicts, particularly those capable of generating security threats, through dialogue and accommodation with the potential adversary. The bottom line remains accommodation without sacrificing the vital interests. Where resolution is out of reach, attempts should be made to devise ways and means of living with the conflicts through effective measures of conflict management. In the contemporary world, co-operation at the bilateral, sub-regional, regional and international levels is also a powerful instrument of conflict management. On the other hand, the task of diplomacy is to cultivate friendly relations with countries capable of influencing the behaviour of the potential adversary in a positive direction or rendering assistance in facing the security threats. To sum-up, foreign policy and diplomacy remain the first line of defence vis-à-vis a potentially stronger adversary.

If diplomacy fails and the threat to its security becomes imminent, how a country may deal with such threats, particularly in an asymmetric conflict favouring its adversary? While the role of military in facing a direct threat to its security is of vital importance, the military strategy may not be conventional one alone. In this regard, formulation of a


creative and innovative strategy based on the evaluation of both conventional and non-conventional options is of crucial importance.

On the basis of the above discussions and relying on the available literature, an attempt is made below in Table I to synthesise the dimensions of the traditional context of national security with a focus on the security issues and possible responses. In our subsequent analysis of the traditional context of the national security of Bangladesh, we would refer to the ideas discussed above and synthesised in Table I.

### Table I

**Dimensions Of National Security**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Security Issue</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Security for whom?</td>
<td>Primarily, the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security for which values?</td>
<td>Territorial integrity and national sovereignty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security from whom?</td>
<td>Other states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security from what threats?</td>
<td>Direct threats from other states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security by whom?</td>
<td>Primarily, by state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security by which means?</td>
<td>Ultimately by military means but, primarily,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by diplomatic means</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### III. Traditional Threats To Bangladesh Security: Sources, Nature and Magnitude

With an area of about 144 thousands square kilometres, Bangladesh is located at the North-eastern part of South Asia. It is surrounded by India on three sides—West, North and East with a common border of 4095 kilometres. The country shares a small, but sensitive border with Myanmar over a highly difficult terrain of 272 kilometres in the Southeast of the country. Bangladesh’s opening to the South—the Indian Ocean—is guarded by Indian Navy with no parallel in the region. Such a situation often generates in Bangladesh perceptions like the country being ‘India-locked’ or a victim of the ‘tyranny of geography’. It is made more poignant by a number of other factors as well. Bangladesh is a flat alluvial plain with an
average elevation above sea-level of only 10 metres into which flow no less than 56 rivers and 54 of them flow in to the country from India. Other two flow from Myanmar.

Bangladesh’s predicament vis-à-vis India is fixed not by geographical factors alone. Economically, politically and geo-strategically, India is the single-most dominant power in the region, which overwhelms all its South Asian neighbours taken together. India has 77 percent of the population and 72 percent of the total area of SAARC. It has 84 percent of the arable land and land under permanent crops, 81 percent of forest and 69 percent of irrigated land. In terms of mineral resources also the picture would not be much different. Technologically, India by far surpasses the achievements of other regional countries. While in terms of per capita GNP, India lags behind some of the SAARC countries, its total GNP surpasses that of the rest of SAARC countries taken together. It has the world’s third largest armed forces in terms of number of people in active service. It is one of the largest producers of armaments. Owing to all these, India enjoys considerable clout in international arena.

In terms of ethnic composition, Bangladesh is the most homogenous of the states of South Asia. Almost 99.5 per cent of the population is made up of Bengalees. Nonetheless, since its independence in 1971, the country has been facing problems in integrating its minorities to the national mainstream. These minorities, Chakmas, Marmas, Tripuras and others, constitute less than 0.5 per cent of the total population and concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) - a hilly, sylvan territory covering about 9 per cent of the total area of Bangladesh. India, while herself suffering from similar problems, tended took advantage of insurgency problems suffered by Bangladesh in the CHT area.

In comparison with India, historically, there has been very little interaction between Bangladesh and its other neighbour, Myanmar. While the difficult terrain along the common border is one factor the other factor is the strict isolationist policy that

Myanmar pursued for a long time. Nonetheless, the border between the two countries has not been free from problem that would be discussed later.

As a matter of fact, no country merits greater importance in Bangladesh's security considerations than India. Such an importance, however, needs to be evaluated against the backdrop of the fact that the peoples of these two countries have had a highly complex relationship over a long historical period. They have numerous commonalities. They have common ethno-linguistic origin. They are common heirs to one of the greatest ancient civilisations. They have lived for centuries within the same political entity. They have identical and/or similar socio-economic and politico-cultural experiences and traditions. The list could be enlarged further and further.

Historically, the relations between them have, however, been characterised by numerous ups and downs. During the ancient and mediaeval periods, they have lived under a single empire or different virtually independent rulers in peace and harmony interspersed by periods of volatile, at times, adversarial relationship. They have suffered together colonial subjugation and also fought together in one of the most heroic national liberation struggles of the modern history, though the common anti-colonial front ultimately could not survive. Under the influence of all these, the relations between the people of the territory what constitutes now Bangladesh on the one hand, and that of India on the other, over a number of historical periods, have also been characterised by a struggle for the survival of the former and the supremacy of the later. It has deeply influenced the formation of the collective ethos of the people of Bangladesh.

The experiences of 1971 constitute a significant modern milestone in relations between the peoples of two countries. It is understood that strategic convergence of interest on the part of Bangladesh, which fought for its survival, and India, which fought to settle a long-cherished score with its arch-rival, Pakistan, brought the two sides into an alliance relationship. This generated feelings of short-lived friendship between India and Bangladesh. However, this could not last long. Historical
memories coupled with independent Bangladesh's bitter experiences of its relations with India, particularly a host of bilateral disputes and more so India's overbearing policy towards its smaller neighbours, generated deep suspicion in Bangladeshi mind to the extent of India being viewed as a source of threat to Bangladesh's security from traditional point of view.

While this view is widely shared by the academia, media and policymaking circles in Bangladesh, the nature and extent of threat India poses to the security of Bangladesh and how to deal with such threats remain, by and large, open questions. Along with India, Myanmar is also discussed, though to a much lesser extent, as a potential threat to Bangladesh's security. What follows is an attempt to evaluate the context, nature and magnitude of threats to Bangladesh's security. The discussions would be focussed on these two neighbours of Bangladesh.

1. Threat To Bangladesh's Security Posed By India: Nature And Magnitude

Independent Bangladesh's relations with India have traversed through a chequered process. From an apogee of very close friendship in the aftermath of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, Bangladesh-India relations plummeted into a nadir of mutual mistrust and suspicion within a very brief period. Neither could be sustained for a long period. It is due to the complexity of the relationship between the two countries. On the one hand, factors pertaining to history, geography, economy, politics, culture and so on suggest co-operation between the two countries. On the other hand, the same factors often generate almost irreconcilable conflict of interest. These

31. See, for example, Itekharuzzaman, "India Doctrine: Relevance for Bangladesh", in M. G. Kabir and Shaukat Hassan (eds.), Issues and Challenges Facing Bangladesh Foreign Policy (Dhaka: Bangladesh Society of International Studies, 1989), pp.18-43 and Shaukat Hassan, "The India Factor in the Foreign Policy of Bangladesh", in Ibid., pp.44-61.

ensure that the mutual relationship between the two countries remains characterised by the elements of conflict and cooperation at the same time. In the circumstances, it becomes difficult to identify and, more so, to gauge the magnitude of direct threat to the security of Bangladesh posed by India. An attempt is made below to do the same with a focus on the regional security posture of India and the issues at stake in Bangladesh-India relations.

i. India's Regional Security Posture: Bangladesh's Apprehensions

India's regional security posture and its aspiration to a predominant role in South Asia deeply rooted in the historical and psychological factors generate considerable apprehension and mistrust among its smaller neighbours including Bangladesh. Since the ancient time, India, particularly the historical Hindustan, has been the centre of power in South Asia, which dominated the peripheries. The Great Aryan emperors, the Sultans of Delhi, the Mughals and the British, all made persistent efforts to dominate the peripheries with a great deal of success. In this regard, for about more than a millennium, Delhi was the centre of power except for the initial period of the British rule when Kolkata (also in India) was the capital. Indians still remember all these with a great deal of nostalgia. Even an Indian scholar with considerably moderate views recalls, "Through the greater part of history of South Asia it was some power established in what is now known as South Asia."

While the Indians view themselves as the heir to all the great rulers of the land, for practical purposes, specific reference to India is made more as the 'Successor State' to the British Raj. Thus, a group of Indian scholars headed by a luminary of Indian academia asserts that "the Indians perceived themselves to be inheritors of the rights and privileges the British used to enjoy in what is now known as South Asia". What are these


34. See, Bhabani Sen Gupta, Amit Gupta and Prakash Nanda, "Regionalism in South Asia: Roles and Behaviour", in Bhabani Sen Gupta, (ed.), Regional
rights and privileges? Relevant to our context is the fact that "The British had conceived of the geo-strategic imperatives of Indian defence as embracing the whole subcontinent of South Asia and extending to its environs, such as Tibet and Afghanistan, and involving command of the Indian Ocean".\(^{35}\) India inherited this body of strategic thinking from the British and, with some modifications due to the changed context of regional and international environment, this remains the corner-stone of Indian security perceptions. Thus, contemporary India conceives of her neighbouring countries as lying within the Indian defence perimeter and being integral to the security interests of India, while India's neighbours themselves regard India itself as the source of their own insecurity against whom it is necessary to organise their own security interests, sometimes even on an extra-regional basis.\(^{36}\)

Such divergent perceptions in the backdrop of disproportionately greater physical endowment of India coupled with New Delhi's occasional attempts to transform its natural pre-eminence into imposed predominance serve as a constant source of apprehension, mistrust and fear of smaller South Asian countries in relation to India. During the post-1971 period, India, from a claimant to the regional power status in South Asia, transformed itself into a contender of it.\(^{37}\) Accordingly, her strategic thinking on the region underwent further modification. Taking into account her historical heritage, geo-strategic position, economic and military potentials as well as international standing, Indian strategists

---


36. See, S. U. Kodikara, op. cit., p.34.

developed a series of well-connected foreign policy and security perceptions with regard to its role in South Asia which are widely known as India Doctrine. To a significant extent, it is the South Asian version of Monroe Doctrine, wherein India views the entire region as a single strategic unit and herself as its sole custodian of security and stability.

During the late-Indira period, and particularly under Rajiv Gandhi, this doctrine was put into action. As judged by Indian policy makers, over the four decades of its independent existence, the country has prepared itself to embark upon such a policy. Meanwhile, the withdrawal of competitive involvement of great powers from South Asia in the wake of the Cold War created a vacuum setting the stage for India to fulfil its objectives envisaged in the India Doctrine.

While such a situation has been envisioned by India's founding fathers, Nehru in particular, in terms of the method of its implementation the Indian policy was an antithesis to Gandhian non-violence and Nehruvian peaceful coexistence. It was highly heavy handed and dependent on the use of or the threat to use force in dealing with the neighbours. Indian policy towards the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka and the stationing of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in that country under a controversial treaty in 1987, its intervention in the Maldives to suppress an attempted coup in 1988 and a virtual blockade imposed on Nepal following severe disagreements between the two countries over the trade and transit treaty in 1989 are the most illustrated manifestations of this policy.

India's role as the self-appointed custodian of peace and stability in South Asia during late-1980s further reinforced the


environment of mistrust and suspicion in the region. It was viewed by the smaller South Asian neighbours of India as an attempt by New Delhi to transform its natural pre-eminence into an imposed predominance and hegemony. They were deeply concerned that what happened to Sikkim, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Nepal could be repeated with any other country. Thus, India's regional security posture came to be perceived in Bangladesh as a threat to its security. For obvious geo-strategic reasons, this remains the single-most predominant threat to the security of Bangladesh from conventional point of view.

To gauge the magnitude of the threat posed by the regional security posture of India to its smaller neighbours, including Bangladesh, attention would be focussed on the evaluation of the security posture since late-1980s when India Doctrine was put into action.

Despite forceful attempts, India has been unable to translate its natural pre-eminence in South Asia into an imposed predominance, while paying a high price for the hawkish policy of the late-1980s. The enormous costs incurred by India in terms of material and human resources to sustain its Sri Lanka adventure, the unhappy experience of deadlock in its relations with Nepal have brought, even during Rajiv Gandhi's rule, a change in Indian mind. Influential circles in India came to realise that the prevailing situation of mistrust cannot be congenial for the long-standing interests of the country in the region. They became aware that Indian diplomacy has failed to display the wisdom, sophistication and caution as displayed by the previous generation of its leaders.

In concrete terms, they seem to have clearly realised that it is necessary to devise more sophisticated methods of exerting influence on the neighbours than employed against Sri Lanka or even Nepal. During V. P. Singh's rule, Indian regional posture underwent a process of change. The withdrawal of IPKF from Sri Lanka, a comparatively

40. See, Iftekharuzzaman, op. cit., pp.18-43.
conciliatory approach towards Nepal and, to a lesser extent, towards Bangladesh were indicative of the new trend in Indian thinking. The crisis over the Babri Mosque issue and the subsequent developments, have reinvigorated the shift in Indian policy away from foreign adventure to domestic problems. In view of sharp division of the society along ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious as well as politico-ideological lines and resultant violence, India appeared to be at war with itself. Any dramatic improvement in the domestic situation was unlikely and it served as a powerful restraint against foreign adventure.

While the policymakers in New Delhi came to recognise the country’s regional security posture of the 1980s as being counterproductive, Indian ability to undertake any courageous initiative, in this regard, remained circumscribed under P. V. Narasimha Rao. It was primarily due to the fact that the government was weak and vulnerable to domestic opposition. To an extent, it was also morally blackmailed by the rising tide of Hindu nationalism.

It was the 1996 elections and consequential changes that put India on the threshold of a change in its policy towards the neighbours both in terms of its regional security posture and bilateral conflicts. The 1996 elections brought to power a coalition government headed by the United Front. Under the United Front government, India has undertaken an initiative with a view to replacing the abrasive security posture of the 1980s and resolving the country’s some of the long-standing disputes with the neighbours, and thus, improving the overall political climate in the region. The new policy is associated with the name of I. K. Gujral who served the United Front government initially as Foreign Minister and, finally, as its Prime Minister. His long-standing image as a liberal gave the initiative remarkable credibility.

At the centre was a cautious, carefully-formulated policy proposition known as Gujral Doctrine. The new doctrine was enunciated by I. K. Gujral in his Inaugural Address entitled “Security Concerns in Asia in the Early 21" Century” at a seminar in New Delhi on January 23, 1997. Gujral Doctrine is
based on five principles that are to be abided by India in its relations with the neighbours. Firstly, with its neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, India does not ask for reciprocity, but gives and accommodates what it can in good faith and trust. Secondly, no South Asian country should allow its territory to be used for any activity against the interests of another regional country. Thirdly, no regional country should interfere in the internal affairs of another one. Fourthly, all South Asian countries must respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Finally, they should settle all their disputes through peaceful bilateral negotiations.\textsuperscript{41}

These principles are not applicable in case of Indo-Pakistan relations. This served the basis for some analysts to characterise the 'Gujral Doctrine', as being an attempt to marginalise and isolate Pakistan within South Asia and neutralise Pakistan's potential to form a common front with the smaller countries against India.\textsuperscript{42} The Gujral Doctrine could very well be designed to detach Pakistan from other SAARC countries, particularly in view of reinvigorated confrontation between India and Pakistan. However, important point in the context of our analysis is the fact that Gujral Doctrine has been, to an extent, a departure from India Doctrine, though it remained silent on India's regional ambition. The Gujral Doctrine conveyed the message that India is prepared to make concessions and accommodation in terms of bilateral disputes with its smaller South Asian neighbours. This, by implications, would make India restrain its regional ambition vis-à-vis its smaller neighbours.

The new trend in India's regional posture and behaviour was further facilitated by at least two factors. First is a remarkable change in Indian politics that begun with the 1989 elections which, for the first time in India, failed to produce a parliamentary majority. It is an important turning point in


Indian history with consequences not only for its domestic politics but also for the country’s regional behaviour. Since the 1989 elections, Indian politics came to be seen as following what might be called an Italian model, or less benignly, an Indian version of the French Fourth Republic – a situation in which no single party commands a parliamentary majority and governments are formed in a pattern of shifting coalition. Such a situation has been further strengthened by the outcome of subsequent four elections to the national parliament held in 1991, 1996, 1998 and 1999.

The political scene in the country is marked by the significant influence of the regional parties concerned much more with regional issues and centre-state relations than foreign policy. In the changed context, power is being shared not only within the ruling political parties and among the coalition partners but also with the opposition parties. This has led to the increase of the influence of regional leaders on the Centre. In a process of complex interaction of all these factors and forces, political power in a highly centralised state is being decentralised gradually, though this implies to a much lesser extent in case of economic power. Whether all these would lead to the strengthening of the federation through effective decentralisation of power or to the strengthening of centrifugal trends already prevailing in the country remains a moot point. An important point, in this regard, is that in the changed political matrix, the emergence of an all-powerful leader capable of mobilising the necessary resources and public opinion at home for foreign adventure became less likely.

Second is the ongoing change in the world economy and its impact on India. Indian economy – a highly autarkic one with large-scale state owned enterprises – is going through an arduous process of economic liberalisation. In the process, the country is making a qualitative shift away from reliance on the state owned enterprises to that on the private sector ones. Thus, opportunities for private investment, both domestic and foreign,

are being created while the activities of the state owned enterprises are being gradually curtailed. The country’s long-standing protective trade regime is being liberalised opening its market to the outside world. The essence of the liberalisation program is to transform regulated Indian economy into one relying on the interaction of market forces. The process of economic liberalisation is marked by difficult challenges as well as tremendous opportunities. These will create tremendous pressure on India to concentrate much of its resources and energy on the fulfilment of the domestic socio-economic tasks and facing the challenges of globalisation. Accumulative effect of all these are likely to serve as a restraint against abrasive foreign policy.

While these factors as discussed above, have put a considerable restraint on India’s regional behaviour, particularly in terms of making attempts to transform its natural pre-eminence in SAARC region into an imposed predominance, the ambitions remain very much alive and forceful attempts to fulfil them may revive at any juncture of history. It is particularly because of the fact that the current constraints as faced by India are not permanent, nor even long-standing. Moreover, the success of the ongoing political and economic processes may further strengthen Indian polity and economy and, thus, make the country more capable of fulfilling its long-standing regional ambitions.

As discussed, India’s urge for playing a dominant role in the region is deep-rooted. A variety of powerful lobbies in India continue to advocate an assertive role for the country in the regional affairs. The ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) itself is a proponent of this school of thought. Even the Gujral Doctrine did not reject India’s regional ambitions. More importantly, Gujral Doctrine still remains a policy proposition for dealing with the neighbours that is far from being transformed into a clearly charted policy. In the circumstances, while the rage generated among India’s smaller neighbours by its abrasive regional posture of the late-1980s has to an extent reduced, smaller South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, still continue to consider India’s regional security posture as a threat to their security.
ii. Bangladesh-India Relations: Issues at Stake

Bangladesh-India relations are characterised by the existence of a number of contentious issues, which proved to be too difficult to resolve.44 While some of them are rooted in the historical past, others are in the current dynamics of bilateral relations. The list of such issues would be long enough:

i. the sharing of the water resources of common rivers, including that of the Ganges;
ii. implementation of the 1974 Land Border Agreement;
iii. India’s support for insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT);
iv. demarcation of maritime boundaries and the ownership of South Talpatty Island;
v. huge trade imbalances in favour of India;
v. smuggling, illegal cross-border activities and a number of other issues.

These and other outstanding issues of bilateral discord engendered a relationship between the two countries wherein the process of co-operation has remained overshadowed by numerous disputes and disappointments. Occasionally, one or a combination of these and related issues come to the forefront to create impasse in bilateral relations.

In comparative perspective, the degree of adverse consequences for Bangladesh and India resulting from the procrastination of the settlement of contentious bilateral issues vary widely leaving the former in a much disadvantageous position. It is particularly true when one looks at the matter from strictly bilateral perspectives. For Bangladesh, economic and ecological consequences of the deadlock over the sharing of water of the Ganges alone have been so critical that the very survival of the nation has, over time, been put to the question.

Other issues are as well of considerable concern to her. For her, there is no option other than the early settlement of the disputes. On the other hand, India's stake in the early settlement of the disputes is viewed to be less significant if it is to be compared with that of Bangladesh. No less important point, Bangladesh remains at the receiving end of almost all the issues, while India holds the key to the solution. Such a situation has shaped India's long-standing policy toward the contentious issues. Over a period of time, it has developed a policy, which could be summarised as follows:

i. procrastination over the settlement of the disputes with the assumption that time would work in favour of her;
ii. creating occasional pressures on Bangladesh with a view to weakening her resolve and moral;
iii. when pressure fails, displaying indifference to the sensitivities of Bangladesh.

It is a comprehensive policy approach with the ultimate objective of compelling Bangladesh to come to terms with New Delhi on the terms offered by the latter.

Lacking much viable leverage on India, Bangladesh had to depend on the goodwill of the latter which it singularly failed to demonstrate. Constrained by its predicaments, Bangladesh neither could afford confrontation with India nor it could submit to the will of the latter. In the circumstances, it had to find out a grey area between confrontation and submission, which let her to avoid major crises in bilateral relations that Bangladesh could hardly afford. However, from such a grey area, Bangladesh neither could compel India to find out a compromise solution to the disputes nor could it elicit any concession from New Delhi.

The situation was so frustrating that it has taken almost two decades to resolve a small issue – Tin Bigha Corridor – pertaining to the 1974 Land Border Agreement through two supplementary agreements signed in 1982 and 1992. In this regard, through hard bargain, India could make the provision for the common use of the corridor by both Bangladesh and
India instead of lease in perpetuity to Bangladesh as it was envisaged in the 1974 agreement.\footnote{Khabarer Kagaz, July 7, 1992.}

A major breakthrough, indeed, took place during the late-1990s. In this regard, two developments are of crucial importance. First is the signing of a Treaty between two countries on December 12, 1996 that envisages the sharing of Ganges water between the two countries for the next 30 years.\footnote{See, A. K. M. Abdus Sabur, and Mohammad Humayun Kabir, op. cit., pp.66-67; Rehman Sobhan (ed.), \textit{Bangladesh-India Relations: Perspective from Civil Society Dialogues} (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2002), pp.153-57.} Under the new agreement, Bangladesh will receive a 50 per cent share of the Ganges water when the water flow at Farakka is less than 70,000 cusecs. If the flow rises beyond that level, Bangladesh is guaranteed 35,000 cusecs; if it passes the 75,000 cusec mark, India is guaranteed 40,000 cusecs. The treaty marked an end to the oldest and, by far, the thorniest dispute between Bangladesh and India.

The second is the Accord on Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) signed on December 2, 1997 between the National Committee on CHT and the \textit{Parbatiya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti} (PCJSS). An understanding reached between Dhaka and New Delhi in 1996 to co-operate with each other in dealing with cross-border insurgency paved the way for the signing of the Peace Accord.

Subsequently, however, Bangladesh-India relations came to witness another spiral of difficult period. While a number of issues, as discussed above, remain unresolved, New Delhi, particularly its press, came to constantly accuse that insurgents from North-eastern states and Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan use Bangladesh territory for activities hostile to India with approval or connivance of Bangladesh Government.\footnote{Sriradha Datta, \textit{"Security of India's Northeast: External Linkages"}, \textit{Strategic Analysis} (November 2000), pp.502-506; and Sriradha Datta, \textit{"Indo-Bangladesh Relations: An Overview of Limitations and Constraints"}, \textit{Strategic Analysis} (July-September 2002), pp.427-440.} Some
public figures also echoed the same. Bangladesh has categorically denied such allegations and considers all these politically motivated. Similarly, Indian press and also Indian officials at the highest level, including Home (Interior) Minister L. K. Advani, often mention Bangladesh as a source of large-scale illegal migration to India. The issue remains a highly sensitive one in Bangladesh-India relations. The issue of alleged large-scale illegal migration of Bangladeshis to India and push-in-push-back games played periodically remain a constant source of tension in bilateral relations. Bangladesh expressed unequivocally and repeatedly that there are no illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India. India continues to repeat its stereotype arguments while a common ground for negotiation remain far from sight. The issues remain a potentially disruptive factor in relations between the two countries.

Bangladesh-India relations encompass a wide range of complex issues. Only a handful of them could be highlighted. However, on the basis of our discussion it is clear that the issues will continue to pose challenges to the leadership of both the countries. Already achieved agreements are to be implemented against numerous odds, while agreements are yet to be reached on a number of unresolved issues. While the issues at stake in Bangladesh-India relations are highly complex and difficult to resolve, and new issues are almost certain to appear at the horizon, none of these and prospective issues warrant military solution. These will have to be resolved through diplomatic means.


This is, however, a rational consideration. Inter-state relations, particularly that between a big power and a small power not always follow textbook-type rational considerations. In pursuit of power and influence or motivated by security considerations, big powers while dealing with comparatively smaller ones often magnify small issues or even a non issue to the extent of justifying the use of force. While such a scenario in Bangladesh-India relations is unlikely, it also can not be ruled out altogether.

As the foregoing discussion on India’s regional security posture and contentious issue in Bangladesh-India relations suggest, there persist a threat to the security of Bangladesh emanating from India as viewed from the perspective of traditional security. However, the threat, so far, remains largely ambiguous and somehow remote and more hypothetical than real. Ambiguous in the sense that India has not displayed a clear intention of achieving its regional objective vis-à-vis Bangladesh or resolving bilateral disputes through the use of or the threat to use force. Nonetheless, the pattern of India’s behaviour also does not provide with any assurance that New Delhi would not do so. For the same reasons, the threat is not an imminent one though could be considered as being possible. Since the threat remains ambiguous and remote, it also remains more hypothetical than real. Owing to all these, Bangladesh-India security relationship remains highly complex and delicate that needs to be taken into consideration while formulating Bangladesh’s India policy.

2. Myanmar: A Security Concern Rather Than a Threat

Bangladesh and Myanmar are witnessing recurrent problems on their common border, occasionally, raising security alerts in both the countries. The question pertinent to our study is whether and how far these pose a threat to Bangladesh’s security from traditional point of view. While dealing with this, we would focus our attention primarily on the Rohingya issue that triggered crises in relations between the two countries twice, in 1978 and 1991-92, and Myanmar’s overall policy towards Bangladesh.
Myanmar’s intra-state conflicts have always been a concern to its neighbours, particularly Bangladesh. The first major crisis in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations erupted in 1978 when a well-orchestrated and brutal military campaign by Myanmar drove about 200,000 people belonging to the country’s Muslim minority community living in its Rakhaine (Arakan) state and known as Rohingyas to Bangladesh. The relations between the two countries deteriorated to the extent that over times they appeared to be on the brink of war. Along with efforts aimed at resolving the dispute bilaterally, Bangladesh also brought the issue to the international forums, including the United Nations. Under pressure from international community, Yangon finally signed an agreement in July 1978 envisaging the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar while actual repatriation begun in August the same year. Thus, the ‘Rohingya issue’ in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations found a temporary solution to be revived in 1991-92 with even more ferocity.

Army repression in the Rakhaine state of Myanmar bordering with Bangladesh as initiated in 1991 has been a part of the broader wave of repression designed to suppress the democratic movement and ethnic insurgency in the country. Soon after the military campaign was initiated, Rohingya Muslims began to cross into Bangladesh territory, initially in small numbers. But within a brief period, as the campaign intensified, the Rohingyas began to cross into Bangladesh territory in large numbers.

The relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar deteriorated further sharply following an attack on December


21, 1991 by the NASAKA (Border Forces of Myanmar) on a Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) camp at Rejupara under Naikhongchari Thana in Bandarban district. During the attack, Myanmarese forces killed a member of the BDR, injured seven others and looted arms and ammunition from the camp. Military officials from both the countries held ‘flag meetings’ on December 31, January 7 and 28 in an attempt to resolve the crisis. During these meetings, Myanmar accepted the responsibility for the December 21 incident with an explanation that the raid was carried out ‘by mistake’ "in the belief that the border outpost was an insurgent camp". Myanmar also assured that it would return the weapons and ammunition taken by its troops and open the border, which was sealed by Yangon. While all this made possible to avoid new border skirmishes, tensions in the border areas and in the relations between the two countries continued to grow.

Meanwhile, Myanmar began a massive deployment of troops along its border with Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh defence sources quoted in press reports on January 19, 1991, Myanmar deployed over 75,000 troops along its border with Bangladesh. It also set up 32 army camps, including camps along the border with the Bandarban district with facilities for helicopter landing and takeoff. At least two military airfields near the border abandoned after the World War II were repaired and renovated, and military aircrafts had been brought in.

Amidst all these, continued Rohingya influx into Bangladesh assumed the character of a large-scale exodus. By mid-January 1992, the number of Rohingya refugees in

Bangladesh was over 60,000. Within a couple of months, over 265,000 Rohingya refugees crossed into Bangladesh to escape from persecution at home. Thus, the Rohingya issue in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations re-emerged with even more ferocity than in 1978.

From the very outbreak of the crisis, Bangladesh has been concentrating all its efforts with a view to finding out its early and peaceful solution. Despite so many odds, Dhaka maintained a line of communication with Yangon intact so that the problem could be resolved through bilateral negotiations. On the other hand, it has also employed considerable efforts with a view to influencing the Myanmar authorities through international community. All these led Myanmar to sign an agreement with Bangladesh in April 1992, which envisaged the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to their homeland. While most of the refugees have returned to Myanmar, about 20,000 are yet to be repatriated.

Let us focus on whether and how far the Rohingya issue and the broader policy of Myanmar pose a threat to Bangladesh’s security from traditional point of view. Given the long-standing nature of the Rohingya issue, a permanent solution to refugee problem is virtually impossible. The refugees may come back after they are repatriated if and when the situation in the Rakhaine state worsens and, thus, making it a recurrent problem. More important, different guerrilla groups, like, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, operating in the Arakan may try to use Bangladesh territory as sanctuary. The terrain in the border areas is favourable to such a purpose. They may also try to recruit guerrillas from among the refugees. In that case, serious complications may arise in the relations between the two countries. Bangladesh, therefore, will have to be highly cautious in dealing with the Rohingya refugee issue. Most important, while providing the Rohingya refugees with

humanitarian aid, Bangladesh needs to ensure that Rohingya armed resistance groups do not use Bangladesh territory as a sanctuary.

Another important point, with a view to diverting the attention of its people and world opinion from the real problems of Rakhaine, Myanmar itself may create tension in the border areas by implicating Bangladesh in the Rakhaine imbroglio. Exactly that happened on December 21, 1991 when Myanmar conducted a raid on a BDR camp. Subsequently, Yangon made persistent attempts to connect the raid with its hot pursuit of insurgents into Bangladesh territory, though no Rohingya was found in the camp.61

From strictly military point of view, for Bangladesh, such a scenario poses a highly difficult challenge. Myanmarrese army is more than two times larger than that of Bangladesh. They, now, stand at some 325,000 troops62 well-equipped with relatively sophisticated weapons procured mainly from China.63 Yangon’s army is considered by the observers to be the toughest and the most effective light-infantry jungle force operating in Southeast Asia.64 In the circumstances, prospects for military confrontation with Myanmar along the common border pose a formidable security threat to Bangladesh.

However, the nature and magnitude of this threat needs to be weighed in the light of Myanmar’s broader policy towards Bangladesh. Myanmar’s policy towards Bangladesh with regard to Rohingya issue is clear. Myanmar considers the suppression of or even brutality against the Rohingyas as internal affairs of the country and it expects Bangladesh to remain indifferent to the plight of the Rohingyas. In this regard, Myanmar often fails to understand Bangladesh’s socio-economic, politico-cultural

64. Asiaweek, February 21, 1992, p.25.
and environmental predicaments resulting from the spill-over effects of the Rohingya issue. Even Bangladesh’s humanitarian concerns vis-à-vis the Rohingya issue are viewed by Myanmar with suspicion or even as a threat to its security.

Apart from the Rohingya issue and the periodic problems along the common border, Bangladesh and Myanmar do not have any outstanding dispute between them except maritime boundary. A Land Boundary Treaty signed between the two countries on November 12, 1998 is operative. Land border between the two countries is demarcated, while the demarcation of the maritime boundary will remain a long-standing issue. Myanmar does not have any irredentist claim towards Bangladesh. Myanmar’s policy at the bilateral and regional levels does not seek preponderance or domination over Bangladesh. Over the years, Myanmar also has demonstrated its willingness to develop mutually beneficial co-operation with Bangladesh. Viewed in this light, the present and prospective security challenges emanating from Myanmar could be considered as a security concern rather than a threat to the national security of Bangladesh as judged by the traditional concept of security.

IV. Facing the Security Challenges: Ways and Means

As evident from the preceding discussions, threat to Bangladesh’s security, as it is understood by the traditional concept of national security, may be remote but it does exist. While such a threat to national security of most of the countries is remote, no country can afford not to deal with it with utmost priority. Because, this impinge upon the survival imperatives of a state – national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The traditional concept of national security put single-minded emphasis on military state-craft as means of dealing with threats to security. This is certainly the ultimate means of preserving national sovereignty and territorial integrity when a direct threat becomes a concrete reality. However, when the threat remains still ambiguous, remote and far from being crystallised, as it is in the case of Bangladesh, the role of foreign policy and diplomacy becomes the most effective means of dealing with such a threat. This
also particularly implies to the small states or the states facing much superior military powers. It is in this context that the discussion on the ways and means of dealing with the traditional threats to security of Bangladesh below would be focussed on the foreign policy and diplomacy, while military option would receive due consideration.

1. **Foreign Policy And Diplomacy: The First Line Of Defence**

Foreign policy and diplomacy have always been used worldwide as a device of facing the security challenges. Foreign policy is defined as a strategy or planned course of action developed by the decision makers of a state vis-à-vis other states or international entities aimed at achieving specific goals defined in terms of national interests. In the context of the present study, ‘specific goals defined in terms of national interests’ is the security as defined by the traditional concept of national security. The pursuit of this goal by Bangladesh through foreign policy and diplomacy is a complex task as predicated by the nature and magnitude of the threat faced by the country vis-à-vis its two neighbours. While the prevailing nature and magnitude of the threat require Bangladesh to remain firm on its pursuit of security, these also allow the country to display considerable flexibility vis-à-vis its neighbours and enormous manoeuvrability in the international arena. Thus, a multiple of options are open to Bangladesh. These are: dialogue, accommodation and co-operation at the bilateral level, regional and sub-regional arrangements, cultivating friendly relations with the outside world and participation in the international and multilateral organisations. What follows is a discussion on how all these options could be explored.

i. **Bilateral Mechanism**

Bilateral mechanism is the most widely used and the most effective mechanism for managing bilateral disputes as well as fostering co-operation between two countries. While implying

---

this to Bangladesh-India relations, a point needs to be cleared. India insists on strict bilateralism in dealing with contentious issues with the neighbours as a matter of policy. Bangladesh does not need to embrace Indian stance while exploring the bilateral mechanism for the purpose of conflict management, confidence-building and, thus, alleviate any threat that may be posed to the security of the country. While opting for bilateral mechanism, Bangladesh also should keep other options open.

Given goodwill on both the sides, bilateral mechanism is the most effective one for the management and resolution of conflicts and disputes between two countries, particularly the neighbours. It could be activated with the least efforts and time. Negotiations could be conducted more candidly and with less stress on the parties. More importantly, a deal could be reached through mutual accommodation and compromise without aggravating mutual relations or loss of face. Such a deal, in most cases, even conceives the prospects for furthering the good neighbourly relations. Any of these could hardly be achieved outside the bilateral mechanism.

Bangladesh's experience in managing and resolving conflicts with her neighbours also suggest the overwhelming effectiveness of the bilateral mechanism. As we have discussed, while the settlement of disputes with India has been and still remains highly difficult undertaking, two of the disputes, including the crucial sharing of Ganges water, have been settled through bilateral mechanism. The same implies to Bangladesh-Myanmar dispute on the Rohingya issue. All these tend to encourage the use of bilateral mechanism.

Even in our neighbourhood, in the ASEAN region, notwithstanding the existence of a host of regional mechanisms for conflict management, most of the intra-group disputes and conflicts in the ASEAN are primarily dealt with at the bilateral level. This is facilitated by a broad framework for consultation/negotiation at the bilateral level. Bilateral mechanism for conflict management takes various forms. One is ad hoc political and diplomatic dialogue, which may
culminate at the level of heads of governments depending on the gravity and urgency of the issue.  

Bangladesh and her neighbours can learn from the experiences of ASEAN and other regions while developing their bilateral mechanism for conflict management. However, there are at least three reasons why Bangladesh should keep other options open. Firstly, there is an inherent risk for a country like, Bangladesh, to rely exclusively on the bilateral mechanism for conflict management with a country like, India, that is comparatively so much greater in terms of physical endowments. Secondly, the other neighbour, Myanmar, often remains insensitive when Bangladesh suffers the worst consequences of the spill-over effects of intra-state conflict in that country. Thirdly, Bangladesh’s perceived threat to its security emanates primarily from India’s regional aspirations.

ii. Regional and Sub-regional Co-operation

Co-operation at the regional and sub-regional levels is also a mechanism for conflict management even if the co-operative grouping refrain from setting such a goal overtly, like, SAARC and the ASEAN in its early years. While the Declaration on South Asian Regional Co-operation stipulated that “bilateral and contentious issue shall be excluded from the deliberations”, the SAARC Charter stated that, "increased co-operation, contact and exchanges would contribute to the promotion of friendship and understanding". How could friendship and understanding be promoted without managing outstanding conflicts? So, by implication, conflict management has been an objective of SAARC.


68. “Charter of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation”, in ibid., p.55.
The concrete issue, which serves the main source of threat to the security of Bangladesh from traditional perspective, is the persistence of a big power-small power syndrome. As discussed, at the centre remains India’s natural pre-eminence in the region and New Delhi’s occasional attempts to transform this natural pre-eminence into an imposed predominance. The asymmetry of power is an objective reality that can not be changed. What can be changed is the perception of India towards its neighbours and vice-versa. To this, SAARC and sub-regional groupings, like, South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), that includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and the Seven North-eastern states of India and Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Co-operation (BIMSTEC) could play a significant role. In this regard, the experiences of ASEAN in dealing with a similar phenomenon can serve as an example, though not a model.

Indonesia’s policy towards its neighbours, at times, even has been more abrasive than the Indian one. Nonetheless, ASEAN could find out a common ground where Indonesia’s regional ambitions and consequential security concerns could be addressed. In this regard, the role of Indonesia, particularly the farsightedness and political acumen as displayed by its leadership, played the decisive role. Indonesia under Suharto made it a conscious policy to exchange its erstwhile role of a regional troublemaker for that of a constructive partner. In dealing with intra-group conflicts, Indonesia displayed a high degree of restraint and caution so as to remove the deep-seated suspicion in the mind of its ASEAN partners with regard to Jakarta’s hegemonic ambitions in the region. Political self-denial on the part of Indonesia contributed significantly to the normalisation of politico-security environment in the region. This would remain

a difficult undertaking largely due to the deep-rooted Indian ambition to play a predominant role in South Asia. While the Gujral Doctrine indicated a flexible policy proposition in dealing with the smaller neighbours, it remains far from a political self-denial as practised by Indonesia in the ASEAN region. However, something of the kind is a *sine qua non* for making a breakthrough in the prevailing security environment in the SAARC region.

Similarly, the smaller South Asian countries as well need to reconsider their policy towards India. South Asian reality amply suggests that the management of inter-state conflicts and their ultimate resolution require considerable sacrifices on the part of all the parties concerned. While pressing for concessions from India, smaller South Asian countries also will have to find out ways and means of accommodating some of India's aspirations. That does not necessarily involve any sacrifice of national sovereignty. Indonesia's smaller neighbours have conveniently accommodated some of its aspirations without sacrificing their core interests. However, if initiated, the process of conflict management through mutual accommodation should be based on the collective and concerted efforts on the part of all the SAARC countries. Its ultimate goal should be to evolve a workable mechanism for the management of intra-group conflicts.

### III. Cultivating Support in International Arena

The cultivation of friendly relations in international arena is a significant factor contributing to the enhancement of the security of a state, though the nature of the relationship may not necessarily be security one. However, the extent of the strengthening of a country's security and the enhancement of its manoeuvrability vis-à-vis its potential adversaries would depend on its ability to cultivate friendly relations with the countries and groupings who can influence the development in international arena as well as in the concerned region. This also includes the cultivation of friendly relations with the allies of potential adversary. Viewed in this perspective, following is an attempt to evaluate how the cultivation of friendly relations in the international arena could contribute
to Bangladesh's efforts at facing the security challenges. For the convenience of our analysis, we would concentrate our attention on the following areas of significant importance to the country: the West, Middle East, Asia and the Pacific as well as international/multilateral forums.

Bangladesh, for a long time, is pursuing a policy in international arena that is significantly closer to the collective position of the West. Barring some issues of vital concern to the Islamic Community like, Palestinian issue, Bangladesh by and large identified itself with the West. Bangladesh's performance in international politics during the Second Cold War earned the country a good name in the Western capitals. As a matter of fact, it could yield some dividends for its pro-Western stance in its foreign policy.

However, there has always been a limit to which Bangladesh can expect to derive security benefits from the West, particularly vis-à-vis India. Nonetheless, friendly relations with the Western countries have contributed to the enhancement of Bangladesh's manoeuvrability vis-à-vis both of its neighbours. It is particularly true in case of two crises that Bangladesh has faced in its relations with Myanmar. Bangladesh's friendly relations with the Western countries are a factor that would be taken into consideration even by India while encroaching upon its security interests. Another important point, the nature and the magnitude of threat faced by Bangladesh, as discussed, also does not require overt security commitment to Bangladesh on the part of the Western countries.

Bangladesh, like most of the developing world, is likely to face a considerable challenge in its relations with the West, though the magnitude of this challenge is yet to be revealed. The West appears to be no more a cohesive force in international arena. The debate centres on the role of the US – the lone super power – in the unipolar world. France, Germany and some others vehemently opposed the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, while, Italy, Spain and others supported it. How far this cleavage within the Western alliance would develop and where this would lead to still remain open questions.
Meanwhile, Russia and, to a lesser extent, China as well opposed the invasion. All these have already made the great power politics considerably complex. The process may continue posing a severe challenge to the countries like, Bangladesh, in their dealing with the West. In more concrete terms, the challenge is to device the ways and means of maintaining good relations with both sides of the dividing line within the West or, if compelled to choose either of the sides, how to make the choice.

The Asia-Pacific region has emerged as one of the most important economic, commercial and geo-strategic centres of the present day world. For the convenience of our analysis, we would concentrate our attention, primarily on Japan, China and the Asia-Pacific NICs, who are assuming increasing importance in Bangladesh foreign policy.

Since the World War II, the region has been undergoing a dramatic transformation. The countries of the region witnessed spectacular growth in their economies, technological and scientific development parallel with the deepening of economic co-operation, interdependence and rapid increase in their share of world trade. In this regard, the meteoric rise of Japan as an economic super power has been one of the most significant developments of Post-War period. From the ashes of nuclear catastrophe, it has emerged as the second largest economic power of the world. It has also emerged as the World’s largest creditor nation.

Along with Japan, the Asia-Pacific NICs, namely, South Korea, Taiwan, Hongkong, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have achieved great success in economic and industrial development. All these developments have transformed the region as one of the most important focus of attention in the present day world. In the broader perspective, the balance of global politico-strategic and economic importance is increasingly being shifted from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific setting the stage for the "Age of the Pacific".

Current realities of regional and international politics coupled with China’s emphasis on its domestic priorities are
discouraging the country to play the role of a counterbalance to India in South Asia. In practice, India has always sought to neutralise Chinese support to smaller South Asian countries vis-a-vis New Delhi. This should not discourage Bangladesh. In fact, Bangladesh's security predicaments do not require a degree of commitment as required by Pakistan. China remains an important partner of Bangladesh for a number of reasons. It is a major arms supplier to Bangladesh and due to latter's inability to pay for Western arms it is likely to remain the same for some times to come. China is as well an important donor country. Bangladesh will have to maintain and strengthen further its mutually beneficial relations with China without being unduly concerned with the development Sino-Indian relations.

Most of the Asia-Pacific NICs - North Korea, Taiwan, Hongkong, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand - have been as impoverished during the 1950s as Bangladesh was. During the past three decades they have achieved tremendous success in industry, trade, education and science and turned into envy of other developing countries. Over the years, it is being increasingly realised the necessity of economic co-operation with the Asia-Pacific NICs, particularly the ASEAN countries with a view to stimulating our nation-building process. There have been also a lot of talks on the subject among different circles of the society. Some efforts were as well initiated with a view to expanding Bangladesh's co-operation with the Asia-Pacific NICs. Nonetheless, very little has been achieved. Very recently, present government has undertaken a policy initiative called 'Look East' aimed at exploring the prospects for mutually beneficially co-operation with the Asia Pacific region. It is necessary to concentrate efforts at materialising the objectives envisaged in the policy.

The Middle East occupies an important place in Bangladesh's foreign policy. It is the single-most important area of employment opportunity for the Bangladeshis abroad and the largest source of remittance. It is also an important source of foreign aid to the country. The region remains almost the only source of crude oil and a largely unexplored market for Bangladeshi goods.
Bangladesh's foreign policy is faced with two broad groups of issues in its relations with Middle East. First one pertains to its aid and trade relations as well as employment opportunities for Bangladeshis in the region; and the other pertains to Bangladesh's stand on the issues of significant concern to the regional countries.

Current state of Bangladesh's relations with the mainstream Middle East countries is highly favourable to increasing the country's export to the region as well as employment opportunities for Bangladeshi workers. Whether the business opportunities would be explored or not would depend largely on the ability of the country's business community. With regard to increasing employment opportunities, along with the private initiative foreign policy establishment needs to invigorate its activities. Employment market in the Middle East has increasingly becoming competitive and Bangladesh has already been in certain instances outsmarted by Pakistan and India. Proper co-ordination of both government and private initiatives is highly essential.

Bangladesh foreign policy will have to deal with two major issues of the region. First one is the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict and the other is the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq.

With regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, co-relation of forces both in the regional as well as global context is overwhelmingly against those who are struggling for a just and peaceful solution to the conflict. The US commitment to Israel is firm and that has no counterbalance. While there is a deep underlying psychological drive for Arab unity at the grass-root level on anti-Israeli basis, virtually, all the Arab regimes have now a common patron with Israel - the US. After the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq, no Arab regime or a group of them have either political will or capability to challenge Israel. In the circumstances, there is no reason why Israel should make any such compromise on the Palestinian issue, as demanded by the Palestinians. Whether the Palestinian state is at all in the agenda of the US is of considerable doubt. Despite the
involvement of a lot of emotions with the Palestinian issue, Bangladesh can not ignore these developments, while formulating its practical policy towards the issue.

The same implies to the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq. The World, including the Arab world, has accepted the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq as a fait accompli and, now, making calculations on how to live with the lone super power or the hyper power in the unipolar world. For Bangladesh, the safest policy option, perhaps, may be to remain with the crowd.

Last, but not the least, for Bangladesh, to strengthen its position in the international arena that could be translated into increased manoeuvrability vis-à-vis its neighbours, active participation in international/multilateral forums is of crucial importance.

In asymmetric conflicts, for obvious reasons, diplomatic means are always preferred by the weaker side as against the military ones. For Bangladesh, which is facing potentially stronger adversaries and the threat to its security from traditional point of view remains ambiguous, remote and more hypothetical than real, foreign policy and diplomacy remain the first line of defence. However, the goal of ensuring security by foreign policy and diplomacy could be achieved through the display of diplomatic acumen and sagacity as a political art of the highest order.

2. Military Means: The Ultimate Option

In an anarchic world, uncertainty is the only certainty. However, ambiguous, remote and hypothetical the threat to security of a country might be, there is no guaranty that such a threat would not become evident, imminent and real, notwithstanding, the most sagacious foreign policy and the most skilful diplomacy. Thus, if foreign policy and diplomacy fail to ensure security by peaceful means and the threat to its security becomes real, how a country may deal with such a threat, particularly in an asymmetric conflict favouring its adversary as the prospective case for Bangladesh is. While such a scenario is not eminent, it also cannot be ruled out
altogether. In such a scenario, while the role of foreign policy and diplomacy would continue to remain crucial, the role of military means in facing a direct threat to the security would become vital as the ultimate option or the last resort. Hence, the need for defence preparedness to face the conventional security threat is of paramount importance even during peacetime.

As a matter of fact, defence preparedness during peacetime not only increases a country’s ability to face aggression if and when it occurs, but also and, more importantly, deters a potential aggressor. While there is no denial of the role of military in facing the conventional threat to security, enhancing security capability and deterring aggression, the debate roves around the degree of defence preparedness, defence policy/military strategy and defence management.

The degree of defence preparedness or the ability of a nation to deter or face an aggression by military means is a rather complex issue. It depends on a host of factors like, the size of the armed forces, the inventory of armament in their possession, the quality of the professional training, motivation, moral and so on of the rank and file as well as the political and military leadership. In this regard, comparative strength of its adversary is a crucial point. Therefore, defence preparedness of a nation always includes an element of competition vis-à-vis its potential adversary. Owing to this,


defence preparedness has always been a costly venture. In the era of scientific and technological revolution, it is becoming even more costly. Thus, in the ultimate analysis, defence capability of a nation is increasingly becoming more and more dependent on the defence expenditure. However, every nation has got too many other priorities.

Viewed in this light, the degree of defence preparedness is determined primarily by two considerations. Firstly, how much priority should defence get in comparison with other national priorities? Answer to this question depends on the prioritisation of the comparative needs of a society. More precisely, it is necessary to identify the place of defence requirements in the process of the compartmentalisation of all other societal requirements. In academic literature and policy debate this often comes down to a defence-development dilemma or in a more crude form 'guns versus butter' debate. The debate remains a highly exacerbated one with wide range of participants: academia, media, professional groups, business interest, socio-political forces, civil society organisations and so on.

The debate is a highly complex one. Neither scholarly endeavours nor the experiences of modern nation states, so far, could delineate a clear balance between defence and development. The issues involved are complex by themselves. Comparative priority of the two based on societal needs varies from country to country. More importantly, societal perception on the issue is highly diverse as the different segments of the populace in a given society often visualise the issue from diverse or even antagonistic perspectives. As a consequence of all these, the debate on the issue remains inconclusive.

Amidst academic debate and political polemics, the experiences of modern states have clearly demonstrated at least one point: drastic distortion of the balance against either defence or development could have disastrous consequences. The experiences of Sri Lanka and the former Soviet Union are the two extreme examples. Sri Lanka largely ignored the

73. Abdur Rob Khan, and Munim Kumar Barai, op. cit.
defence for a quite long time while, successfully concentrating on socio-economic development. The former Soviet Union single-mindedly based its security on military parity with the US while, ignoring the developmental aspect of its competition with the US. In both the cases, disastrous consequences are well-known. Thus, striking an appropriate balance between defence and development in national planning remains the most ardent task as well as the most difficult challenge. Like most of the countries, for Bangladesh, as well, the issue will continue to remain an illusive one.

Secondly, the degree of defence preparedness is determined by the comparative preparedness of the prospective adversaries. In case of Bangladesh, such a proposition would, in any case, be a highly difficult one for consideration. Indian armed forces have 1,298,000 persons in active service, in addition to a reserve of 535,000 persons. Its paramilitary has 1,089,700 persons in service. Indian Navy is five times and Air Force is more than twenty times larger than those of Bangladesh are. In addition to all these, India is a nuclear power. Even Myanmar armed forces have 344,000 persons and its paramilitary has 100,250 persons in service. Bangladesh armed forces have 137,000 persons and its paramilitary has 63,000 persons in service. In the circumstances, for Bangladesh, achieving parity in terms of the size of the armed forces with even Myanmar would be an almost impossible proposition, not to speak about India.

However, Bangladesh never set an objective of achieving parity with even Myanmar, not to speak about India. Its defence strategy has always been based on deterrence. In case of Bangladesh, deterrence implies that the country has such defensive capabilities that would make an attack on it by an aggressor "militarily indecisive, economically unprofitable and politically unacceptable". In case of war, deterrence capability would mean the capability of the armed forces of


75. Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, op. cit., p.29.
Bangladesh to deny a cost-effective victory to the aggressor through inflicting unacceptable damage on it.

As we have discussed, the asymmetry in terms of military power between Bangladesh and India is so sharp or rather the gap is so wide that achieving parity with India remained out of calculation. However, the same degree of asymmetry, again and again, raised the issue of whether the current defence strategy of deterrence relying on conventional forces alone is enough to ensure the security of Bangladesh in the face of aggression by a much superior adversary. This has generated the idea of a military strategy of "total resistance by the nation-in-arms" as advocated by Talukder Maniruzzaman. The strategy envisages the training of every citizen in a defensive war.

In this regard, some strategists also refer to the experiences of the War of Liberation as a basis for a non-conventional strategy of facing a superior force in an asymmetric war. The experience of the War of Liberation is indicative of a strategy of transforming untrained but highly motivated general mass into a non-conventional force if and when the survival of the nation would be at stake due to external aggression. All these, however, still remain at the level of academic discussions and, mostly, ignored by the military establishment and unexplored by the political leadership.

Ensuring security as it is understood from the traditional perspective of security is the responsibility of the armed forces that basically think in terms of conventional military strategy alone. Moreover, the strategies envisaging 'peoples war', 'nation-in-arms', 'guerrilla warfare' and the likes are mostly based on the assumption that the country or a part of it would be occupied by an aggressor. Therefore, it is unlikely that the military establishment would be favourably disposed to such non-conventional strategies. Nonetheless, while the


77. Syed Muhammad Ibrahim, *op. cit.*
defence strategy may remain a conventional one, exploring the utility of non-conventional methods, at least, as a tactical option is a worthwhile proposition. In this regard, formulation of a creative and innovative strategy that synthesises the virtues of a conventional strategy and non-conventional tactics deserve serious consideration.

V. In Lieu of a Conclusion

Challenges to the security of Bangladesh as perceived from the traditional point of view and, more so, the broader comprehensive security, are multifaceted, highly complex and, to a remarkable extent, ambiguous that make them difficult to deal with both in theory and practice. There prevails a wide range of diverse theories to deal with security challenges. These are the outcome of efforts on the part of the most accomplished scholars and professionals involved in the field from ancient time. However, "theory", as emphasised by Clausewitz, is not "... a positive doctrine, a sort of manual for action.... It is an analytical investigation leading to a close acquaintance with the subject." A diverse range of theories may indicate different or even contradictory guidelines towards the understanding of the same problem and devising its solution. Moreover, theories continue to be changed and modified constantly to keep pace with time or in their endeavours towards perfection.

In the circumstances, there exists no theory as a perfect guide to either understanding or action, particularly in the context of security challenges. In order to deal with the specific security challenges faced by Bangladesh, it is necessary to construct or reconstruct theories. Due to our intellectual dependence on the West, as discussed, it is also necessary to indigenise Western theories. All these involve a complex task of avoiding misjudgement through a combination of critical and cautious approach, on the one hand, and an innovative and creative one, on the other.

Similarly, efforts at understanding the security challenges to Bangladesh and devising practical solutions to them must

proceed through dubious, diverse and contradictory developments as well as the fog of time. Understanding the action and inaction, and the pattern of behaviour, evaluating their underlying reasons, particularly specific objectives of concerned actors, are an arduous task. Making judgement on the basis of which policy should be formulated is even more difficult an undertaking. All these make the very process of analysis and synthesis difficult and the process of policymaking fraught with deception and misjudgement.

The foregoing efforts at dealing with the traditional context of the national security of Bangladesh had to undergo all the constraints as discussed above. Nonetheless, some conclusions had to be made. While it was discussed that the security threat posed by India to Bangladesh remains ambiguous, remote and somehow hypothetical, whether, why, how and when this may transformed into an evident, imminent and real threat remains far from being clear. More importantly, how to deal with the threat in its present form? While foreign policy and diplomacy has been suggested as the first line of defence, how to achieve the desired result remains considerably unexplored. Finally, how to deal with the threat if and when it transforms into an imminent one? While military means remain the ultimate option in dealing with the traditional threat to security, the level of required defence preparedness and the appropriate military strategy for Bangladesh to deal with a possible aggression remain less clear. With regard to Myanmar, while we have identified the nature of security interaction between the two countries as more a security concern for Bangladesh than a threat, whether and how such a security concern could be assuaged through mutual efforts remains to be explored.

Thus, the article has, perhaps, raised more questions on the subject than it has answered to. Available literature on the subject reviewed in the process of the preparation of this article as well suggests the same. Exploring answers to these questions is a sine qua non for understanding the security challenges faced by Bangladesh and devising appropriate policy options. This remains a highly difficult undertaking. Individual or isolated efforts would fall far short of facing the challenges. To paraphrase Clausewitz, security is too serious a
matter to be left with individuals or particular groups. To face the intellectual as well as practical challenges to the security of Bangladesh, there is no alternative to concentrating concerted and inexhaustible efforts on the part of concerned scholars and professionals from all walks of life.