FOREIGN POLICY AND NATION BUILDING: INSTITUTIONAL INPUTS

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The politics and nation building process of the emergent nations of Asia and Africa have become the objects of awakened diplomatic and intellectual concern throughout the world. The intractable problems faced by most of these nations relate to: (i) creating a viable national identity out of diverse cultural and ascriptive identities and (ii) telescoping into a few decades a process of socio-economic development that took the developed countries more than a century. In context of the above, the management of foreign policy plays a crucial role. First of all, the foreign policy affords them an opportunity to define the ‘we’ and ‘they’ of these societies i.e. to establish an identity vis-a-vis the outside world. As one author aptly points out, “domestic issues divide the nation and disclose how little developed is its consciousness of itself, foreign issues unite the nation and make it as a going concern.”¹

Second, since most of these developing countries are abysmally poor, they get an opportunity to utilize foreign policy for the purpose of getting desperately needed crucial inputs for their economic development and modernization. Most developing countries’ foreign

policies are, in fact, economic policies geared to obtain aid and assistance from the developed countries. In this sense, their foreign policies may be called ‘aid diplomacy’ or what one author termed as “diplomacy of economic development.”

Third, security of the developing countries in this perspective is not only the defence of territorial integrity but also internal security in the sense of protecting socio-economic order. Because strictly speaking, if security is a function of military and economic strength, it is utterly misleading to think that an economically backward state can attain a level of military preparedness adequate for its security in most contingencies. The need to use foreign policy judiciously and to attract maximum sympathy and cooperation from the international community is therefore, more important for a developing country like Bangladesh. This, of course, does not mean that a reasonable level of military preparedness is not necessary.

Bangladesh is fortunate to be a relatively homogeneous nation with a predominant Muslim population. But geopolitical realities and abysmal poverty of Bangladesh are the principal constraints that the nation’s leaders have always to take into consideration in formulating security and foreign policies. While a paranoid fear of being dominated or recolonized by India impinges directly or indirectly on the psyche of the new nation’s existence, the possibility of securing crucial inputs of desperately needed capital and technology from the developed countries is the major source of hope for the future. Foreign policy-making process of Bangladesh, therefore, can be seen more as constraints emanating from the above two major sources.

The inability of Bangladesh to become economically self-sufficient together with its restricted power position vis-a-vis India signifi-

cantly affect the foreign policy environment of Bangladesh. The imperative of economic development necessitates Bangladesh to seek foreign aid and assistance from all possible sources, and this shaped to a great extent the broad orientation and strategy of our foreign policy. Food shortages provide a striking example of economic considerations influencing foreign policy moves. The continuing food shortage for a grossly overpopulated country has been a constant drag on the national efforts at industrialization. It has gravely aggravated our dependence on foreign supplies of food grains and manufactures, and thus has imposed a severe constraints on our foreign policy.

While it may be argued that there was hardly any country which did not depend to an extent on borrowed technology and capital at the early stages of economic growth, in case of Bangladesh the scarcity of capital and the level of technology create a limitation so palpable and so obvious that any foreign policy which is not squarely based on it would be superficial. Moreover, the relative scarcity of natural resources further undermines our foreign policy stance and led to heavy dependence on foreign countries. It, therefore, becomes a natural function of Bangladesh foreign policy to ensure not only availability but also the maximisation of quantum of aid and assistance. This heavy dependence on foreign sources opens up the policy process to multifaceted penetration of foreign actors and made it less responsive to domestic inputs. However, in this paper I have mainly dealt with domestic institutional inputs to foreign policy making and no effort has been made to assess them vis-a-vis external inputs.

The post-independence era offered Bangladesh a challenge and an opportunity to undertake a meaningful exercise in foreign policy. It is noteworthy that despite abrupt domestic political changes, continuity in Bangladesh's foreign policy has been generally maintained with important shifts and priorities. Although the formal inputs to policy making have shown improvements in terms
of structural, procedural and qualitative changes over the years, the informal inputs have not shown much vitality and effectiveness in the formulation and implementation of foreign policies of Bangladesh.

**Formal Institutions and Policy Leadership**

Bangladesh during the past decade has evolved a fairly well-structured formal machinery to conduct its external relations. Although it can be said that in Bangladesh irrespective of forms of government, it has been almost the sole prerogative of the Chief Executive, either he be President or Chief Martial Law Administrator to formulate and implement foreign policy, the style of decision-making and substance of goals pursued have changed over the years. There has been gradual accretion of power in the foreign policy machinery of government that structures the decisions by setting out the choices. As the nation’s activities in the international arena have grown in scope and variety, not only the Foreign Ministry but other Ministries, particularly Ministry of Finance, its External Resources Division, Ministry of Commerce, Ministries of Home and Defence have also become integral part to the conduct of foreign affairs. The Council of Ministers generally serves as an advisory body, discusses certain aspects of foreign policy but is unlikely to have any substantive influence on important foreign policy issues. It is generally believed that an inner cabinet which obviously includes the Foreign Minister or Foreign Adviser serves as the principal deliberating organ that assists the President or Chief Executive on foreign policy matters. The formation of this inner cabinet, however, varied in successive regimes. During President Zia’s regime, the Vice-President, Economic Adviser / Minister, the Foreign Minister, and at times the Prime Minister were believed to have comprised this inner cabinet on foreign affairs. Concerned ministries were often consulted on issues involving respective areas of speciality. Only on rare occasions, important foreign policy decisions were taken by the President through elaborate and meaningful discussion in the cabinet.
The Parliament during successive regimes in Bangladesh, either directly or indirectly through Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, could not assert itself in the foreign policy decision-making process. Although Parliament has a clear constitutional role, the nature of power structure in Bangladesh, however, could not allow it to grow and develop as an involved institution, particularly in foreign policy making. Parliamentary control over the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not been generally used as a leverage by the Parliament to assert itself in foreign policy affairs.

The authoritarian nature of Executive Head in Bangladesh did not afford the Parliament an opportunity to exercise any meaningful role in the general conduct of foreign policy. The Parliament neither could effectively examine proposed legislation on foreign relations, nor examine or debate any vital document or agreement with foreign countries. Although members of the Parliament could raise foreign policy issues through parliamentary questions, calling attention notices and adjournment motions, they could not really extract relevant information from the Minister or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They often had to deal with fait accompli situations which left no scope or initiative in assisting the government in the formulations of policy. Although usually Parliament even in India, for example, plays less role in the shaping of foreign policy,4 a vigilant and well-informed Parliament, however, can certainly compel the Executive to operate within the policy limits that it lays down. In the United States where President as the Chief Executive dominates the foreign policy process, the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate and Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, nonetheless serve as powerful organs to control the executive. In Bangladesh, however, foreign policy has become almost the exclusive preserve of the executive, and the real work on practically all aspects of foreign policy is done by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Other Ministries

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acts as the formal institutional focal point of Bangladesh’s foreign policy. Subject to the approval of the Chief Executive on important policy matters, the Ministry is headed by a Foreign Minister or Foreign Adviser who is responsible for making and implementing policies. He is also generally responsible for conducting the business of the Ministry in the Parliament. Depending on the style and personality and above all, personal equation with the President or the Chief Executive, the office of the Foreign Minister signified varying degrees of importance, influence and effectiveness in the formulation and implementation of external policies.

Bangladesh has mostly been under Presidential or military system of governments, as such the Foreign Ministers did not have to worry a great deal about parliamentary sensitivities in the conduct of foreign relations. The very nature of his job made the Foreign Minister one of the closest confidants of the President. But on the other hand, non-parliamentary nature of his power-base made the Foreign Minister considerably subservient to the will of the President. Most Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh, however, served their respective Presidents with high degree of competence and loyalty as the principal foreign policy advisers. Instances of Foreign Ministers being changed in routine cabinet reshuffles have not been very common. Durability of Foreign Minister has given over the years a much needed sense of continuity, stability and above all, maturity in the conduct of Bangladesh’s external relations. Since most of the Foreign Ministers did not come from the ranks of ‘career politicians’ they seemed to have worked in an environment of partial isolation from the domestic politics. This led to a kind of ‘technocratic’ view about them which is often detrimental to public knowledge and understanding of the role of Foreign Ministry and Foreign Minister.

Foreign Secretary occupies an important and sensitive position in the Foreign Ministry. Relationships between Foreign Secretary
and Foreign Minister, and Foreign Secretary with the President depend on a whole range of sensitive factors including the personality and efficiency of the individuals concerned. There had been Foreign Secretaries who deal with the President or Chief Executive directly on many issues while others were reduced to the level of routine-functionaries by the Foreign Minister. The choice of Foreign Secretary is, therefore, generally made by the President and Foreign Minister with care so that personal trust and confidence could be reposed.

The process of formulation of policy options and policy decision making is basically initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the basis of reports received from Bangladesh missions abroad and other sources. The Ministry also analyses and interprets all the reports received from various sources. It is in this process that the Ministry does not have the full benefit of a well-equipped archive. The system of institutionalised memory including the system of storage and retrieval of information is rather rudimentary. The Legal Department and the Research Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are yet to develop and be relevant to the total process of Ministry's activities. The practitioners in the Ministry tend to formulate policy papers at times on the basis of inadequate information or inadequate analysis of information. The result is impressionistic approach to the formulation of policy options which may deny the decision makers a more complete analytical policy paper on which they could base sound decisions.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the principal channel of communication between Bangladesh and other countries. For all foreign missions located in Dhaka, Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the primary point of contact. Bangladesh Government communicates either through the foreign missions (59 resident missions) in Dhaka or Bangladesh missions (44 resident missions) abroad or through both at the same time. Visiting dignitaries and officials, and travels of Bangladesh dignitaries and officials abroad also provide yet another direct channel of communication. But the
Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially remains at the hub of all significant two-way communication between domestic system and the external system.

Important Bangladesh delegations include representatives of the Foreign Ministry, and in all significant negotiations Foreign Ministry's representation is ensured. These participations create considerable strains on the limited resources of the Foreign Ministry but puts the Ministry at the centre of all external relations activities. This co-ordinating and harmonising role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also various manifestations and ramifications for the domestic system of Bangladesh.

Projection of Bangladesh abroad is one of the basic functions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But due to resource constraints, the Ministry is not fully equipped for this important role. The wide range of specialised information material that is essential for disseminating objective facts about Bangladesh cannot be produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs both for lack of funds and organisational limitations. The External Publicity division of the Ministry is the organ charged with this responsibility but it has neither the material nor the manpower resources to perform its role effectively. This is one of the obvious weak areas in the organisational set-up of the Foreign Ministry.

In the process of analysis and policy paper formulation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have the benefit of academic research material and independent opinion. There is practically no link between the academic world and the Foreign Ministry. A cross-fertilisation of ideas, and institutionalised exchange of information could not only advance the cause of social pluralism but also materially benefit both the practitioners and theoreticians.

Other Ministries of the government of Bangladesh in varying degrees also contribute to the inputs for external policy making and participate in its implementation. The External Resources Division
(ERD) of the Ministry of Finance is the second most involved organ of the government in the process of external relations. It deals mostly with policy as well as functional aspects of external economic relations. In fact, the ERD over the years has become the focal point of overall external economic relations i.e. trade, aid and finance. Structurally the ERD is somewhat organized like the Foreign Ministry into various functional country-desks and organization-desks. The ERD also plays a central role in financial relations through the Bangladesh Bank. This has been possible because of interchangeability of officials and structural unity within the Ministry of Finance. The processes of external financial and aid relations are structurally coordinated at the level of the Finance Minister.

The process of external trade relations is conducted by the Ministries of Commerce and Industries. Most of the policy issues relating to Bangladesh foreign trade are initiated by the Ministry of Commerce. Both Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Commerce have their representatives in the Embassies as Economic Ministers/Counsellors to conduct external economic relations on their behalf. The fragmented and compartmentalized approach of different ministries towards the conduct of external relations sometimes create difficulties in making a coherent and integrated approach. The process of external economic relations cannot be viewed separately from the process of political relations. On the other hand, skill and competence of the personnel of ERD or ministry of trade and commerce are also valuable for external economic policies. No country can afford to run parallel structural and functional activities which lead to administrative dysfunctions, interservice and inter-ministerial jealousy, and lack of communication and coordination among the ministries. However, it is expected that as the involved ministries begin to develop greater mutuality and reciprocity in terms of recognition each others importance and specialities, some of these difficulties may gradually disappear. The government should take an unified and coherent personnel policy, and effective measures for functional level inter-ministerial coordination in the conduct of external relations.
The Armed Forces and Intelligence Agencies

The armed forces of Bangladesh constitute a very important formal institution of external relations both in peace and otherwise. The very size and competence of the military force of a country basically determine its ability to conduct external relations. When a country finds it difficult or impossible to conduct its external relations through peaceful means, the armed forces are obliged to pursue national interests through other means. A new dimension in the role of the armed forces of Bangladesh in the conduct of external relations began with the induction and lateral entries of military officers in various important positions in the Bangladesh Foreign Service particularly as Ambassadors, Ministers and Counsellors.

Espionage and clandestine activities of external elements/agents constitute a significant external relations problem for a country. Bangladesh seeks to protect herself from such illegal activities with the help of intelligence agencies of which National Security Intelligence (NSI) is the principal civilian institution. There have been occasions when on the finding of NSI and other intelligence agencies the Government of Bangladesh had to discretely request foreign states to quietly withdraw their agents. Bangladesh in keeping with her non-aligned and positive foreign policy does not seek to make any political capital out of such detentions and expulsions. Taking advantage of the institutional weaknesses and inexperience during the early years of Bangladesh, clandestine activities of foreign agents proliferated. It is generally believed that both governmental and non-governmental agencies of foreign countries might have taken advantage of the situation for their own narrow motives, with the security institutions of Bangladesh becoming more experienced and organised, such activities seem to have been brought within manageable limits.

Public Opinion and Institutions of Informal Interactions.

Foreign policy making process is influenced broadly by public opinion or national mood of the people through scores of non-govern-
mental institutions. Public opinion is often given strong emphasis partly because of democratic ideals and aspirations and partly because the contemporary political role of mass opinion. Nevertheless it is necessary to recognize that the impact of public opinion on the conduct of foreign policy is complex and more limited even in developed countries. The degree of democratic freedom, tradition and consciousness of a society largely determine the nature and extent of these informal interactions and growth of such institutions. In Bangladesh to make even a cursory appraisal of the specific ways in which foreign policy is affected, distinction must be drawn between 'articulate opinion'—the overtly expressed view of important individuals, organized groups, and the mass media—and the 'climate of opinion'—the broadly held attitudes of the general public.

Articulate opinion has an activist dimension, and in Bangladesh it has been employed primarily by the opposition, especially through demonstrations, often policy pronouncements in the mass media, and interventions in the Parliament. In Bangladesh, opposition political parties constitute the major institutions outside the government which concern themselves with issues relating to external relations. But their structural weaknesses and lack of experience and specialised competence oblige them to confine their role to those external issues having more direct bearing on domestic political climate. Political parties in Bangladesh by and large do not have adequate organisational capability but on major issues of foreign relations, they demonstrate their views often through public protests, organization of public meetings and newspaper statements.

The Press and Media

Vernacular press of Bangladesh does not generally specialise in news and views on external relations as the mass readers do not seem to demand and perhaps not even expect frequent coverage of foreign relations issues. Some English dailies do regularly cover external

relations related news and views but their effectiveness is again circumscribed by the demand-level of their readership. Some newspapers and periodicals seem to have discernible ideological preferences while others tend to be neutral. Their respective news coverage and headlines reflect those preferences. Despite these limitations press constitutes an important element of the institutions which strive to informally influence external relations of Bangladesh through the creation of public awareness, understanding and opinion on specific issues.

The degree of correlationship between the press coverage, comments and analysis etc. and the external relations-related activities of the governmental institutions is not easy to discern. It is commonly known that these days in many countries the press at times gives out inspired news and views for helping the government in advancing national interests in the matter of external relations. The degree of such co-operation between the press and the government of Bangladesh seems to be limited. Sensitive news involving foreign countries and foreign missions located in Bangladesh are believed to be at times 'killed' at the persuasion of the authorities. As in many other countries, press in Bangladesh seems to be fairly conscious of its responsibilities in the sphere of external relations. Press briefings, press conferences and press handouts are among the important institutionalised forms of communication between the government and the press. The press also uses non-institutionalised methods for gathering news on issues relating to external relations.

Media (Radio and Television) in Bangladesh being fully government-owned and controlled does not have much scope of activities that could influence external relations independently of government policies. Its role as educator of public opinion on important foreign policy issues is commendable. A conscious and well-informed public opinion is always an asset for any government democratic or otherwise. Foreign policy related media programmes are believed to be quite popular though these are few and far between.
Specialised Bodies

The UN Association of Bangladesh (UNAB), Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA) and Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) are among the major Bangladeshi bodies concerning themselves with foreign policy issues. All these institutions seek to create greater awareness and wider publicity on foreign policy issues through dissemination of knowledge, information and views. They organise lectures, seminars and workshops for their members and invitees. Among these, the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), a semi-official organisation of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, is particularly making its mark. The Institute is growing into an effective forum for scholars, policy makers and academicians. BIISS is not only involved in conducting research on major foreign policy and strategic issues, it is also trying to bridge the existing gap between theory and practice through collaborative efforts between academicians and policy makers, planners and professionals.

Groups and Associations

The business community, particularly involved in trade, commerce and finance, is becoming yet another important institution in the conduct of external relations. Bangladesh Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industries has formed joint commission with its counterparts in many countries including Japan, F.R.G. and Belgium etc. The growing global activities of multinationals is also attracting attention of most Third World governments. Therefore, international interactions of private businessmen are acquiring significance and importance requiring governmental attention and even intervention.

Trading interests are among the major determinants of foreign policy these days. Private traders while operating within the formal framework of intergovernmental understandings and agreements have their own way of influencing and at times even determining the
nature of those understandings and agreements. As the private sector business institutions of Bangladesh are developing competence and gain experience, they are increasingly playing their role in influencing the formulation and conduct of external relations.

There are small private special interest groups and organisations seeking to influence foreign policy issues. There are organisations of stranded Pakistanis who are still awaiting repatriation from Bangladesh to Pakistan. Their organisations are neither very vocal nor very effective. Occasionally their existence is visible in the streets of Dhaka.

Friendship associations seek to develop better relations between Bangladesh and involved foreign countries. There is no law regulating their creation or conduct. These friendship associations are voluntary and private. Their sources of finance are supposed to be local but there does not seem to be much public supervision over their activities and sources of fund. It is believed that source of these friendship societies/associations could be used by interested countries for protecting their specific interests. By and large these friendship associations are rendering a satisfactory service in promoting better relation between Bangladesh and other countries. In some countries, Foreign Office finances such organisations and thus exercises a measure of control and influence over their activities. But in Bangladesh there has been no such effort by the Government. As such some of these associations continue to remain in a way susceptible to external influences.

Universities and other higher seats of learning in Bangladesh have often sought to make themselves intellectually relevant and effective in relation to foreign policy questions. University-based organisations of teachers and students with different political persuasions have at times taken open position on certain foreign policy issues.

There is also a growing interest within the academic circle of Bangladesh to discuss and debate foreign policy questions. Many University teachers have now recognised publications and monographs
on foreign policy issues. Universities all over the world are known to provide necessary intellectual basis or rational for foreign policy activities of their governments. As the universities of Bangladesh are coming out of their relative isolation, it is expected that they would become centres of influence in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy of Bangladesh.

**Conclusion**

The conduct of foreign policy for a country like Bangladesh is characterized by infinite complexity. Geographic location, low level of technological development, a dearth of natural resources, economic backwardness, and a heavy dependence on foreign aid, all make it impossible for Bangladesh to pursue an active, assertive and autonomous foreign policy. Bangladesh’s larger and more powerful neighbour, India is another crucial factor affecting Bangladesh’s external relations. In the face of such internal and external constraints, the effectiveness of Bangladesh’s foreign policy depends to a great extent on the stable flow of domestic inputs in the form of greater and effective participation of domestic groups and institutions in the foreign policy process. The successive regimes in Bangladesh, however, have placed disproportionate emphasis on extraneous factors, and foreign policy process has been overwhelmingly dominated by a narrow ‘bureaucratic elite’ sheltered in secrecy. This resulted in extremely poor linkage of broader domestic groups and institutions with foreign policy goals both in terms of their identification and commitment. Although Bangladesh over the years has been successful to an extent in projecting its identity in many international forums, and attracting sympathy and assistance from the international community, these could not be used and directed effectively to its nation building process. There is, therefore, need to broaden the foreign policy process and strengthen the flow of domestic inputs to that process, which in turn would generate a sense of national unity behind national goals and symbols, and act as an effective deterrence against potential external threats.