INTRODUCTION

It is always a difficult proposition to look far into the future and indulge in any sort of prediction. In the context of the changing scenario, in terms of national and international security, and the changing concept of security, how do we go about identifying the security threats confronting us and take measures to offset them? More importantly, how do we accord priority so that undue emphasis is not put on one aspect of security to the exclusion and detriment of the others?

In attempting to address the question of 'Security of Bangladesh in the Twenty-first Century', it would be appropriate to dwell on why and how the concept of comprehensive security has evolved. What is the relevance of such understanding of security to Bangladesh? What are the problems this might pose, and what are the different types of threats that are likely to confront Bangladesh in the next century?

RECONCEPTUALISATION OF SECURITY

In addressing the issue of security of a state one may be forgiven for looking at the issue in an entirely exclusive and narrow manner, as was the case during the period of the Cold War. Such had been the focus of the international academic community, at least since the start of the Cold War, that all other dimensions of security were relegated out of reckoning to the background, and threats projected primarily from external sources were accorded primacy in the security calculus of states. It is only recently that the comprehensive nature of security has captured the attention of academics
and security planners. This has been reflected in the plethora of academic works that have emanated since the fall of the Berlin Wall, particularly from Western security experts.

Security has always been and continues to be the prime concern of individuals, groups and states. "It is scarcely possible to involve the term security without sensing something is dreadfully wrong with the way we live in." In the past, the task of providing security devolved entirely on the state since it was considered to possess the wherewithal to provide the necessary security against threats that were almost always external and physical in nature impinging on the physical wellbeing of the state. On the contextual plane, the issue of people's security was considered an essential element of good governance even many centuries ago as would be evident from the Edict of Emperor Ashoka. In more contemporary period we hear the need for providing common security, i.e. the security of the people, being articulated by western writers. For example, in 1705 the German philosopher Leibniz, 'expressed the need for the state to provide common security to its citizens'. Thus, to suggest that the modern perception of security, drawing away from the state-centric to a multidimensional focus is a recent phenomenon, will not be a correct assertion. Our preoccupation with the Cold War and the threat of a nuclear conflagration so overwhelmed our perception that all other factors were entirely ignored.

The 'Realist' definition of threat has been characterized by its critics as being misleading on grounds that it does not allow for an objective assessment of the threats by excluding other sources of threats to security, thereby defeating the very purpose of the exercise. After all, the purpose of threat assessment is to determine our future course of action to achieve national objectives. An exclusive treatment of threat predicated on military considerations excludes other equally important adjuncts of the issue. This has led academics to emphasize on what has come to be described as 'comprehensive security'.

One's attempt to draw up a comprehensive definition of the term is compounded by the radical changes associated with the transition from the Cold War era to the supposedly benign strategic environment, occurring as a result of the
demise of the Soviet Empire. The uni-dimensional threat, meaning the Soviet threat, was replaced by a multidimensionality of the term wherein all developments affecting our actions and reactions and capable of impinging on our national interest were brought under the rubric of ‘threat’. Re-conceptualization was a result of the recession of physical danger personified by the ‘East’. It merits mention that the Cold War era definition was fostered and pursued diligently by the West. No efforts to make others share this perception were spared and all actions, diplomatic, trade and aid, were motivated by it.5

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union are the reference points of any contemporary security discussion because of the fundamental changes brought about by these two events.6 A positive impact of the cessation of the Cold War has been the transformation of the concept of security. Much has been made of the end of the Cold War, perhaps rightly so, as the datum point that engendered the onset of a favourable strategic environment and accorded internationalism and interdependence a new meaning. The conduct of international relations, which was thus far a manifestation of anti-Soviet posture and a Cold War imperative, is now being driven by the realisation that without cooperative relationship between states at the regional and international levels it would be difficult to address the issue of ‘comprehensive security’ and combat the non-traditional aspects of security. “Our national security today depends on things like balance of payments, economic affairs, foreign assistance....”7 is a statement that seems to come from a Third World politician but is actually a part of the statement made to the US Congress in 1972 by the then US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. While the post-Cold War international relations reflected the awareness of the need to address the non-traditional issues of security, the motive force driving the Cold War era as well as the current policies of the Big Powers remains the same - their economic interest, i.e., command and control of economic resources and access and control of markets.8

Apart from the culture of interdependence, the desire to acquire excellence in the field of technology to enhance economic growth and development has prompted nations to
sideline the conflict issues and embark upon cooperative interactions and discourses. One has to look at China to see the truth of this statement. She has relegated the military to a secondary role, only as a mechanism to backup diplomacy. 

Change in the strategic climate brought about by the end of the Cold War has had very little effect on the strategic scenario in South Asia. This has primarily been due to the fact that the region was only of a peripheral interest to the Big Powers in their power play, notwithstanding the linkages of the individual countries of the region with the major world actors. The region had very little relevance to the world geopolitical developments. Thus, the observations that, “In no region of the world do these events appear to have less impact on the fundamentals of the security situation than in South Asia, whether at the inter-state level or intrastate level,” is borne out by the current security scenario in the region. Notwithstanding the few arrangements in place to attenuate the unstable situations, the regional scenario, so much dependent on Indo-Pakistan relationship, will continue to remain volatile. Therefore, in spite of the honest intentions of all concerned and in spite of the pious hope that we ought to look at the non-traditional threats, shifting of focus may be made more difficult to achieve due to the negative developments in the region. Objective realities demand that we come out of the realist discourse but are unable to do so because of our mind set.

PROBLEMS AS A CONSEQUENCE OF REDEFINITION

Our reorientation towards the concept of security has suggested a new approach to security planning that is no longer based on military threat. This has thrown up a new challenge. Because, during the Cold War threats were tangible and conflict prediction and prediction of results from it were possible through objective analysis. Because of the tangibility of threat, the scope of its effect and the countervailing measures could be determined. Under the new dispensation, threat assessment has become rather difficult.

Another problem that security planners would have to contend with is what some scholars have described as 'broadening the concept' of security. Bringing too many
factors into consideration under the rubric of security or threat may hamper our efforts in determining priorities for the national agenda. Another analyst states thus, “An easy mistake to make is to regard all threats to human well-being as threats to security. By taking such a route it is possible to become hopelessly confused, as anything and everything ‘bad’ becomes a ‘security concern’.”

Yet another problem for the planners is the question of what is described by scholars as the ‘component-whole’ relationship. “It is conventionally and conveniently assumed that security of the whole or the system would ensure the security of the components”,13 which is countered by the argument that unless the constituent part is secure the whole cannot be secure either. Individual problems by accretion may assume the proportion of a national problem, if not addressed in time.

If the question of ‘component-whole’ relationship seems vexing, interfacing national and international security is no less problematic. With the growing need for interdependence there is a concomitant need for concerted efforts to address threats and vulnerabilities. One security analyst highlights this when he states, “The global community has become too small... and the destinies of its members too intertwined for any nation to think in those narrow traditional terms. The United States has learned there is very little it can accomplish by itself even about its own international problems...”14 The moot point that emerges is how much we are able or willing to compromise on our security/national interest at the regional or international level in order to attain regional or international security. Will it mean discarding our autonomy for the sake of interdependence? Will it mean ceding our security to some supranational authority? These are perhaps matters for expert deliberations.

**LIKELY THREATS**

If “security means protecting the people’s life from various types of threats”15, what are the likely threats that we might have to encounter in the foreseeable future? Keeping in mind the pitfalls of enlarging the foot prints of our security
discourse, five major areas that might pose a threat to our national interest, if not given due importance, may be identified. Barry Buzan has suggested that there are primarily five major sources of threat to our national interests, namely, military, political, economic, social and environmental. This is not in any ascending order of importance. However, let us consider the issue of environment first.

Experts are divided in their opinion regarding the relevance of environment to our security. While one security expert states, “Not all analysts are convinced that there are identifiable links between environment and war or that environmental degradation can lead to serious conflict. Indeed the whole notion of environmental security is contested”.16 Another security analyst says that, “Ultimately states, peoples, and economies cannot be secure unless the ecosystem is secure”.17 It is this conflicting perception that should generate inquiry and discussion on this issue, which, I believe, has far-reaching consequences for our national interest and national security. Given the fact that not all nations are equally resource-endowed and given the fact that some of these resources are common and straddle international boundaries, “Conflicts are likely to increase as ... resources become scarcer and competition for them increases.”18 I also feel that scarcity of resources has the potential of intrastate conflict with spillover effects. It is important that we also develop national capacity to deal with this issue.

The link between security and economic development is illustrated by Robert McNamara, “Security means development. Security is no military hardware, though it includes it, security is not military force, though it may involve it, security is not traditional military activity, though it may encompass it. Security is development and without development there can be no security”.19 We hardly need reminding that economic development, politics and security are mutually inclusive and influence the social dimension.

Our economic development is linked with the modern trend of globalisation. It is going to occupy the unmitigated attention of our foreign policy planners as has been suggested by some analysts. I would like to pose the same question that is posed by many, that is, whether globalisation is a source of
growth and prosperity or is it a threat to social stability and natural environment? Whether there is a need for anxiety over the consequences of liberalisation, both in trade & commerce and agriculture? Or, is globalisation no more than a buzzword and its impact greatly exaggerated?²⁰

Needless to say that an economically strong country is better placed to address the many threats it is confronted with, military and non-military, external and internal. Its economic strength accords it the flexibility and the manoeuvrability it requires in the age of globalisation and international financing institutions in the running of our economy and the process of not only implementing our development plans but also their formulation. Without economic development and distributive justice, the non-egalitarian state of our society will be a cause for implosion from within that no force can contain, much less cure. "The atom bomb on Hiroshima killed 180,000 people; every three days a silent Hiroshima occurs in childhood deaths. Globally, children are dying somewhere near the rate of 270,000 per week, 14 million a year."²¹ Whether or not that impacts on our security is for you to judge. I would also like to think, in this context, that poverty is the major threat to security of the developing societies. President Gayoom of the Maldives has hit the nail on the head with his comment, "It will never be enough, or indeed good enough, for the small states to be just well defended bastions of poverty."²²

The socio-political aspect of security, which is again intricately linked to economy, can hardly be over-emphasised. In fact, most analysts cite this factor as the single most important source of threat to a country’s stability. Political instability, nexus of politics and violence, proliferation of small arms, etc. are all recipes for disaster and, unless addressed, will impact on our security adversely.

Having said that, I believe that discounting the possibility of conventional security threats would be misleading. Conflict is the result of clash of interest that may be due to any number of reasons. We must also recognise the fact that threat may occur from within as well as from outside. Threats from outside may not necessarily emanate from one’s neighbours only. We must be prepared to deter the prospect of physical security threat whatever be the source. Hence, to
dilute the need for addressing our legitimate defence needs, arising out of geopolitical developments around us on grounds of internal privations, is at best fallacious and at worst self-defeating. While one notices in strategic literature the overwhelming arguments about the opportunity cost of military expenditure in Bangladesh, one does not notice very much written on the cost benefit issue of this matter. Return from defence expenditure is unfortunately not tangible. We also tend to overlook the fact that defence is a non-substitutable product with other commodities/services of the economy. We are thus faced with the Defence-Development dichotomy. I do not see these two aspects as conflicting. With proper planning the perceived burden can be removed.

CONCLUSION

The concept of security has gone beyond the pale of traditional perception. We are required to place greater reliance on "...The right balance between diplomacy, military power, techno-economic capabilities, interdependent linkages and participation in global institutional mechanism in order to enhance security." 23

Accepting the validity and relevance of comprehensive security, as has been propounded by the Japanese who were the first to adopt this concept as an element of state philosophy, applicable to us, it then behooves us to make objective assessment to determine our security strategy which we must to make optimum use of our resources. Our policy should bear the hallmarks of objectivity and has "to be related to some basic principle of national interest that transcended any particular Administration and would therefore be maintained." 24

While one would not accept a situation that, according to President Gayoom, many of the Third World countries are seen to endure, equally unwelcome is a situation where even a lot more developed country cannot deter a big neighbour’s irredentist aspiration. In 1990, Kuwait had all the attributes of a developed nation. But was she secure? No, she was not, and perhaps she did not get her priorities right.
Endnotes


18. Ibid.


