FOREIGN POLICY AND NATION BUILDING

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BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY: DOMESTIC INPUTS
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I

Foreign policy is shaped not by any single but by a varied combination of factors, objective conditions, security environment, national unity, resource strength, social values, domestic pressures etc. Dr. Kissinger once said, "a nation’s values define what is just, its strength determines what is possible, its domestic structure decides what policies can be implemented." A great deal is summed up in these brief remarks.

Formulation of policy for the conduct of foreign relations is a continuing process, trying to match the desirable with the possible. Policy makers are expected to examine all available options before selecting the most practical with a view to achieving desired results. They also need to bear in mind the essential correlation between policy and resources. Outside well-informed circles, the public in general may lack its realisation. In a resource-deficient country like Bangladesh illusions cloud realities and there is need to liberate foreign policy goals from them. Policy objectives must not exceed the limits of our capabilities. What we support as just position internally, has to be vindicated by diplomatic moves externally. This has often not been possible, mainly because ends did not correspond with the means,
Sacrifices of the people of Bangladesh in the liberation struggle of 1971 left many legacies. Among them were the transformation of our perceptions and raising our expectations. We had visions of a nation committed unalterably to constitutional government. We expected a just society ruled by egalitarian principles. We believed in the promise of prosperity and conceived of equitable distribution of wealth. In the foreign field we hoped for all-round friendship and goodwill for our new nation. As events belied expectations, disillusionment was not long to come. In the domestic as in the foreign field, failures and frustrations produced their impact on the thinking of our people. Change in circumstances soon compelled reappraisal of policies.

It seems appropriate that through identification and analysis of broad goals, we will be able to shed some light on domestic inputs in our foreign policy. By any standard of judgement, insurance against external threats to security ranks high among national goals. Maintenance of security calls for a whole range of actions. Of crucial importance is internal stability and national unity underwritten by a determination to make sacrifices in defence of national rights. Internal cohesion, based on shared convictions, inevitably contributes to security. Open society, free institutions, free press and informed debates help build sound and durable national consensus. In these respects, regrettably, our objective conditions and preferred goals have not been in balance. As we faltered, doubts assailed our intentions. Internal political development knocked our pretensions. With our governmental system in periodic disarray and our political parties stagnating in dissension, our policies could neither inspire at home nor win confidence abroad. It has not been possible for Bangladesh to maintain any vigorous foreign policy initiative under these circumstances.

II

Geographical situation of Bangladesh will always be a vital factor in the formulation of foreign policy. In regard to influence of
geography, Bangladesh situation is not unique. In varying degrees it is important for all countries. Britain and Japan, located at the edge of European and Asian continents respectively, have had historical experiences quite different from their neighbours. They enjoyed relative immunity from the crises which afflicted their continents. The vast landmass of Russia has often frustrated foreign invaders. Landlocked nations have suffered from many inhibitions. Their policy options are few. The high Himalayas provided, through the ages a defence shield to India from the north. In the United States, geographically sheltered by two great oceans, the factor of physical location encouraged an isolationist mentality. It was essentially her values and interests which accounted for her involvement in conflicts of regions far beyond her frontiers.

Bangladesh neighbourhood is dominated by Indian presence. A sense of its pervasiveness seems to prevail. Heavy imbalance in the power equation between the two countries compound the situation. India's impact is felt mainly in the economic rather than in the political or in the cultural fields. Despite ethnic and cultural affinities, four decades of existence under distinctly different arrangements and policy divergences induced in Bangladesh an outlook different from that in the neighbouring areas of India. Indo-Bangladesh frontiers have not been a strong barrier to economic intercommunications. Cross-border trade defies all attempts at effective control of the frontiers. The physical factors of shared land and maritime boundaries has produced a number of problems, some more intractable than others. All major rivers in eastern India flow through Bangladesh before reaching the sea. Bangladesh's requirement of waters of these rivers remain high and for purposes which are multifarious. While summer months produce problems of abundance, winter months create a crisis of shortage. This seasonal variation calls for agreed regulation and a mutually acceptable formula for sharing the available waters. So far all attempts to reach a permanent solution of this water problem have failed. It is hard to cite another example from the
experience of other nation which can match the record of time and energy expended on solving a similar problem. Interminable negotiations, repeated stalemates, divergent demands and partisan publicity have had their cumulative effect on the external policies of Bangladesh. The problem and the efforts concerning its solution have extended beyond bilateral confines. Continued stalemate and adverse economic impact compelled Bangladesh to refer the issue to the United Nations some years ago. Through the good offices of mediators a consensus was reached and was reflected in a resolution. Its beneficial effect cast its shadow on later negotiations ending in the 1977 agreement lasting for 5 years.

Intensity of public feelings on the water issue found occasional expression in overzealous activities like protest marches, rallies, demonstrations etc. The effect of all this was to harden attitudes, complicate negotiations and render accommodation more difficult. Foreign policy could not isolate itself from these developments. Paradoxically, a sense of despair gave the negotiations a renewed momentum. To foster close and friendly relations with the Islamic nations is a foreign policy objective strongly supported by popular sentiments in Bangladesh. Religious sensitivities and cultural outlook of the overwhelming majority of our people sanction this policy preference. Islamic unity has been inspired by the fervour of our faith. Political, economic and cultural institutions, created jointly by Islamic nations therefore have shared goals. In recent years, however, the Camp David agreement, the Iran-Iraq war and the Lebanese crisis have wrecked this unity. This division and disunity have seriously hampered the foreign policy initiatives of the Islamic World. Unlike all other Islamic countries, Bangladesh lacks an Islamic neighbour. The consciousness of this isolation has made its unique contribution to Bangladesh's desire for Islamic solidarity. Its promotion has gained priority among foreign policy goals of our country.

One disturbing phenomenon in some Islamic countries is the persistent presence of sectarian divisions. Fortunately, in this regard
Bangladesh has an excellent record; no such division exists here. This advantage has enabled Bangladesh foreign relations to avoid suspicions of partisanship abroad. Neither rivalries of "traditionalist" and "progressive" Islamic states nor the bitter conflict between Iran and Iraq have affected our foreign policy approach. We have retained the privilege of neutrality and the honour of impartiality. In terms of maneuverability nothing confers greater advantage in the field of external affairs than an affirmation of impartiality and other nations' perception of it. On this account benefits to Bangladesh foreign policy have been incalculable.

III

Domestic public opinion is another powerful factor in the formulation and conduct of foreign affairs. Nothing so reliably mirrors internal environment as public opinion. Its influence is maximum when constitutional guarantees ensure freedom of political institutions, free flow of information and free expression of opposition views. If public awareness of foreign environment is limited and media freedom is curbed, public opinion cannot exert its full beneficial influence on foreign policy making.

While strong public reaction can reinforce policy positions, they can also limit options. Absence of pressure allows policy makers greater freedom and flexibility. In such a situation commitments could be undertaken or withdrawn, policy directions could be changed and positions could be compromised. When it is supportive of policies, strong public opinion, free from its euphoric content, can prove to be a helpful ally. In the United States for example, public opinion was sensitised to a high threat-perception during the Cuban missile crisis. Strong public reaction accounted, in large measure, for the solid support the U.S. government enjoyed in handling the situation.

In periods of crisis or confrontation public feelings can be whipped up. Even in enlightened and articulate societies people's views are not necessarily the product of proper analysis and unbiased
judgement. Public opinion can be shaped by media presentations, political parties and preferred associations. A political crisis can also divide public opinion and thus hamper policy initiatives. History of our contemporary period presents many striking examples of this situation. The Algerian crisis split French public opinion. For several years none of the contending groups in France could master an overwhelming majority. This contributed to the continuation of a costly war much longer than prudence justified. The pressure of public opinion was a nightmare for U.S. policy makers during the last years of Vietnam negotiations. U.S. opinion was deeply divided both over the goals of overseas policy and the conduct of military operations in Vietnam. Domestic discord created a wide credibility gap and assumed proportions of a national obsession in that country.

Political analysts have observed that the importance of public opinion as a factor in national policies could sometimes be exaggerated. Even in Western democracies, where free access to information is assured and enlightenment is generally assumed, a large proportion of the people remain apathetic to national issues. Despite all public debate and media attention, the Vietnam issue provides an example. It has been reliably estimated by pollsters that during the height of the crisis only about 1% of the people were actively and vocally involved in opposition, holding marches, rallies, demonstrations etc. About 3% took relatively passive actions such as writing or speaking. Not more than 15% took any action trying to convince others. These statistics indicate the size of the silent majority. It would, however, be misleading to underrate the pressure-potential on forcing policy of an emotionally charged minority.

In different periods of the short but eventful history of Bangladesh, public sentiments played an enormously important role. Its finest honour was during the liberation struggle. In standing firm and united against tyranny, it helped sustain the popular upheaval. All initiatives in Bangladesh to defend national rights have always enjoyed undivided popular support. Our public opinion has been
particularly sensitive to events. There are few examples of its becoming an easy prey to the machinations of political groups. In relation to foreign issues, where popular perceptions of national interests were clear, our domestic opinion has always shown remarkable unity. Sanctity of our frontiers, rights over river waters etc. are examples. Our unity was not in clear evidence in respect of some issues closely linked with internal policies. Differences could not be eliminated for example, on such vitally important issues as secularism and nationalisation. Such examples could perhaps be multiplied.

Low rate of literacy limited accessibility to foreign environment and restrictions imposed from time to time on press freedom have left our people ill-informed. In consequence, emotions have at times prevailed in formation of public opinion. There are also issues on which our national consensus has remained unclear. Aid dependency on the part of Bangladesh seems to be a case in point. While public opinion has focussed on the undersirability of long term aid support, it is yet to concentrate on the accountability of the proper use of foreign aid. In the Western democracies, commitment to foreign aid has now become a dwindling constituency. It would be somewhat curious to contemplate that with full facts and costs of foreign aid being realistically assessed, enthusiasm for its acceptance in our country would also decline.

IV

Foreign policy of Bangladesh has generally been reflective of knowledge and assessment of our capacity to achieve our goals. Harsh realities, objective factors, frequent political changes, resource-deficiency, unsatisfactory internal environment and facts of geography have combined to render the designing of Bangladesh foreign policy an infinitely delicate task. For our nation's security and progress the vigour and viability of this policy remain crucial. The ultimate guarantee of our success resides in the unity and the strength of will of our people.