POLITICAL CHANGE, EXTERNAL VULNERABILITY, UNDERDEVELOPMENT: THE VICIOUS CIRCLE FOR BANGLADESH

Iftekharuzzaman

I. Introduction

The term 'development' has multi-dimensional implications. Both as a concept and as a process it denotes transformations of wide-ranging nature with their impact visible in social, economic, technological and industrial sectors as much as in political, diplomatic and security aspects. Gone are the days of conventional wisdom under which development was to be viewed as only economic, only industrial, only social, only political, or the like. Development is indeed a total process in which the economic, social and political, along with all other structures of the nation-state undergo sustained and substantive transformations.

To the extent that development is a process, it is both an end and a means, implying a self-sustaining momentum of the whole process on the one hand, and mutually complementary nature of the various aspects in a holistic frame on the other. There is, thus, no end of the process and today's development is essentially geared to tomorrow's. Likewise, it makes little sense to speak of a country's development as only economic, only social or only political. Such a fragmented approach does not really stand the test of modern-day realpolitik. If economic or technological and industrial development do not bring along socio-political transformation or fail to strengthen the nation-state as an entity and as an actor in its regional and international milieu in the increasingly interdependent world, or conversely, if social and political transformations are not both cause and outcome of economic development, then there is hardly any development.
In the same manner impediments to development and the process thereof are also multi-dimensional with economic, social, technological, environmental, as well as political and security ramifications, in many cases originating from both domestic and external sources. The term development in this paper is, therefore, understood in a totality—as a goal and as a process for total social transformation—with inputs taken from every aspect of the societal system that makes it work and sustain.

The most important and visible indicator of development in this sense is the strengthening of both economy and polity of a nation-state. From this perspective, an attempt is made below to comprehend Bangladesh’s impediments to development in terms of a vicious circle between political instability, external vulnerability and under-development. There is no contention here to underestimate the impediments of essentially economic and related nature like the country’s chronic resource shortage, technological backwardness, illiteracy, external economic dependence and recurrent natural disasters. What instead is attempted is to view these as they relate to, and get compounded in conjunction with, the country’s chronic political instability and its critical vulnerability, more often than not in both internal and external dimensions. The objective is also to indicate that in the ultimate analysis it is the strengthening of both the polity and the economy parallel and complementing each other that needs to dominate the development agenda of Bangladesh.

II. The Premise

A central question in any discussion on development of a country like Bangladesh is how the ruling elites make use of the acutely scarce resources in meeting the demands of economic development which compete fiercely with those of managing the polity. Both, but more often the latter, are mostly viewed to be identical with issues of regime security. Even at today’s level of advancement of development theories no definite answer to this question can be regarded as complete. Various hypotheses and propositions have been advanced to provide at best some valuable insights. The complex variety of problems has impeded the establishment of a conceptual framework. Available evidences nevertheless suggest that problems of development in so-called Third World countries like Bangladesh are so complex and options for the ruling elites are so limited that the choice focuses more often
than not on questions of regime survival and issues of short-term relief thereof.

Besides problems of severe resource shortage what counts most are the issues of regime weakness, and thereby, chronic political instability on the one hand, and those of external vulnerability. In other words, the ruling elite's judgement about the effectiveness of ways to protect its own survival against both domestic and external vulnerabilities defines the framework for options and decisions that are projected to be geared to the country's development. We assume that Bangladesh is no exception to this, and proceed here to examine the impediments to the country's development under two main headings: political instability and vulnerability. Before that, however, we pause for a while to briefly outline the developmental challenges to the country for the sake of placing the premise of the paper into proper perspective.

Bangladesh has so damagingly ill-managed its economy and polity that only a foolhardy would bet that it can be turned round in the foreseeable future. It was, however, not at all supposed to be so in 1971 when the country emerged as an independent nation in the wake of a bloody and devastating liberation war. It was the culmination of a long and traumatic process partly under the 'melting pot' of British colonialism and partly under the yoke of 'internal colonialism' of Pakistan. The post-independence period of the new nation's political consolidation and economic rehabilitation coincided with the deepest of the post-World War II international economic crises. Regionally, the country found itself a part of a sub-system that has dubiously distinguished itself for three main reasons: a) its massive poverty and widespread underdevelopment, b) its bedevilled inter-state relations, and c) weakest link among its component states in terms of positive interaction for cooperation and development. On a closer focus the traumatic experiences of immediate post-independence political turmoils impeded the healthy growth of socio-politico-economic institutions. The backlash effect of all these turned Bangladesh into something of a paradigm—how a newly independent country can be plunged into crises by shocks generated within the frontiers combined with those transmitted from outside.

Bangladesh today faces nearly all the conceivable problems of development. The difficulties are clear and well-known. Belonging to the World Bank classification of Least Developed Countries,
Bangladesh accommodates the eighth largest populace of the world living with one of the highest densities in a land with virtually no resources except its vast under-utilized manpower and alluvial farm land. The potential of the latter is ravaged almost invariably each year by recurrent natural disasters including devastating floods in its mighty rivers belonging to the Himalayan basin. The difficulties are indicated as much by the damages of whatever productive efforts are undertaken, caused by these natural disasters as by the failure to negotiate a long term viable regional solution to these along with co-basin states, namely India and Nepal.

The country has on the other hand, one of the lowest levels of per capita income, and is characterized by pervasive poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy. The country has also inherited a poor resource and infra-structural base and huge economic, industrial and technological deficiencies nourished for long under centuries of 'hinterland status'. With independence came the series of external economic impediments including loss of markets for the country's few exportable items and ever-declining price of the same thereby shrinking the possibility of sustaining the income and of supporting development by financing import requirements. While the inherited level of external economic dependence continued to grow and productive base shrunk in an environ of 'rising expectations' out of independence, pressure on scant available resources proved to be too high. The administrative and managerial inexperience coupled with distorted economic and social standards on the one hand, and political mismanagement on the other created socio-political disharmony and instability in the country. Series of political turmoils followed soon and this complex background continues to have its impact not merely on subsequent politico-economic development but also on all possible prognoses about the country's future prospects.

III. Political Instability: The Cause and the Effect

Political instability has long been studied by social scientists. Aristotle found inequalities of wealth and power to be at the root of political instability. John of Salisbury justified tyranicide, Machiavelli advocated violence for his Prince. Marx predicted revolution and violent change. In more recent times Western political

scientists like Huntington viewed political instability as an outcome of the process of a country's development. Leaving aside theoretical expositions and ideological implications, there is hardly any two opinion on the linkage between economic frustration and political instability. The emphasis of this paper is on the two-way relation of political instability with economic frustration or underdevelopment. It would be useful to stress that while economic underdevelopment leads to political instability, the latter also accounts in a great measure for failure in development pursuits.

Politics and development are inseparable and mutually complementary. Economic and political decision-making, therefore, overlap and indeed policies for economic management are essentially part of those for state management. Thus the pattern of economic management is defined by interplay of both economic and non-economic factors. Policies for economic management are basically concerned with allocation of disposable resources between various alternative purposes. From the political perspective it involves allocation of resources in a way that it favours those who possess the political power and influence or is considered instrumental in making the power and its base. The linkage between economic and political management is manifested by the way economic development is projected to be the political objective of the state. While this remains the *de jure* objective, the goal of regime security remains the prime *de facto* objective. The state in any society—developed or not—is thus found to be under persistent pressure to divert resources from those with little or no political power to those who are in possession of the same. In specific conditions of underdeveloped societies like Bangladesh resources tend to be distributed away from villages to the cities, toward the advantaged as distinct from the disadvantaged, and more towards sectors that help regime survival by containing its vulnerability in the context of political turmoil and instability.

It is appropriate at this stage to briefly comprehend the matrix of political instability in Bangladesh. Central in a simple hypothetical model of Bangladesh's political instability are ceaseless dissensions on core national issues and the resultant political crisis and instability. Problems are certainly associated with the process of nation-building. Nation-building in the literal sense of the term

is indeed hardly a problem in the context of Bangladesh. Unlike most other developing states of the Third World which have been aptly described as nations not in being but only in hope,3 Bangladesh is a new state of an old nation. The fact that Bangladesh’s nationhood preceded its achievement of statehood is well-documented and undisputed.4 Long before the new state was formed in 1971, strong sense of nationhood took deep roots and the independence of the country marked the congruence of the nationhood with a statehood. At independence Bangladesh contained in the words of a noted analyst:

a rarity in the modern age state system: a state which also happened to be a nation linguistically and culturally homogeneous and united by the spirit and experience of a people’s centuries-long resistance against foreign and align aggression, domination and exploitation. Eighty-five percent of this nation also happen to have religious homogeneity—they are all the sunni muslims with an untarnished record of toleration and cooperative coexistence with voteries of all religions under the sun.5

Thus Bangladesh’s near-homogeneity in ethnic, linguistic, cultural and even religious terms apparently renders nation building a non-issue. On a closer focus and from a more functional point of view, however, it is to be recognized that despite advantages of homogeneity and shared glory of the past, very little has been achieved in the way of nation building. The point is brought home if nation building is viewed to cover the:

vast range of human relationships, attitudes, activities and social processes... the development of a sense of nationality; the integration of political units into common territorial framework with a government which can exercise authority; the integration of the rulers and the ruled; the integration of the citizens and various social groups into a common

---

5. ibid, p. 194.
political process, and ... ... the integration of individuals into institutions for purposive activities.

From such a multi-dimensional and comprehensive perspective Bangladesh may rightly be considered to be still in the continuum of the nation building process. The nation exists, blessed with advantages rarely found in most of its Third World counterparts. Despite this it continues to be far from having achieved the objectives of nation building. The critical factor appears to be the endemic weakness of the state that has assumed the responsibility of presiding over the blessings bestowed upon the nation. Factors that have contributed to this weakness include a pseudo-crisis of national identity. That a country like Bangladesh with its glorious history of national revolution would enter into any controversy over national identity was to be the last thing in anybody's imagination before 16 December 1971 when the country achieved independence. The reality is however different, and after seventeen years since then the search for a consensus on the issue continues. The identity travelled from Bangalee to Bangladeshi in a state which has swung from secularist to Islamic, thereby exacerbating the process of political instability in the country.

The second critical factor that contributes to political instability is undeveloped state of political institutions. Very few, if any of the numerous political parties operating in the country are strictly organized, well-knit and spread up to grass-roots levels having definite policies and programmes of action. Intense factionalism and polarization among social groups and classes—a creation of inequitable distribution of wealth and power in the midst of poverty—coupled with a close network of patron-client relationships pervading the whole society have resulted in a system devoid of institutional virtues. Party politics is almost universally characterized by factionalism and decisions made at personal level with strong subjective bias determine the outline of poli-


7. For a detailed discussion on the subject see, Iftekharuzzaman and Mahbubur Rahman, op. cit., and M.G. Kabir, "Post-1971 Nationalism in Bangladesh: Search for a New Identity", in M. Abdul Hafiz and Abdur Rob Khan, op. cit.

tical activism. Whether in the government or in the opposition, the leadership caters to the maximization of the interests of the most influential sub-groups and power bases at the cost of the interests of the masses. On the other hand, concern for harmonious relation within the groups or factions often prevails over that for political programmes or strategies. Hence, politics is determined largely by narrow individual or group interests. Political postures, activities and performances are determined by factors of personalities, influences, patronage and prestige rather than by specific political issues or alternate political programmes. The prevalent value orientation of the political elite reflects their urge for enhancing their social prestige, political power and economic status at the cost of national interest, allegiance to which is minimal. The end result is that the character of the state elite and sub-elites of the country is too weak to create a national consensus capable of creating a strong, legitimate and viable state authority.

Bangladesh is a society of sharpening social inequalities and cleavages. On the one hand, there is abject poverty pervading the society, and on the other hand there is acute inequity in the distribution of income and wealth in both urban and rural areas. The polity is furthermore a specific case of "intermediate-praetorian syndrome". The intermediate class in the absence of well-developed capitalist establishments is at the helm of state-power with its power base in three sub-groupings: a) civil bureaucracy, b) the military and c) the civilian political activists. Outside these groups of vested interests there is the vast 'ruled universe' including the lower-middle and low-income working class and the unemployed, the near or total landless peasants and the destitutes and disadvantaged in both rural and urban areas. Taken together, this ruled part of the society forms the reservoir of political activism that may be dragged into whatever changes may occur from time to time.

Ironically enough, although poverty and socio-economic underdevelopment determine the composition and structure of the society in Bangladesh, the class character is hardly reflected in the social and political behaviour of these classes, particularly that of the

disadvantaged sections, nor are organized on the basis of class consciousness. Thus class based organizations have not practically grown in the society. On the other hand there exist strong and well-knit patron-client relationships between the poor and the rich. At the poor’s end such relationship is dictated by the issue of sheer survival for which they have traditionally submitted themselves to the local landed and richer sections. The latter for their part have extended the critical umbrella to create the support network and power base of their social, economic and political muscle. Thus from the reciprocal needs of both the lower strata and upper class of the society grow the vertical formations undercutting the existing economic cleavages. The outcome is that whether it is a political party, or a civil-military oligarchy that is in power, the platform is built not on the basis of long term socio-politico-economic need of the society as a whole but on mutual patronage criterion. In the process the masses are absent from the corridors of policy and decision making. They are also virtually out of the process of participation in the mainstream of political and economic activities. To add to the complexities there is continued social disagreement on institutional group role, and pending national consensus on critical issues the military by dint of its position of physical strength keeps on enjoying the upper hand in a state structure which not merely lacks legitimacy and stability but also adds to the national vulnerabilities.

Two more internal problems that are particularly critical not only for their intrinsic complexity and dimensions per se, but also because of their cross border ramifications, are the ethnic disturbances in Chittagong Hill Tracts and natural disasters including floods, droughts and other environmental problems. The interplay of all these factors leads to a pervasive socio-political frustration, lack of social accommodation, growing tension and uncertainty within the state contributing to its instability. Needless to underscore the impact of all these on the development efforts of the country. The ruling elite being pre-occupied with grappling of issues noted heretofore is concerned more with its own survival, and therefore,

the state machinery is geared more towards that than the cause of development. The problems are of course further compounded by the vulnerability of the state transmitted from outside the national frontiers. And to this we turn our discussion now.

IV. External Vulnerability: The India Factor

Like most other states of the modern world Bangladesh is vulnerable to external threats. At the theoretical plane, of course, the problem of external threats to a state's security is the function of the rather anarchic character of international political system. As Kenneth Waltz points out, "with many sovereign states, with no system of law enforceable among them, with each state judging its grievances and ambitions according to the dictates of its own desire, conflict sometimes leading to war is bound to occur."13 External threats to national security of one state originate therefore from the policies of other states. And while in theory all states may be prone to external threats, in the real world, the weaker states are more vulnerable than the stronger ones. This is obviously the outcome of their own weakness as a state and their relatively low power capability.14 In case of Bangladesh, for clear reasons of geo-politics, most of the country's threats to security—perceived or real—originate from the policies of India, the big and advantaged neighbour, which literally enlocks the country.

It needs to be stressed here that factors of Bangladesh's external vulnerability may be grouped generally into two major heads: a) globally as the country interacts with the international community as a whole, and b) regionally as it relates to its immediate neighbourhood of South Asia. It is also evident that if a country's external relations are a function of domestic compulsions, there can be no other factor as critical in Bangladesh's external relations as its economic imperatives. As a corollary, no factor other than its overriding aid dependence and imbalances and anarchy in global trading and financial system can be more important in transmitting vulnerability. To that extent also, Bangladesh's external vulnerabilities are more or less akin to those of the Third World countries in general.

14. *ibid.*
What is more significant in the context of the present paper, on the other hand, is Bangladesh’s interface with India, its immediate big neighbour in the region which defines most, if not all, of the elements of the country’s external political vulnerability. Bangladesh’s relation with India has traversed through a chequered process. From an apogee of very close ties in the aftermath of Bangladesh’s liberation in 1971 it plummeted into a nadir of mutual mistrust, suspicion and recrimination. The critical turn was visible in the wake of the change of government in Bangladesh in 1975. Then a perceptible improvement in relations with the accession to power of the Janata government in 1977 was discernible. The return of Congress I to power in India in 1980 provided the renewed damper on bilateral relations which by all indications persists and relation can hardly be described as congenial to good neighbourliness.

Formal relation of independent Bangladesh with India was established on 6 December 1971 when the latter accorded recognition to the new republic three days after the outbreak of Indo-Pakistan war. In reality the relationship, however started earlier in March the same year when the military junta of then Pakistan unleashed a reign of terror and repression against the civilian population of Bangladesh. Indian support and assistance to the millions of evacuees who flooded into India, to the provisional government of Bangladesh and the organizational, logistic and diplomatic support to the liberation struggle of the country are well known. What is often less emphasized is the significant coincidence of the cause of Bangladesh’s independence with India’s long-standing strategic objectives vis-a-vis the region. For Bangladesh of course, it was a matter of national independence and a black-and-white issue of survival. For India it was a combination of political expediency and self-interest. In the abiding circumstances India was indeed proffered a unique occasion to cut to size all unfriendly neighbour, Pakistan, and at the same time emerge as the unchallenged regional power in South Asia. Thus, when the Indian international locus standi of having to sustain millions of refugees on its soil was reinforced by the Pakistani blunder of open attack, India could retaliate in full strength to make the best use of the ‘historic opportunity’. From such a perspective the sense of Bangladesh’s gratitude to India for the latter’s role in 1971 may be reasonably tempered by the realization that India had certain well-conceived and cogent calculations of its own in extending assistance to Bangladesh.
Bangladesh-India relations developed speedily into a level of cordiality in the immediate post-liberation period. Mutual visits at the highest political levels took place to symbolize the level of understanding and personal rapport between the leaderships. The visits were significant as these were potential milestones in institutionalizing the bilateral relations. During one such visit by Indira Gandhi to Dhaka the 25-year Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace was signed. The joint communique at the conclusion of the same visit highlighted certain vital areas of common interest and agreement.

The Friendship Treaty, on the status of which both the sides soon became silent, stipulated *inter alia* mutual consultations in case either party was threatened with attack. The preamble of the treaty, designed in line with Moscow-initiated Friendship treaties alluded to common ideals and struggles and sacrifices that both countries had gone through. The two sides expressed their commitment to maintain good-neighbourly relations and eternal peace and friendship. Article I declared that “there shall be lasting peace and friendship” between the two peoples and countries.

Visits at various political and official levels continued during which discussions and understanding covered wide-ranging subjects including cooperation in trade, economy and issue of Ganges water. On this last item foundations were laid for a possible mutually acceptable solution, although New Delhi subsequently became reticent to follow these up. During Indian Foreign Minister’s visit to Dhaka in February 1974 the two sides agreed that a mutually acceptable solution will be arrived before the Farakka Barrage was commissioned. It was also agreed subsequently that a) there might not be enough water to meet the needs of the Calcutta port and full requirements of Bangladesh during the minimum flow period of the Ganges, b) the fair weather flow in the lean months would have to be augmented and c) the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) should study and make recommendations about the best means of augmentation.

Subsequently, pursuant to these decisions, before the test-run of the feeder canal the two sides reached in April 1975 a limited agreement on water-sharing during the dry season under which India agreed to limit its withdrawal from 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs. After August 1975, the Indian attitude showed a radical change and New Delhi became overtly reticent on its earlier commitments. In
retrospect, considering the sharpness of reaction in 1975 and the level of intransigence in subsequent periods, it appears that the August 1975 events in Dhaka came as a blessing for New Delhi, which had indeed been looking for a pretext to provide the U-turn. With the approach of 1976 dry season Bangladesh suggested that the 1975 formula be continued and a joint study on the effects of withdrawal, as stipulated under the April 1975 agreement, be carried out. India, as it is well known, was non-responsive which compelled Bangladesh to take the issue to the UN which referred it to the Special Committee of 31st UNGA Session. Pursuant to a consensus statement that was subsequently accepted at the intercession of some non-aligned countries three rounds of Ministerial level negotiations took place between the two countries which could make no progress. It was only after there was a change in New Delhi with the Janata government in power that an agreement could be reached, that too in exchange for nearly doubling of India’s withdrawal authority from 11,000 to 16,000 cusecs range to 20, 500 to 26, 500 cusecs. It was however agreed that in the case of exceptionally low level of flows Bangladesh would be guaranteed a minimum of 80% of the volume earmarked for it in the schedule of allocation. With the return of Congress (I) to power in New Delhi Indian attitude to Bangladesh stiffened again. The Memorandum of Understanding that was signed in October 1982 significantly enough, dropped the 80% guarantee clause leaving Bangladesh at the whim of India during the dry season. Relations deteriorated subsequently in almost every aspect, particularly visible in the wake of the floods of 1987 and 1988 when Bangladesh strengthened its campaign for a regional solution to this basically regional problem.

Bangladesh’s experience over its relation with India highlight the following aspects of its vulnerability toward India. Firstly, the status of bilateral relation between Bangladesh and India has been vulnerable to political change in the latter. There are ample evidences, as highlighted above, to suggest that with every change in helmsmanship in New Delhi there have been substantive changes in New Delhi’s attitude towards Dhaka.

Secondly, Bangladesh has faced numerous occasions on which Indian actions and postures are not in conformity with New Delhi’s earlier commitments. India, as mentioned above committed that it would ensure a mutually acceptable solution to the water issue before the Farakka Barrage was commissioned. The barrage has
very well been commissioned while a solution remains as elusive as ever. Although a limited agreement was signed, India never hesitated to break the spirit of even that. On the question of South Talpatty India accepted a Bangladeshi proposal to undertake a joint survey of the island. Breaching its commitment India carried out a unilateral survey in 1980. Under the border guidelines of 1975 it was stipulated that there may be no defensive structures within 150 yards of the border on either side. But casting unwarranted aspersions to Bangladesh and causing damage to the friendly and good-neighbourly relations India undertook a project to erect a barbed wire fence along the Bangladesh-India border on the alleged pretext of cross-border immigration. Shifting of Indian position was visible also in case of the maritime boundary issue. The two sides agreed in 1975 that a) maritime boundary should be delimited by mutual agreement, b) it should be demarcated in a manner equitable to both countries and c) the line of demarcation should safeguard the interest of both the countries. A clear hardening of Indian attitude in subsequent periods as distinct from these commitments rendered progress on the issue difficult. India's insistence on equidistance method disregarding the specific geographic situation and non-acceptance of equi-depth method — examples of which are not rare in similar situations elsewhere — indicates Indian imposition of big-brotherly dictates in its relation with Bangladesh.

**Thirdly,** India has been adopting circumlocutory tactics in its dealing with Bangladesh, particularly in relation to commitments already made. The Tin Bigha issue is the most glaring example of such behaviour. The delay of over a decade in the execution of an agreement is something extraordinary and certainly re-inforces evidences of India's feet-dragging in its treatment of Bangladesh. Reluctance to undertake a joint study on the effects of water withdrawal at Farakka as stipulated under a 1975 agreement is yet another evidence of circumlocutory tactics.

**Fourthly,** Bangladesh is exposed to continued Indian intransigence on major issues of discord between the two countries. The patronage and assistance to the insurgents in Hill Tracts and other political opponents brushing aside Bangladesh's repeated protests have rendered the country increasingly vulnerable and politically unstable. India has been providing various assistance to Bangladeshi political dissidents including the so-called *Shanti Bahini* and the
Shadhin Bangabhum activists. Independent reports published recently speak of the involvement of the Indian intelligence agency, RAW, in anti-state activities in Bangladesh. On the water issue Bangladesh is being pushed to the wall by mounting social, economic, ecological, environmental and political pressures as a result of continued diversion of water from the border rivers despite loud protests from Bangladesh.

Fifthly, India's principled position of bilateralism in dealing with Bangladesh even on issues that are fundamentally regional is a source of major concern for Bangladesh. Bangladesh's efforts towards seeking a regional solution to the problem of floods and other natural disasters have long been resisted by India despite all technical justifications. The main Indian intention in every instance discussed above is to keep Bangladesh endemically vulnerable which in Indian perspective apparently serves its regional geo-political designs of establishing itself as the regional superpower.

Finally, Bangladesh is continually being provoked by New Delhi to follow an anti-Indian posture. The main rational possibly includes the need for a 'Bangladesh bogey' in Indian domestic politics. India is unduly sensitive to alleged 'atmosphere of oppression of minorities in Bangladesh' as a result of so-called 'theocratization of administration' under the present government. The Indian media and press and top political leaders have been actively fabricating stories of 'lack of constitutional safeguards' for the minorities. The most important motivation behind such an Indian policy appears to be a perception in New Delhi that a Bangladeshi anti-Indianism would serve the interest of India more than a closer friendly relation. Under the latter possibility, India may have to concede to Bangladesh's legitimate and reasonable demands on more critical issues like water sharing and multilateral approach to flood protection, Tin Bigha and insurgency problem.

Critical to the external dimension of Bangladesh's vulnerability is, therefore, the India factor and more particularly divergent Indian position on issues of mutual concern. Some of the dissensions are obviously the outcome of the so-called India doctrine while others

have their own dynamics. In any case, there is hardly any two opinion that India is determined to capitalize on Bangladesh's geopolitically disadvantaged situation on the one hand and domestic weakness on the other to do everything that compounds the insecurity and vulnerability of the country. Other aspects of external vulnerability, as already mentioned, are broadly similar to those relevant to Third World countries in general, like international economic and political environ. There are of course as elsewhere and as always, the possibility of exogenous factors like crop failure, instability of aid inflow and/or political influence out of the same. In terms of priority and incidence, however, the India factor overshadows the rest of the sources of external threat to Bangladesh. This coupled with the country's problems of political instability make up the vicious circle of underdevelopment.

V. The Vicious Circle

The basic argument of this paper is that in the context of Bangladesh the 'poverty curtain' needs to be understood also as an 'instability-vulnerability trap'. It should be stressed that this interpretation of the problems of development of the country is a tentative sketch on the scheme of things needing further expositions. What appears clear from the discussion above is that Bangladesh is caught up in a triangular trap of instability-vulnerability-underdevelopment. The country's chronic political instability in a process of complex interface with its external vulnerabilities, both political and economic, tends to seriously impede the process of development which in turn leads to further instability and further vulnerability.

What appears critical besides the country's severe resource constraints is the weakness of the state authority and perceived or real threats to its survival and continuity. This latter element is shaped by the elite's own judgment of effectiveness and legitimacy of its own regime in containing internal political instability and external vulnerability. Effectiveness and legitimacy are largely normative values, and hence governmental actions and policies ultimately boil down to concerns of regime security. This of course can be viewed to be a commonplace in modern political science. But in the context of Bangladesh it is imperative to emphasize with greater urgency than ever because the resources that the country is disposed with—both material and temporal—are strikingly limited.
There is no further scope of using these to focus on merely short-term survival.

The internal instability and external vulnerability elements intersect to generate four broad types of impediments to development of Bangladesh—economic, political, environmental and security. In the given matrix and in the event of no major change in it, Bangladesh’s development possibility may be perceived at two parallel and mutually complementary levels. At the home front the whole set of issues related to the process of nation-building and development pursuits comes in. The point being stressed is that the polity and the economy have to be built so strongly as to develop an instinctive national resilience. The state system needs to be strengthened, political development and economic growth should be components of one and the same process while national consensus on basic issues remains the over-arching need of the hour.

The vicious circle, as already indicated, becomes pervasive because of the fact that the country is critically resource-poor, so marginally poverty-stricken, so explosively over-populated, so under-developed in terms of growth of socio-politico-economic institutions, so embroiled in continued clash of group interests and above all, so polarized on matters of core national interests. The point to be stressed here is that since the polity and the economy are continuously fragile an instinctive national resilience does not take root and national priorities and policies lack proper direction and vision. The imperative in this respect is a leadership under which the vast majority of the citizens would be spontaneously loyal and supportive of the policies pursued by the state and would accept its authority with the understanding that the policies and institutions provided would ensure enduring and self-sustaining development of the country.

The other level of the approach here is external, the central theme of which is active diplomacy guided by a pragmatic appreciation of being in a disadvantaged and vulnerable position. There should be threadbare discussions and deliberations on the salients of national interests, both political and economic, that Bangladesh needs to pursue through its foreign policy. There may be difference on the specifics, but on the broader plane there is a critical need for national consensus as far as the national objectives and instruments for attaining such objectives are concerned.
Bangladesh cannot clearly afford or indeed does not need to be passive or emotional or confrontational with any particular state, and for that matter with India. From the perspective of Bangladesh, to the question whether a policy of friendship and good-neighbourliness with India would be consistent with Dhaka's principled foreign policy goals there should always be only one answer—an unequivocal 'yes.' Friendship and good-neighbourliness do not necessarily preclude the existence of problems. What these indicate is the imperative of a goodwill, best intentions and political acumen to be applied in resolving outstanding issues. Surrounded as Bangladesh is by India on three sides, good relation with that country is more than a geo-political imperative. The problem for Bangladesh is that in India it has found a 'superior with an inferiority complex' in the sense that India is incredibly rigid and imposing as the bigger and more powerful partner on the one hand and surprisingly petty and circumspect as if a weaker partner on the other. Given Bangladesh's geo-political imperatives, however, Bangladesh's best option is to deal with India from the position of friendship rather than one of antagonism. Friendship alone can provide Dhaka the leverage that it needs in dealing with New Delhi. It needs to be stressed however that what is proposed is a friendship that is compatible with self-respect and unfettered exercise of sovereign rights and manoeuvrability of policy options. It's a position between confrontation and submission so that vital national interests are not in any manner jeopardized. The immense potential of mutual benefits out of closer economic cooperation between the two countries can be reaped only in an eventuality of better political ties.

There is also a felt need for further diversification of Bangladesh's foreign relations. The premise here is the changing global political climate. Bangladesh has to reap for itself the benefits of the process of easing global tensions. Dhaka cannot afford to be without a locus standi in the emerging political order. An objective appreciation of the implications — both opportunities and constraints — of the processes of US-Soviet, East-West, Sino-Soviet, Sino-Indian and a possible Indo-Pakistan rapprochement is clearly needed. Openings offered by emerging international role of Japan and other East Asian new 'giant economies' may also be of critical importance for Bangladesh. Close examination of the sea-wave of changes undergoing
in East Europe may be useful. Leverages should be sought in poles that may function as a balancing factor not by way of antagonism but by accommodation with the big neighbour. In any event, the main focus here is clearly on the necessary homework for building a self-image of a country with strong national resilience, both domestically and externally.