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## **BANGLADESH-US RELATIONS AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: INFLUENCE OF SYSTEMIC AND SUB-SYSTEMIC FACTORS AND WAY FORWARD**

### **Abstract**

Scholarly works on Bangladesh-US relations largely tend to be viewed from an asymmetric lens. Such a perspective fails to bring a nuanced understanding of a bilateral relationship that has evolved and been complicated by the emergence of an over-encompassing geopolitical construct such as the Indo-Pacific. Given China's rise and the creation of small power constellations, it has been increasingly difficult to sustain the liberal order that the US built in the post-WWII phase and consolidated following the end of the Cold War. Against this backdrop, the article analyses the evolving dynamics of Bangladesh-US relations within the context of the broader geopolitical landscape, particularly focusing on the Indo-Pacific region. It scrutinises systemic and sub-systemic factors influencing these relations, delving into Bangladesh's strategic manoeuvring amid its associations with its key partners and neighbours such as China and India. Examining key policy documents, the article elucidates the nuanced considerations shaping Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Furthermore, it explores Bangladesh's attempts to navigate great power competition, proposing potential pathways forward. The article advocates for Bangladesh's expanded engagement with global actors, citing BRICS and RCEP as viable avenues. It concludes by emphasising the imperative for Bangladesh to navigate these geopolitical shifts to realise its developmental aspirations and secure strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, strategic autonomy, multipolarity, friendshoring, BRI, RCEP, BRICS

### **1. Introduction**

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world has witnessed major global political shifts. The unipolar world order established by the United States (US) and its Western allies is in flux and increasingly being challenged by multipolar power

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constellations. Subsequently, China's re-emergence as the global manufacturing hub, along with Southeast Asia's remarkable turnaround, resulted in a gradual shift of wealth from the West towards the East. Notwithstanding the global financial crisis of 2008, the resurgence of China and India as major powers of the Indo-Pacific region meant the geostrategic gravity has shifted towards Asia. These changing dynamics have extensive consequences for the future course of human history as well as the international order. Such a remarkable transition has a significant bearing on Bangladesh's foreign relations, which gained its independence merely five decades ago and started to outperform many of its regional neighbours in terms of many economic and human development indicators. Given the contributions of the US-led Western development partners on the one hand and China's role in its infrastructural development on the other, it is particularly interesting to study Bangladesh's response to the major political and strategic shifts that are taking place at the global, regional and state levels and vice versa. Most of the academic literature written on Bangladesh's foreign policy has India at its centre and understandably so. India is the biggest neighbour that surrounds Bangladesh from three sides and shares the fifth-longest land boundaries of more than four thousand kilometres.<sup>1</sup> The political, historical, civilisational, cultural and economic connections between the countries demand such scholarly attention. In most academic analyses, the geographic, demographic, economic and power disparity between the two nations brings the "overwhelming power or strategic asymmetry" to the forefront.<sup>2</sup> Such a lens has its utility to understand a state's foreign policy behaviour *vis-à-vis* its largest neighbour or a great power of the system. However, South Asia became strategically more important due to China's growing influence, India's geographic location, and its place as a core partner in Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Therefore, despite

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, "Soft Sovereignty, Rising Powers, and Subnational Foreign Policy-Making: The Case of India," *Globalizations* 12, no. 5 (2015): 728–743, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2014.1001596>.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Razaul Karim, "Strategy of Small States Toward Regional Powers: A Case of Bangladesh," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* (November 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/09735984231204410>; Abu Sufian, "Geopolitics of the NRC-CAA in Assam: Impact on Bangladesh–India Relations," *Asian Ethnicity* 23, no. 3 (2022): 556–586; Saleh Shahriar, Lu Qian and Sokvibol Kea, "Anatomy of human rights violations at the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8, no.4 (2020): 553–578; Md. Sohel Rana, "Transformation of Indo-Bangladesh Relations: From Insecurity to Cooperation in Northeast India," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no.6 (2018): 559–577, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1559976>; Syed Muazzem Ali, "The Current and Future State of India–Bangladesh Relations," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no.5 (2018): 529–537, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1523079>; Harsh Vardhan Shringla, "India–Bangladesh Relations: An Indian Perspective," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 5 (2018): 524–528, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1523080>; Sreeradha Datta, "Indo-Bangladesh Relations: An overview of limitations and constraints," *Strategic Analysis* 26, no. 3 (2002): 427–440, [10.1080/09700160208450057](https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160208450057); V. K. Vinayaraj, "India as a Threat: Bangladeshi Perceptions," *South Asian Survey* 16, no.1 (2009): 101–118, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152310801600107>.

the existing power asymmetry, smaller nations of South Asia like Bangladesh are receiving heightened attention. As competition for influence grows among the great and middle powers, it not only renders better opportunities and increases relative bargaining powers but challenges as well.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it will be interesting to go beyond the asymmetric lens since in the last decade, Bangladesh's foreign relations with the US have evolved and been impacted by a few significant transitions. Hence, this relationship cannot be properly understood or explained merely by studying the "asymmetric bilateral relationship" discourse.

Rather, clarity regarding the major systemic and sub-systemic level changes or watershed moments and how those affected the Bangladesh-US relationship is crucial to understand. This paper argues that the year 2013 marks such a watershed moment, which signals Beijing's ambition and intent to safeguard and extend its energy supply and trade routes, as it introduced a grand infrastructure and connectivity project named "One Belt One Road (OBOR)". Now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it includes the "21<sup>st</sup>-century Maritime Silk Road" and "Silk Road Economic Belt", which aims to connect Europe through infrastructure/port development in littoral countries along the coastlines as well as reconnect Southeast Asia with Africa by reviving the ancient Silk Road.

Furthermore, given Beijing's tension with its Southeast Asian neighbours in the South China Sea, such a grand connectivity project triggered alarm among the US policymakers and its allies.<sup>4</sup> However, at the systemic level, the Obama administration was already responding to the challenges they perceived from China's rise, which was manifested in their narrative building by the US policymakers.<sup>5</sup> This threat perception was translated into Obama's "Rebalance Asia" or "Pivot to Asia" policy, which was the prelude to the US Indo-Pacific vision. Although Washington started to rebalance towards Asia since the Obama administration, the "Indo-Pacific" construct that epitomises the US response to China's BRI, received traction in its official vernaculars under the Trump administration as Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). However, Japan and Australia were the first among nations to put Indo-Pacific in their official vernaculars. Despite such an elaborate ideational exercise,

<sup>3</sup> Shahab Enam Khan, "The Emerging Regional Power Dilemma in the Indo-Pacific Region: Bangladesh and Sri Lankan Perspectives," *Journal of Defence & Policy Analysis* 01, no. 01 (December 2021), <https://fdss.kdu.ac.lk/jdpa/v1i1.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Saeed, "From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-US Strategic Competition," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 03, no. 04 (2017): 499–512, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740017500324>.

<sup>5</sup> Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

ambiguity regarding the US' position and commitment remained among the allies. To reduce such confusion, the National Security Strategy of 2017, the National Defense Strategy of 2018, the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report of 2019 and most recently, under the Biden administration, the latest version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy was published in 2022. China's perception of the US-led Indo-Pacific construct is straightforward. At a minimum, the US wants to dilute China's status as the great power in the region or, worse, the containment of China.

As a construct, the "Indo-Pacific" is a vast geographic and maritime space with flexible boundaries, which former Japanese Prime Minister Abe famously described as a "confluence of two oceans". With the US laying out its vision for a 'free and open Indo-Pacific', the term has gained a global resonance. As a concept, "Indo-Pacific" is used by many countries, each emphasising both overlapping and different packages of values and interests. These divergences and convergences have been discussed in the following section to conceptualise the construct, where both the US and Bangladesh's respective positions have been analysed.

Notwithstanding their overlaps and differences, major global powers have scrambled towards the Indo-Pacific region to align and realign their strategic posture with each other. Initiatives such as the Asian Rebalancing Strategy, BRI, FOIP, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B), and more recently, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), AUKUS (i.e., a trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific region between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US) started to occur centring Indo-Pacific region to address new realities of traditional and non-traditional security threats, norms and alliance building, infrastructure and economic development as well as free and open sea line of communication in this region.<sup>6</sup> Given India's rise as Washington's crucial partner and Beijing's proximity to South Asia, this region is increasingly becoming a hotbed for strategic competition within the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, South Asian nations join their Southeast Asian neighbours in strategising the costs and benefits of this new concept and strategy. Due to the multinational nature of the endeavour, there are various strategies at work, with some seeking to engage in or avoid balance of power politics.

Bangladesh, being in the middle of South and Southeast Asia, has an imperative for exploring and understanding all the prevalent discourses regarding the

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<sup>6</sup> Seth Schindler, Jessica DiCarlo, and Dinesh Paudel, "The New Cold War and the Rise of the 21st-Century Infrastructure State," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47, no. 2 (February 2021): 331–346, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12480>.

capricious future resulting from the great power competition for dominance in this region. In that connection, Bangladesh-US bilateral relations have become critical for Dhaka to safeguard its strategic autonomy in foreign policy decision-making and in navigating the troubled waters of the Indo-Pacific. In the coming years, this bilateral relationship will have a significant bearing on its relations with other important actors in the region and beyond (i.e., India, Japan, China, Russia, and the European Union (EU)). As competition grows among regional and global actors in the Indo-Pacific, it will be increasingly difficult for Bangladesh to maintain equidistance and strategic autonomy.

Given this backdrop, this paper will argue that the “Indo-Pacific” has emerged as a geopolitical construct within which systemic factors or conditions have a critical impact on Bangladesh’s relationship with the US. On the other hand, at the sub-systemic level, state, organisation, region and individuals influence this bilateral relationship through the interplay among them. Therefore, this paper tried to find the answer to the questions: what are the systemic and sub-systemic factors that have influenced Bangladesh-US relations for the last decade, and how do they influence this bilateral relationship in the context of the Indo-Pacific? Before finding the answers to these questions in Sections 3 and 4; the following section (Section 2) looked at the existing literature on the Bangladesh-US bilateral relationship and conceptualised levels of analysis as this paper’s analytical framework. Henceforth, the broad objective is to understand and analyse how systemic and sub-systemic factors influence Bangladesh-US bilateral relations at systemic and sub-systemic levels (i.e. state, organisation, region and individual). Based on the answers to these questions, Section 5 will explore the way forward for Bangladeshi policymakers. This research is qualitative in nature, and data collection has been done from primary and secondary sources. Primary data has been collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with former and current diplomats, researchers and government agencies in Bangladesh and the US. Meanwhile, government-published documents, speeches, newspaper reports, research reports, technical reports, and academic works published in journals and books have been consulted as secondary sources.

## **2. Conceptualising Bangladesh-US Relations in the Context of the Indo-Pacific: The Need for Level of Analysis**

In a general sense, the Indo-Pacific represents the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the countries around it. However, such a binary understanding might be misleading as not all countries accept the region in its entirety and have their

own geographical construct. Moreover, countries have changed their construction regarding the region during their policy development phase to realign their policies based on perceived political and strategic realities.<sup>7</sup> For example, during the ideational phase under the Trump administration, the US itself started with a geographic construct that described the Indo-Pacific from the “west coast of India to the western shores of the United States”.<sup>8</sup> Such geographic conceptualisation did not converge with some of the key US allies and partners in the region. Whereas Japan (FOIP), France (Indo-Pacific Strategy) and India (Security and Growth for All in the Region—SAGAR) embraced the entire Indian Ocean stretching up to Africa’s continental coastline, Washington decided to leave out the entire Western Indian Ocean from their definition of the Indo-Pacific. In 2018, the US changed its US Pacific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command, which strengthened India’s importance in framing Washington’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the Biden administration adopted the entire Indian Ocean within their revised Indo-Pacific Strategy Report as they gave a new definition by “stretching from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean”.<sup>10</sup> However, the strategy enlarged the geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific, but it does not mention the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, or the African coastline. Despite the significance of the important maritime trade routes along the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean, they remain grouped and ambiguous in one broad term: “the Indian Ocean”.

Such ambiguity is not unique among countries that do not want to define a geographic region that might lead to policy dilemmas. The dilemmas may arise from a range of issues, from being burdened with unwanted responsibilities to provide security and public goods to joining a coalition of states that may restrict policy-manoeuvring space. When Bangladesh unveiled its Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) in

<sup>7</sup> David Scott, “The ‘Indo-Pacific’— New Regional Formulations and New Maritime Frameworks for US-India Strategic Convergence,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 19, no. 2 (November 2012): 85–109, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13439006.2012.738115>; Yoshinobu Yamamoto, “*Josyou Indo taiheiyou gainen wo megutte* [Introduction to On the Indo-Pacific concept],” *Ajia (tokuni minami shina kai indo-you) ni okeru anzen hoshou chitsujo* [Research Report on Security Order in Asia (especially in South China Sea and Indian Ocean)], Japan Institute of International Affairs (March 2013): 5–23, [http://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/research/H24\\_Asia\\_Security/introduction.pdf](http://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/research/H24_Asia_Security/introduction.pdf); Rory Medcalf, “The Indo-Pacific: What’s in a Name?” *The American Interest* 09, no. 2 (October 2013), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/10/10/the-indo-pacific-whats-in-a-name/>; Kazutoshi Tamari, “*Indo taiheiyou gainen no fukyuu katei* [The diffusion of the concept “Indo-Pacific”],” *Kokusai Anzen Hoshou [The Journal of International Security]* 43, no. 1 (June 2015): 68–86.

<sup>8</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017).

<sup>9</sup> US Indo-Pacific Command, “US Indo-Pacific Command Holds Change of Command Ceremony,” May 30, 2018, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1535776/us-indo-pacific-command-holds-change-of-command-ceremony/>.

<sup>10</sup> The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2022).

2023, it refrained from drawing any geographical boundary for the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>11</sup> Rather, it described itself as “...a littoral state of the Bay of Bengal,” which signifies not only the preferred identity but the prioritised geographic zone within the vast Indo-Pacific as well. Given the divergence between the two documents regarding geography and the similarity within the host of issues that these two documents deal with, this article takes the Indo-Pacific region in its entirety, deals it as a geopolitical construct. It discusses issues that have had a profound impact on the political, security, economic, and normative aspects of bilateral relations in the context of the Indo-Pacific.

However, it will be interesting to see how frequently and in what ways the Indo-Pacific was used as a context to explore Bangladesh-US bilateral relations within the existing literature on Bangladesh’s foreign policy. Based on the thematic content, a cursory reading of published scholarly works on the Bangladesh-US relationship will bring out literature that can be divided largely into two groups. The first group represents academic works written solely on this bilateral relationship. The second group represents published studies that do not directly address the bilateral relationship but some fragments of it. However, a more profound reading has shown that many of these scholarly works tried to analyse the relationship based on either the regime in power i.e., Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jatiya Party (JP), Nixon, Bush Jr, Clinton, Obama, Trump, and so forth, or decades (the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and so on). Consequently, such periodic or regime-based analysis provides a limited understanding of the events that took place at the systemic level (Cold War, Unipolar World Order, Multipolar World Order) and moulded the relationship between the two countries over more than five decades. Consequently, it thwarts any possibility of a theory-building opportunity based on the evidence collected and renders little explanatory value to a scholarly work. To address this problem, this section has operationalised the level of analysis to conceptualise the existing body of literature as well as the insights received from the KIIs and thereby identified the major trends, patterns, or factors (both at the systemic and sub-systemic levels) that influence Bangladesh-US bilateral relations.

In the study of International Relations, David Singer first studied the level of analysis, where he took two levels, i.e., the nation-state level and the systemic level.<sup>12</sup> The system level of analysis is a holistic approach to understand the inner workings

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, “Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh,” Press Release, April 24, 2023, [https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press\\_release/d8d7189a-7695-4ff5-9e2b-903fe0070ec9](https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press_release/d8d7189a-7695-4ff5-9e2b-903fe0070ec9).

<sup>12</sup> J. David Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (1961): 77–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009557>.

of the international system, the decision-making processes of the powerful actors/states, and the consequences of these decisions on the system. However, the system cannot be explained based on the mere systemic level of analysis, which has some danger of leaving out relatively less powerful actors whose actions have a significant impact on the international structure. Therefore, along with nation-state, subsequent scholarly works established other dimensions as part of the sub-systemic level, i.e., individual, region, and organisation. Based on the systemic and sub-systemic levels, synthesis of the existing body of literature on Bangladesh-US relations can be done in three different phases described below.

## 2.1 *1971–1990 Cold War: Politics of Recognition, Foreign Aid and Non-alignment*

Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 on the back of the decolonisation wave when the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the US was in full swing. Hence, much of the literature published in the early and late 1970s concentrated on the great power rivalry centring on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. They also show the paradox of the inner workings of Washington DC when the Nixon administration continued support for Pakistani military rulers by going against the popular American public opinion and significant opposition from the US Congress. However, in the eight months of the war, the tide started to shift somewhat when the US State Department cancelled US\$3 million worth of military supplies for the Pakistanis.<sup>13</sup> Following the war, reconstruction of the country and feeding millions of people became the national priority and guided its foreign policy *vis-à-vis* great powers. In 1974, this vulnerability on food as aid was used as a form of a “political sanction” by the US to exert pressure in moulding Bangladesh’s policy related to “public distribution of food, exchange rate policy and subsidies to the farm sector” in the Cold War setting.<sup>14</sup> Another difficult proposition Bangladesh faced in its early years was to gain recognition from the international community and great powers. Later on, this experience had a profound impact on its decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and maintain largely a neutral foreign policy of equidistance during the Cold War.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1980s, academic works started to focus more on the consolidation of relations with the US in exchange for development aid and support for industrialisation.

<sup>13</sup> W. Norman Brown, *The United States and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972): 222–223.

<sup>14</sup> Rehman Sobhan, “Politics of Food and Famine in Bangladesh,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, no. 48 (December 1979): 1973–1980.

<sup>15</sup> M S Ranjan, “Bangladesh and After,” *Pacific Affairs* 45, no. 2 (1972): 191, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2755550>.



Moreover, at the systemic level, the intent was to use a stronger US presence to offset the existing regional power balance in the Indian Ocean, while at the sub-systemic level, it was seeking legitimacy and regime security for the military regime in power.<sup>16</sup> The restoration of democracy in Bangladesh and the end of the Cold War coincided and had a significant impact on the Bangladesh-US relationship to mature under a liberal world order.

## 2.2 *1991–2010: Reaping the Reward of Neoliberalism and Unipolar Moment of the US*

The Cold War ended with leaving the US triumphant and, more importantly, making democracy and neoliberal values such as market liberalisation, privatisation and industry deregulation—the holy grails of unipolar world order. Along with the World Trade Organization (WTO), Bretton Woods organisations and other international donors and development agencies were instrumental in implementing the neoliberal order as the singular acceptable norm for the global system. Globalisation became a force that was facilitated through the open market economy and finances, goods and services started to transcend national boundaries in search of newer markets. Multinational Corporations (MNCs) spearheaded this endeavour to find raw materials and cheap labour in the developing countries.

With developing countries like China, South Korea and other Southeast countries climbing up the global value and production chain ladder and as Bangladesh opened up its economy for global finances Foreign Direct Investment (FDIs), started to flow through to the country, specifically to the Readymade garments (RMG) sector. The restoration of democracy certainly helped to build a better business environment. While in 1985, the share of RMG in Bangladesh’s total exports was only 12.44 per cent, by 1990, it had increased to 40.96 per cent, and within another eight years, by 1998, it was a staggering 73 per cent.<sup>17</sup> Most importantly, in this decade, the EU and the US became the two single best markets for Bangladesh’s RMG export. Such a growing dependence in the 1990s was not perceived as a vulnerability. Rather, the primary objective was to make this booming sector sustainable by taking the opportunity that comes with the restoration of democracy in the country and the existing liberal order in the global system.

<sup>16</sup> M. A. Aziz, “Bangladesh in United States Foreign Policy,” *Asian Affairs* 9, no. 4 (1982): 218–227, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30172053>; Craig Baxter, “Bangladesh,” *The Washington Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1982): 189–193; Iftekhhar A. Chowdhury, “Strategy of a small power in a subsystem: Bangladesh’s external relations,” *Australian Outlook* 34, no. 1 (1980): 85–98.

<sup>17</sup> C. A. F. Dowlah, “The Future of the Readymade Clothing Industry of Bangladesh in the Post-Uruguay Round World,” *The World Economy* 22, no. 7 (1999): 935.

Another facet of Bangladesh-US relations received momentum in the aftermath of the devastating Cyclone Marina of 1991, which is in the form of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), and this has become an important part of the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy since the Trump administration. To conduct a multilateral HADR operation named "Operation Sea Angel", Washington sent marines and sailors stationed at Okinawa and troops who were deployed in the Gulf.<sup>18</sup> As early as the conceptualisation phase of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US identified four major areas of maritime security, which include humanitarian aid, disaster control, enhancing peacekeeping capacities, cracking down on transnational crime, and increasing the US investment in coastal nations.<sup>19</sup> This provides evidence that by 2018, HADR was already becoming an integral part of the US's toolkit to engage littoral nations of the Indo-Pacific region. A multilateral relief operation of such magnitude paved the way for developing a standard framework for HADR operations in this region. Consequently, forces in this region often include HADR as part of their joint exercise.

### **2.3     *2011–2023: Navigating the Brewing Geopolitical Competition of the Indo-Pacific***

At least until the early part of the 2010s, cooperation in countering violent extremism was an important strand of Washington's relationship with Dhaka. In 2013, Bangladesh signed a Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative, which entails formally imparting the US expertise to assist Dhaka in its efforts to comply with international counterterrorism standards. Under the aegis of this framework, law enforcement agencies of Bangladesh participated in the US-led counter-terrorism programmes and training. In a similar vein, members of Bangladesh's judicial and law enforcement institutions received training from the US State Department.<sup>20</sup> For the US, Bangladesh's social, economic and political stability is imperative to counter violent extremism. Stability not only provides a better business climate to attract FDI, it boosts economic development as well. On the other hand, political stability based on democracy deters radicalisation in society. Following the 9/11 terror attack and subsequent US "war on terror", it was imperative for Washington to have a democratic, stable and secure Bangladesh as a partner. Given the moderate nature of

<sup>18</sup> Thomas G. Weiss and Kurt M. Campbell, "Military humanitarianism," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 33, no.5 (1991): 451.

<sup>19</sup> US Department of State, "US Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region," Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesperson, August 04, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific-region/>.

<sup>20</sup> Shahab Enam Khan, "Bangladesh: The Changing Dynamics of Violent Extremism and the Response of the State," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 1 (2017): 191–217, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1266127>.

the Muslim-majority society in Bangladesh, it received significant importance from Washington as a model country in South Asia for religious tolerance.<sup>21</sup> Under the Obama administration, the US continued to press for Bangladesh's engagement with various counter-terrorism platforms.

Hence, in relation to Washington's emphasis on counterterrorism efforts, two important traits could be discerned from US foreign policy during the early 2010s. Firstly, Washington's emphasis on establishing good governance, the rule of law and strengthening democratic institutions in Bangladesh was visible. This includes the Election Commission, Human Rights Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission and the Judiciary, which was reflected in discussions during several high-level visits by the US policymakers to Dhaka. Following the outbreaks of fire in a few garment factories and the Rana Plaza tragedy, citing the need to improve working conditions for the RMG workers, the US suspended the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) facility for Bangladesh.<sup>22</sup> Although the GSP facility covered none of the key export items, it continues to feature at all levels of Bangladesh-US diplomatic dialogue.

Secondly, preference was given to humanitarian assistance programmes, which would supposedly bolster economic development, eradicate poverty, and thus prevent Bangladesh from going towards "terrorism" by providing stability.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, cooperation between the law enforcement agencies between the two countries started to flourish, resulting in the promulgation of the Money Laundering Prevention Act (MLPA), the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), the Human Trafficking Deterrence Suppression Act 2012 and eventually paved the way for greater security cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, due to the growing geostrategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, the US's competition with China in Bangladesh and the broader South Asian region has been highlighted by a significant number of academic works. One such scholarly project focused on Chinese influence in four South Asian countries *vis-à-vis* the US's

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey P. Gottlieb, "The China-Bangladesh Relation and Its Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy," *NDC Journal* 17, no. 1 (June, 2018): 155–173, <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/231>.

<sup>22</sup> Imtiaz Hussain, *South Asia in Global Power Rivalry Inside-out Appraisals from Bangladesh* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 158.

<sup>23</sup> Haroon A. Khan, "Pragmatic Liberalism and President Obama," *SAGE Open* 4, no. 2 (January 2014): 4–6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014541130>.

<sup>24</sup> Monzima Haque and Aynul Islam, "Bangladesh-United States Relations in the Post-September 11 Era: Foundations for a New Framework," *Social Science Review* 31, no. 01 (2014): 11–13.

role in the region, which recommended more robust US engagement.<sup>25</sup> Since small states such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives cannot overtly take sides, hence, this engagement should not come at the cost of relations with China.

However, the first QUAD Summit in 2021 can be viewed as a departure point, where the Biden administration expressed overt interest in meaningful engagement with the South Asian region.<sup>26</sup> The group decided to work on softer issues such as climate, emerging technologies and vaccines, where China has already made considerable ground in this region. Moreover, in some instances, informal US engagement through private and nongovernmental entities was preferred over government-to-government (G2G) to make it look less apprehensive to Beijing.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, there is another argument that, in some cases, small South Asian countries have played China and India off each other to attain the best possible financial arrangement for their development projects.<sup>28</sup>

To evade any military or strategic alliance and the broader great power competition, Bangladesh concentrated on a brand of foreign policy that has been termed as “independent, proactive and balanced”. Under the incumbent AL government, Dhaka largely depended on a “development first” approach.<sup>29</sup> There might be discourses regarding the actual level of “autonomy”, that Bangladesh could leverage against great powers. However, compared to many of its South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh has done well to hedge among major powers in this region actively. Bangladesh-US bilateral relationship has been framed by one academic work based on “trade, investment, and development assistance; security and defence collaboration; political and diplomatic relations; and energy and technological cooperation”.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it also argued that the signing of the Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (TICFA) in 2013 has rendered robustness to the trade relations between these two countries.

<sup>25</sup> Deep Pal, “China’s Influence in South Asia Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (October 2021): 20–52.

<sup>26</sup> The White House, “Fact Sheet: Quad Summit,” Statements and Releases, March 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/fact-sheet-quad-summit/>.

<sup>27</sup> Pal, “China’s Influence in South Asia,” 48–51.

<sup>28</sup> Darren J. Lim and Rohan Mukherjee, “Hedging in South Asia: Balancing Economic and Security Interests amid Sino-Indian Competition,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 493–522, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcz006>; Zhen Han and T V Paul, “China’s Rise and Balance of Power Politics,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13, no. 1 (2020): 18–21, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz018>.

<sup>29</sup> Sheikh Shams Morsalin, “From Cold War to ‘New Cold War’: Bangladesh Foreign Policy Vis-à-Vis the United States and Russia,” *The Journal of Bangladesh and Global Affairs* 01, no. 01 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.55875/jbga.bd.may22.008>.

<sup>30</sup> Morsalin, “From Cold War.”

Throughout the last decade, Bangladesh-US relations have started to move on towards issues that have regional and global implications. It was not merely confined to routine bilateralisms such as export and import, development assistance, or FDIs. As the US-led liberal world order started to face certain questions and challenges both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, the dimension of the relationship has started to change as well. The following two sections, Sections 3 and 4, will discuss how the unipolar world order is gradually being replaced by a multipolar one and what that means for Bangladesh-US relations at the systemic and sub-systemic levels.

### **3. Systemic Factors: Multipolarity and Economic Architecture in Flux**

With the end of the Cold War, a US-led liberal order was established that championed free trade, flight of capital from the East towards the West and democracy as the popular and often only acceptable form of the political system. However, within this unipolar world order, China's ascent was not only tolerated but facilitated. A steady flow of global finances and technology was transferred to China and Southeast Asia to turn this region into an engine and global hub of production for the world economy. There was a popular belief among the US policymakers, shared by most of its Western allies that connecting China to the world economy by transferring global finances and technology transfer would bring fundamental changes to its political system, which would pave the way for Beijing to fit into the US-led liberal order.

To the surprise of the West, that did not happen. Rather, the Western economies were reeling from the world recession of 2008 and witnessing the rise of populism across Europe as a backlash of globalisation. During the same period, the centre of gravity of the world economy shifted from the Atlantic towards the Indo-Pacific, which is home to three of the five largest economies and accounts for 63 per cent of the world's Gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>31</sup> China utilised the liberal global order, the relative peace in the Indo-Pacific and the capitalist mode of production to fuel its ascent. By 2012, when Xi Jinping took over, China was already the second-largest economy in the world. In 2013, when China launched BRI, it was not only a connectivity project but also for the US—a plan for advancing Chinese influence in the region and beyond. However, for many middle-income and lower-income countries, this grand connectivity project came as an alternative funding source for their infrastructural development and getting plugged into the global production chain

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<sup>31</sup> Price water house Coopers (PwC), "The World in 2050," February 2017, [https:// www.pwc.com/gx/en/research-insights/economy/the-world-in-2050.html](https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/research-insights/economy/the-world-in-2050.html).

to enhance their economic development.<sup>32</sup> Importantly, these infrastructure finances do not come with the sort of conditionalities that are associated with Bretton Woods organisations. This was a fundamental divergence from the US-led liberal order and challenged the notion that only strict adherence to Western liberal values would enable South Asian countries to secure development finances. Against this backdrop, Bangladesh signed BRI in 2016, and under the BRI umbrella in the last decade, China has provided US\$4.45 billion, and the majority of its fund went to the development of the transport and energy sector along with connectivity, digitisation, renewables, and human resource development projects. It is estimated that Bangladesh will need an infrastructural investment of 1.5 per cent of its GDP in 2040, and this will be crucial to achieve its Vision 2041. Before China started with its ambitious BRI projects, only Western donors, along with their Bretton Woods organisations, were capable of providing such kinds of development finances. However, China's rise, along with its impetus in connectivity projects, has changed the game since the US is not the only public goods provider for smaller nations of the Indo-Pacific. This systemic level change has had a profound impact on Bangladesh's relationship with the US and its key partners in the Indo-Pacific region, such as India and Japan.

The historical Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia has received renewed momentum in the context of the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the dominant narrative of strategic competition, China is India's largest trading partner in goods, and their India-China bilateral trade grew by 90.14 per cent in the period from 2015 to 2022.<sup>33</sup> However, the competition over dominance has been manifested in their border skirmishes over disputed territory and competing connectivity projects in their neighbourhood. On the other hand, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2022 has assigned the role of "net security provider" to India.<sup>34</sup> In this context, China's BRI not only undercuts India's prevalent dominance in its neighbourhood but also, more importantly, undermines US's and West-led Bretton Woods organisations' role as the sole public goods provider to the smaller nations of South Asia. As such, the then Foreign Minister of Bangladesh AK Abdul Momen remarked at the Munich Security Conference 2022 that China offers a "basket of money" which comes with "aggressive and affordable" proposals for Bangladesh's growing demand for infrastructural development, in particular, when assistance from many countries is

<sup>32</sup> Anthea Roberts, Henrique Choer Moraes, Victor Ferguson, "Toward a Geoeconomic Order in International Trade and Investment," *Journal of International Economic Law* 22, no. 4 (December 2019): 655–676.

<sup>33</sup> Embassy of India, Beijing, China, "Trade and Economic Relations," [https://www.eoibeijing.gov.in/eoibeijing\\_pages/MjQ](https://www.eoibeijing.gov.in/eoibeijing_pages/MjQ).

<sup>34</sup> The White House, *The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

“declining”.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, this has put the US and its partners in the Indo-Pacific region in competition with China and its BRI.

As a countermeasure, India has been promoting regional and sub-regional connectivity and cooperation projects. In initiatives such as the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) Initiative, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), New Delhi perceives itself in a leadership role to offset the Chinese dominance in the region. In bilateral terms, India has converted its “Look East” policy to “Act East” and has been instrumental in implementing “Neighbourhood First” to develop relations with immediate neighbours. Similarly, Japan came up with its flagship economic, infrastructure, energy, and development initiative, the BIG-B, which envisages Bangladesh as a connectivity hub between South and Southeast Asia. If implemented, this initiative will turn Bangladesh into an industrial hub by connecting the supply chain to India’s undernourished Northeast region with Bhutan and Nepal. For Japan, this initiative entails solving its prolonged economic stagnation by encouraging Japanese businesses to tap into infrastructural development in this region. Apart from that, developing the Chattogram Port and linking it with the Indian Northeast can create a maritime space in the Bay of Bengal for Japan, which has been used for 80 per cent of the country’s sea-borne trade.<sup>36</sup> In essence, all these connectivity, economic, and development initiatives offered by the US partners in the region are compatible with the US’s vision of the Indo-Pacific, which perceives China as the challenger to the liberal order that the US built in the post-WWII period and consolidated in the post-Cold War period. For Bangladesh, systemic level change such as this magnitude provides economic opportunities as it wants to refrain from security and strategic competition between the great powers. Nonetheless, it is ready to tap into the economic potential of infrastructure and connectivity projects offered by both sides. However, it will get increasingly difficult to navigate such a tussle for dominance. Since the great power competition is intensifying, infrastructure-building endeavours such as ports, roads, rail links, and power stations are often being securitised and frowned upon by the competing great powers.

The second divergence from the unipolarity came from the South China Sea, where Beijing had maritime boundary disputes with its neighbours. China could evade arbitration ruling on the South China Sea and still militarise the islands in the region,

<sup>35</sup> “‘China not only offering basket of money but also affordable proposals’ – Assistance from many countries declining, Foreign Minister says,” *The Daily Star*, February 20, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Gaurav Dutta, “Japan and The Big-B Plan for Bangladesh: An Assessment,” National Maritime Foundation, October 21, 2023, <https://maritimeindia.org/japan-and-the-big-b-plan-for-bangladesh-an-assessment/>.

which was a challenge to the US's military presence in the Pacific. Consequently, the US, with its military bases around the world and strong presence in the Pacific, was challenged by the rise of the Chinese naval presence. The US and its partners in the region perceived this as an example of the weakness of international institutions, in particular the UN system as supranational authorities, to execute international law. This led the US to revitalise its old partnership in the Pacific by taking Japan, South Korea, and Australia on board. Through the rebalancing strategy under the Obama administration and later with FOIP under the Trump administration, the US looked for new partners in the region to offset the Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>37</sup> Such measures signal a substantial change from a unipolar world order that can no longer police these vast oceans without its allies and partners. However, Interviewee 04 argued that the US still remains the predominant power due to its asymmetry in relation to the rest of the powers. China is catching up in terms of its economic rise, but in terms of military, diplomacy, and culture, the US remains the predominant power. As argued further by this expert, notwithstanding the predominant position, the US recognises that it cannot control every scenario due to China's rise and its assertion of power. Hence, the US is strategically aligning, bolstering and in a way, nurturing a multipolar order. In its Indo-Pacific Strategy, a reflection of such exercise has been visible where India was kind of cultivated as a key actor to that multipolar order. Interviewee 04 further opined that if multipolarity is inevitable for the US's interest, it would like to shape that shift of polarity to its own advantage.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, QUAD, a dormant configuration, was rejuvenated to counterweight the growing Chinese influence in the region. Perhaps the doubt many partners have had about whether the US is committed enough as a "Pacific Power" and "came here to stay" was removed with the formation of minilaterals such as AUKUS and the rejuvenation of QUAD. Subsequently, China started to perceive this revived QUAD 2.0 in 2017 as a minilateral security configuration to undermine Beijing's interest in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea.<sup>39</sup> In May 2021, the then China's Ambassador to Bangladesh, Li Jiming warned Bangladesh about the backlash of joining QUAD.<sup>40</sup> In such an event, Bangladesh-China bilateral diplomatic relations would "substantially get damaged". Bangladesh never expressed any wish to join a security minilateral grouping such as QUAD. On the other hand, no QUAD member

<sup>37</sup> Minghao Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 2019): 371–394.

<sup>38</sup> Interviewee 04 is an American researcher at a Washington, DC-based think tank and has worked extensively on Bangladesh issues.

<sup>39</sup> Dingding Chen, "What China Thinks of the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-china-thinks-of-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

<sup>40</sup> Syful Islam, "Bangladesh hits back after China envoy warns against joining QUAD," *NIKKEIAsia*, May 11, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Bangladesh-hits-back-after-China-envoy-warns-against-joining-Quad>.



expressed any desire (at least publicly) to invite Bangladesh. In reply, the then Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, AK Abdul Momen, said that Bangladesh did not make any plans to join QUAD and it would take its decision as an independent and sovereign country.<sup>41</sup> This is evidence of China's growing concern regarding emerging security minilaterals in the region, and it went as far as expressing its anxiety in public to pre-empt Bangladesh from any hypothetical situation of joining the QUAD. Such instances will create apprehension and policy dilemmas for smaller nations like Bangladesh regarding joining economic, trade, or any other blocs or initiatives that might not have any military or security links.

Furthermore, Bangladesh's Constitution puts a high value on avoiding conflict and preaches a neutral foreign policy that upholds international law. As this was codified in the constitution under Article 25: "The State shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes, and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter". In its IPO, Bangladesh stressed upholding international law as it enshrined, "Adherence to the relevant UN treaties and international conventions, as applicable, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)" in the guiding principles section of the document. This principle was further elaborated in the second objective of the document, where the IPO, talked about strengthening the existing mechanisms for maritime safety and security in the Indo-Pacific. It charts out possible components of such a mechanism, which includes a response to emergencies at sea and conduct of search and rescue, and upholds the exercise of freedom of navigation and over-flight. Most importantly, the IPO contended that such a mechanism should be based on international law and relevant international conventions, including UNCLOS, 1982. Given Bangladesh's high dependence on maritime trade, it was not surprising that the IPO put such importance on maintaining and safeguarding freedom of navigation. Around 90 per cent of Bangladesh's external freight trade is seaborne. On the other hand, the country peacefully settled its maritime disputes in the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) with its neighbours Myanmar and India in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Such examples have underscored the need for international law and multilateral institutions to safeguard the rights of the smaller nations, which Bangladesh maintained since its independence. Conversely, China is in discord with ITLOS ruling over its maritime disputes in the South China Sea. However, the incorporation of such points in the IPO proves Bangladesh's eagerness to uphold international law for multilateral protection. On the other hand, the IPO

<sup>41</sup> S M Najmus Sakib and Md. Kamruzzaman, "Bangladesh, China tangle over US-led Quad," *Anadolu Agency*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-china-tangle-over-us-led-quad/2239133>.

calls for a “rules-based multilateral system” in an “inclusive Indo-Pacific” as opposed to the US’s “rule-based order” that envisages countering China in the Indo-Pacific.

The third divergence that arose and challenged the notion of unipolarity came out of the Russia-Ukraine War. Resurgent Russia’s challenge to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Eastern Europe itself was a statement that the US and its allies could not protect and advance the “neoliberal dream” that was promised to many post-Soviet nations. Furthermore, the biggest possible divergence out of this war was the reality check for many Western European countries, which is their dependence on Russian energy and the extent of India’s strategic autonomy when it comes to picking a side between Russia and the US-led Western powers. The divergence of opinion among the QUAD members regarding Russia was further exacerbated when the External Affairs Minister of India remarked that “a multipolar world is feasible only with a multipolar Asia”.<sup>42</sup> This puts forward an important question of whether all the US allies have the same motivation and objective for their partnership with the US. If not, polarity is not evolving towards a bipolar world but rather transitioning into a multipolar world. Countries such as Bangladesh and others from South and Southeast Asia who are counting on a peaceful and economically vibrant Indo-Pacific region for their moment of rise face the question of whether a multipolar world gives them enough manoeuvring space to safeguard their strategic autonomy.

This question arose from the fact that all these Indo-Pacific nations are plugged into a globalised, complex and highly enmeshed global economy through their participation in the global supply chain and production network. China, being the centre of these networks, is in strategic competition with the US. Until a decade ago, it was unthinkable to decouple China from this network. Furthermore, it was the biggest investor in the US, as from 2005 to 2023, the US received US\$190 billion in Chinese investments.<sup>43</sup> The 2018 trade war that started between these two reversed the interdependence and created a situation that begs the question if the global economy is going towards deglobalisation.<sup>44</sup> The economic architecture that was built on liberal order can dispose of China and what will be the future of the countries that are intricately connected with the Chinese economy for raw materials or finished goods. Notably, China is the largest trading partner for many Indo-Pacific nations, and consequently, this will have a grave impact on the stability of the region. By taking

<sup>42</sup> “Fair World Order Feasible If Asia Multipolar: EAM,” *The Tribune*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/fair-world-order-feasible-if-asia-multipolar-eam-507802>.

<sup>43</sup> “Chinese investments in the United States – AEI,” The American Enterprise Institute, accessed December 22, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/china-tracker-home/>.

<sup>44</sup> Kai He and Huiyun Feng, “International order transition and US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific,” *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (2023): 234–260.

this into cognisance, the US tried to build a more nuanced approach and shifted away from the term “decoupling” to “de-risking”. Instead of a complete separation, the US is considering curbing the risk associated with Chinese influence on global economic architecture.<sup>45</sup> Through its multiple pillars of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), “de-risking” from China will entail common standards, shifting high-tech collaborations, and resilient supply chains. Critical raw materials and security structures among partner countries are key focus points for building a resilient supply chain. This transition of production hub has been termed as “friendshoring”. However, many of the Indo-Pacific nations are yet to be convinced regarding the outcome of the IPEF and what it constitutes for the economic future of this region. Interestingly, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) became a platform where China plays a leadership role along with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and some of the US allies in the region, such as Australia, South Korea, Japan and New Zealand. Being the largest trading bloc in the world and a common platform for the rival middle powers of China, RCEP provides an interesting manufacturing space for smaller nations of the Indo-Pacific to follow.

#### 4. Sub-systemic Factors

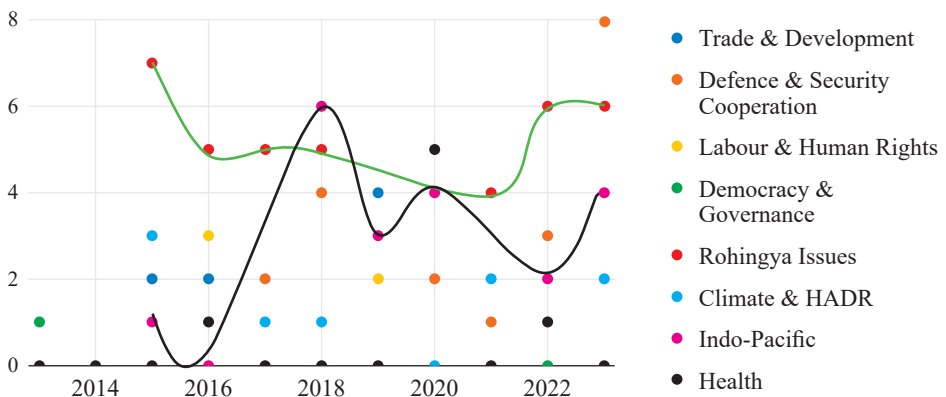
At the sub-systemic level, there have been some significant changes in Bangladesh-US relations. Some of these changes are related to Bangladesh’s ties with China and India. The framework for the India-US nuclear deal, which was signed in 2005, paved the way for India to become the most important partner for the US in the Indo-Pacific. This relationship has grown over the last two decades, so much so that Washington has become sensitive to New Delhi’s needs and vision for South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean region. Hence, it might be difficult for Washington to separate its view regarding South Asia without contemplating a backlash from New Delhi. Given that pretext, Bangladesh has manoeuvring space when it comes to express its own views regarding issues such as the Russian role in the Ukrainian War or showing interest in joining an intergovernmental organisation such as BRICS. On the other hand, Bangladesh’s long-standing relations with China have raised concerns in New Delhi and Washington.<sup>46</sup> While China has made significant strides by offering tangible development assistance in infrastructural development, the US commitment has been guided by a set of normative principles which evolved from its liberal values and ideational exercise over the last decade and later on incorporated into

<sup>45</sup> Agathe Demarais, “What Does ‘de-Risking’ Actually Mean?” *Foreign Policy*, August 23, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/23/derisking-us-china-biden-decoupling-technology-supply-chains-semiconductors-chips-ira-trade/>.

<sup>46</sup> Bhumitra Chakma, “The BRI and Sino-Indian Geo-Economic Competition in Bangladesh: Coping Strategy of a Small State,” *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 3 (2019): 227–239.

its Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, one of the interviewees commented that India—Bangladesh’s “umbilical partner”—played a role in convincing the US to “turn the temperature down” on Bangladesh, particularly on the issue of the election. On the other hand, the uneasy relationship between the World Bank and the Bangladesh Government regarding the financing of the Padma Bridge started to normalise and this was evidenced by Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit to Washington DC in May 2023 to commemorate Bangladesh-World Bank’s 50 years of partnership. During this visit, the Prime Minister sought the World Bank’s support for Bangladesh’s smooth transition to become an upper-middle-income country and implementation of its Delta Plan-2100. The interviewee further stated that the normalisation of relations with the Bretton Woods organisations could not be possible without consent from the US policymakers.<sup>47</sup> Over the years, despite its economic growth and significant development in many human development indicators, Bangladesh did not receive proportionate attention within the US policymaking community. This issue has been further elaborated in the latter section. However, in the last decade, there has been a flurry of diplomatic visits and other engagements (i.e., Dialogues such as Partnership Dialogues, Security Dialogues and bilateral and multilateral military exercises) from the US, which showed her renewed interest in Bangladesh (see, Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Diplomatic Engagement Trends in Bangladesh-US Relations: 2013–2023\***



**Source:** Author’s compilation and based on data collected from *the Daily Star* and the US Embassy Website from 2013–2023.

<sup>47</sup> Interviewee 01, a Bangladeshi academic on International Relations who taught at US educational institutions and currently teaches at a Bangladeshi university.

\* The author is grateful to Nahian Reza Sabriet, Research Officer and Muhammad Mazedul Haque, Research Officer, BISS for their assistance in collecting data and visualisation of Figure 1.

Furthermore, the US engagement has been identified as often “fleeting” and “dependent” on individuals who either work in the embassies or serve in Washington DC on region-specific desks. To turn the tide, the Trump administration unveiled the National Security Strategy of the US and discussed the US commitment to help South Asian nations maintain their sovereignty amid increasing Chinese influence in the region.<sup>48</sup> Published in 2017, it was the first US official document that mentioned the term Indo-Pacific. How the Indo-Pacific enmeshed with other issues became one of the priority areas for Bangladesh-US diplomatic discussion and engagement has been highlighted in Figure 1. This was built on the number of times a particular issue came up in the official vernaculars following diplomatic visits and discussions, different bilateral dialogues, military exercises, and defence article purchases or transfers from the year 2013 to 2023. Eight issues were identified, as shown in Figure 1, where a few of the issues, such as Trade & Development, Climate and HADR, Democracy & Governance and Labour & Human Rights, received steady attention. While issues such as Rohingya received heightened attention following the 2017 influx of Rohingyas to Bangladesh and Health received prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it was not until December 2015 when the “Indo-Pacific” as a concept was publicly unveiled in Bangladesh for the first time by a US diplomat in a seminar at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). The US Under Secretary for Political Affairs-Designate, Thomas Shannon, talked about the commencement of “an Indo-Pacific century”, where he highlighted Bangladesh’s prominence in “President Obama’s strategic focus on South Asia, the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific region”. Consequently, As shown in Figure 1, issues such as Indo-Pacific and Defence and Security Cooperation gradually started to receive heightened priority compared to other issues in Bangladesh-US diplomatic engagements. In 2018, the Indo-Pacific became the most prioritised area for discussion or engagement in this bilateral relationship. The year 2023 was marked by 04 US diplomatic official visits and 04 bilateral as well as multilateral military exercises such as Exercise Shanti Doot-4 and Exercise Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT), 17<sup>th</sup> annual Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) and 26<sup>th</sup> biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise. All of these exercises had Indo-Pacific in their official vernaculars, and in that connection, CARAT focused on maritime security operations, while SEACAT held information sharing and maritime domain awareness at its core. In the same year, during her visit to Bangladesh, the Deputy Assistant to the US President and Senior Director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council, Lisa Curtis, termed Bangladesh an “important partner” of the Indo-Pacific strategy of the Trump administration. Henceforth, since 2015, defence and security cooperation has been another area that has often received preponderance over other issues and often enmeshed and overlapped with the issue of the Indo-Pacific.

<sup>48</sup> The White House, “*The National Security Strategy*,” 2017.

A subsequent document to the National Security Strategy 2017, which was published by the White House in 2019, marked the first official document dedicated to the Indo-Pacific. Published under the Trump administration, this document further elaborates on the US's vision regarding the Indo-Pacific region, where it implies that South Asian nations are facing emerging challenges and the US's engagement in the region reflects "South Asian partners' political autonomy" for an "inclusive Indo-Pacific region."<sup>49</sup> From Bangladesh's perspective, this particular US Document was interesting as it spells out some of the sectors where the US is strongly engaged in the Indo-Pacific. For example, it talks about US measures in providing training to the navies and coastguards of three South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, with an objective to "safeguard strategic sea lines of communication, combat human trafficking, prevent illegal fishing, disrupt drug smuggling, and respond to natural disasters."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, naval boats and training acquired from the US were pointed out as the main reason behind the decrease in the Bay of Bengal's piracy scenario. US assistance for Bangladesh's UN Peacekeeping effort was also mentioned as it received equipment such as the Unmanned Aircraft System (UAV) and training for senior military officers, jointly tackling pressing security challenges and fostering a stable and secure future for the Indo-Pacific region and the world. The document informs that the US has taken the counterterrorism capacity-building initiative for its "South Asian Partners". For example, in the aftermath of the post-ISIS-inspired Easter Sunday terrorist attack, Sri Lanka received "hands-on investigative assistance" as Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigators were deployed to aid the local law enforcement agencies. Similarly, Bangladesh and Maldives received "enhanced border control processes and technology" to prevent such attacks.<sup>51</sup>

Apart from defence and counterterrorism, this document charts a few more areas of cooperation between Bangladesh and the US, which include trade governance and energy security. For example, in 2019, USAID offered projects to facilitate "new trade and competitiveness activities". Meanwhile, in July 2018, the US launched another new initiative named Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network (ITAN). Under the aegis of this project, assistance was provided to "...strengthen the legal and regulatory framework for infrastructure" in Bangladesh.<sup>52</sup> One of the main objectives of this programme was to improve the proposal solicitation process as well as achieve greater transparency in infrastructure procurement throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Energy security came to the forefront of the US's Indo-Pacific vision

<sup>49</sup> The US Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington DC: Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, The US Department of State, 2019), 6–12.

<sup>50</sup> The US Department of State, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific," 2019.

<sup>51</sup> The US Department of State, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific," 2019.

<sup>52</sup> The US Department of State, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific," 2019.

through Asia EDGE, which was launched during the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in 2018. With this programme, the US aims to build capacity for regional cross-border energy trade among South Asian nations such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and India. With Asia EDGE, the US assisted in the commissioning of the 300-megawatt (MW) Pangaon power plant, Bangladesh’s first-ever liquefied natural gas (LNG) import facility and the US General Electric’s joint venture project to build another 583 MW power plant was signed.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these ventures to develop toolkits as countermeasures *vis-à-vis* China’s growing assertiveness in the Bay of Bengal region and broader Indo-Pacific region, the Trump administration was exceedingly criticised. Under Trump, the US had backed off from the Paris Climate Accord and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). He threatened to stop assistance to NATO on the grounds that NATO allies should shoulder more burden for the collective security of this alliance system. Finally, budget cuts for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) have raised serious doubts regarding Washington’s commitment towards sustaining “Pax Americana” as the international order, as well as questioning the role of the US as the leader of the ‘free world’. On the contrary, in 2017, at the World Economic Forum Meeting, the Chinese President called for the rejection of the protectionism that threatens multilateral trade arrangements and embraces the win-win potential of globalised mutual growth. In contrast to Trump’s plans for Washington’s withdrawal from multilateral trading arrangements and protectionism, Xi’s firm commitment to globalisation was visible in Davos.

When the Biden administration took over the Oval Office in 2021, they understood the need to reassure their allies and partners not only within the trans-Atlantic alliance but, more importantly, in the Indo-Pacific regarding Washington’s intention and commitment to the region. Consequently, in continuation with the Trump administration, the White House brought out another document titled, ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States’.

Unlike the previous document, where the US’s cooperation with Bangladesh was discussed at length, often within the purview of South Asia, this document did not explicitly mention ‘Bangladesh’. Rather, ‘South Asia’ was mentioned seven times, and ‘India’ was mentioned 12 times in contrast to the ‘People’s Republic of China’ (PRC), which was mentioned 13 times. This puts New Delhi at the heart of the US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, where the document gives India a role “as a net

<sup>53</sup> The US Department of State, “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” 2019.

security provider” and with whom Washington wants to “steadily advance” their “Major Defense Partnership” as well as build the defence capacity of the partners in South Asia.<sup>54</sup> To that end, the US expressed its commitment to increase the presence of the US Coast Guard through their deployment and providing training to enhance the local navies’ capacity within South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. In South Asia, India was recognised as the “leader”, “a like-minded partner” as well as a “driving force of the Quad and other regional fora”, and new domains such as health, space, cyberspace, economic and technology cooperation were identified as the new domains for cooperation. For the rest of the South Asian partners; pandemic response, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, water scarcity and maritime security were identified as areas of cooperation.<sup>55</sup> Given India’s preponderance as a key US partner and both New Delhi’s and Washington’s growing competition with Beijing creates an interesting and complex matrix for Dhaka while it navigates the great power competition in this region. For the US, China’s engagement in the telecom, infrastructure and technological sectors is particularly concerning as it fears Beijing uses these engagements in its strategic benefits *vis-à-vis* Washington. In times of conflict, these projects will have certain strategic ramifications in the Indo-Pacific.

Significantly, the US is the biggest investor and one of the largest markets for Bangladesh’s RMG sector, so it was imperative for the country to express and clarify its vision or outlook regarding the Indo-Pacific region. In April of 2023, Bangladesh tried to do so by making public its IPO, which ought to be the single most important foreign policy document after the Constitution.<sup>56</sup> Through this document, Bangladesh tried to strike a balance amidst the strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific by projecting a vision of an “inclusive Indo-Pacific and prosperity for all” in the preamble of the document. Furthermore, the document mentions the term “inclusive” again in the fifth and sixth objectives, where it talks about “just and inclusive societies” and “inclusive economic growth”. This indicates Bangladesh does not agree with a narrative of the Indo-Pacific that will exclude certain countries and yet peacefully prosper. On the other hand, it talks about “...Adherence to the relevant UN treaties and international conventions, as applicable, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)” which is more aligned with the “rule-based order” that the US and its partners are preaching for this region. However, given multilateralism being one of the central planks of Bangladesh’s foreign policy, IPO brought in the idea of an “open, transparent, rules-based multilateral system” to highlight the priority for economic growth, development, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

<sup>54</sup> The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, 12–13.

<sup>55</sup> The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy*.

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, “Indo-Pacific Outlook.”



## 5. Way Forward in a Capricious Future

China's rise and subsequent jostling for power and influence centring on the Indo-Pacific has put many countries in South and Southeast Asia in a dilemma. Given how the world is bound together by the forces of globalisation, if unmanaged, this competition may have grave consequences not only for international security but the global economy and softer issues such as attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), poverty reduction, technological innovation, and climate change. Under such a capricious backdrop, how Bangladesh manages its relationship with the US will have significant repercussions for its relations with other actors within and beyond the region.

However, managing any bilateral relationship has to be in sync with the philosophy of Bangladesh's foreign policy, which is based on "friendship to all and malice to none." Since independence, Bangladesh tried to follow a brand of foreign policy that preaches neutrality, puts multilateralism in the centre and adheres to international law and norms. This has proven to be effective for a small state like Bangladesh during the Cold War period to steer clear of great power rivalry. However, with the competition rising in the Indo-Pacific, safeguarding the strategic autonomy of many of the countries in the region will be increasingly difficult. To offset such a situation, engaging with regional partners and players might not be enough in the near future. The multipolarity of the global order illustrates that there is a reasonable number of disagreements/divergences between the US and its partners regarding many issues ranging from trade, human rights, alliance building, defence cooperation, and so forth. This calls for a more meaningful partnership with the global South. Both interviewees, who are Bangladeshi academics, expressed their opinions that connecting with global South or Eastern nations will require Bangladesh to look to build up relations beyond South Asia and make stronger connections in Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa.<sup>57</sup> BRICS and RCEP are blocs that Bangladesh can look at for possible breakthroughs in looking beyond South Asia. Dhaka has already projected its intent to join BRICS, and a few member countries have shown their interest in Bangladesh. However, accession to this organisation will require a flurry of diplomatic activities i.e., head of state's visit to some of the member countries such as India, Russia, China, Brazil and South Africa. This has to be preceded by sending a special envoy to these capitals to convince Bangladesh's relevance and utility for accession. The policymakers need to be mindful of the fact that, with the

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<sup>57</sup> Interviewee 01; Interviewee 02 is a Bangladeshi academic on International Relations and nationalism and currently teaches at a Bangladeshi university.

recently concluded summit, BRICS has been often portrayed as the emblem of a multipolar world order. To avert any misconception regarding Bangladesh's intention to join, the economic and development reasons should be highlighted.<sup>58</sup> When asked about the possible geopolitical objectives of BRICS, Interviewee 01 argued that BRICS may not have geopolitical agendas and, if anything, "it is mostly economic reordering," and furthermore, it will shift the global balance on a small scale but not do so decisively. If it comes to "taking sides" or "showing true colours" the US allies like Saudi Arabia will be "on the side of the US rather than against it". To elaborate on his argument for joining BRICS, they think Bangladesh should not bend to one side or the other as the country has much to gain by being neutral. The only side that Bangladesh should have robust engagement with is the global South, as for the time being, it will not be considered as a "security or strategic issue".<sup>59</sup> To do so, there is one diplomatic challenge that Bangladesh might face in its future endeavours for accession to the BRICS. Given the Sino-Indian rivalry, Dhaka has to assure both Beijing and New Delhi that it will remain neutral and Bangladesh's accession does not cost any of their stakes at BRICS.

On the other hand, RCEP is an interesting proposition as this largest trading bloc offers a game-changing future for Bangladesh's trade prospects with Southeast and East Asia. This is the world's largest free trade bloc that has 15 Indo-Pacific nations with important US allies such as Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea, along with the US's strategic rival, China, and 10 ASEAN countries. Hence, this gives Bangladesh an opportunity to reap the benefits of being part of the largest free trading bloc and, at the same time, not create any US concerns. Interviewee 01 further described Southeast Asia as an "unopened box" that Bangladesh should look into as he identified Bangladesh's limited export basket or overwhelming dependency on the RMG sector as a vulnerability when it comes to negotiation with Western countries. To avoid backlash from any possible punitive measures taken by these countries, Bangladesh should think about Plan B or Plan C.<sup>60</sup> Interviewee 04 argued that the US policymakers believe there is a democratic backsliding taking place in the Indo-Pacific region. If the governments in this region are not accountable to their population, the political elites of this region will be susceptible to co-option by China, and that undermines the US's interest in the region.<sup>61</sup> To avoid getting in the mix of great power competition, apart from diversifying the export basket to reduce its trade vulnerabilities *vis-à-vis* Western countries, Dhaka needs to look ahead to

<sup>58</sup> Interviewee 01; Interviewee 03 is a Bangladeshi Diplomatic high official.

<sup>59</sup> Interviewee 01.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewee 01.

<sup>61</sup> Interviewee 04.

finalise Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Southeast Asian nations. In the context of Bangladesh's post-Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation scenario, these FTAs will be imperative to find new markets, spur export diversification and find different sources of FDIs. In that regard, RCEP provides Bangladesh with an excellent opportunity to get these FTAs done through its accession within this organisation.

Moreover, only a handful of countries have joined the US-led IPEF, which is still in its ideational stage. It has certain pillars that aim to “de-risk” the supply chain from China and “friendshore” many of the US and its allies’ investments from China to Southeast Asian countries. Although it is still in the early stage, the impact is visible as Japan and the US are trying to relocate their tech industries to Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. Given Bangladesh’s trade vulnerability due to its over-dependence on the RMG industry and looming “middle-income country trap”, this can be an opportunity for Bangladeshi policymakers to facilitate local industries to attract these “friendshoring” investments towards Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh is still pondering IPEF, it can still bring some regulatory reforms in line with the IPEF standard regarding customs, common standardisation, and climate-friendly industry by itself. To strengthen its relationship with Washington, like many other small states, Bangladesh also suffers from the “attention deficiency” from the US policymakers.<sup>62</sup> Interviewee 04 also confirmed this view. Apart from the US embassy in Dhaka, he thinks in terms of “rhetoric and staffing”, the number of individuals at the State Department and USAID focused solely on Bangladesh is significantly less than India, Pakistan, or other countries with population sizes similar to Bangladesh.<sup>63</sup> One of the reasons behind such lack of attention might be that the US has been a unipolar power for decades and has to employ its resources in countries that have paramount importance for the cause of US interests. For that reason, it has to cluster countries and prioritise them in terms of the immediate national interests of the US. Apart from the government, the amount of attention that Bangladesh has received from the US think tanks can be argued as disproportionate to Bangladesh’s status as a rising “strategic actor” in the region. Interviewee 04, in this aspect, argued that most of the major American think tanks, such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Stimson Center, and the Wilson Center, have a strong South Asia programme and that they largely focus on India-Pakistan relations or impacts of nuclearisation of the region. Bangladesh has surpassed many of its neighbours in human development indicators, economic performance, and counterterrorism,

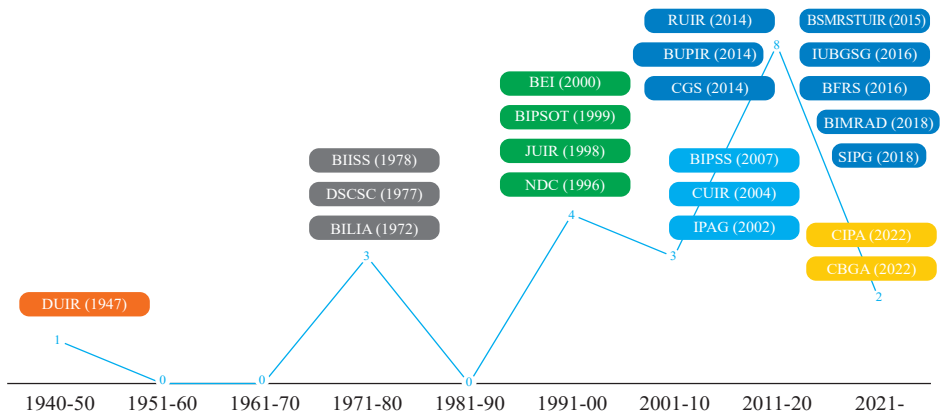
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<sup>62</sup> Interviewee 01; Interviewee 02.

<sup>63</sup> Interviewee 04.

but it has not been reflected in the focus that it receives from the DC think tank community. On the contrary, Interviewee 03 commented that Bangladesh has some deficiencies in research regarding the US foreign policy and strategic community as research, in general, dwells in the periphery of agendas when it comes to Bangladesh-US relations. He argued that Bangladesh’s business community could step up by financing research on the US, which can be used for the consumption of the academia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well.<sup>64</sup>

**Figure 2: Growing Foreign Policy Orientation in Bangladesh:1940–2022<sup>65</sup>**



<sup>64</sup> Interviewee 03.

<sup>65</sup> Author’s compilation, the author is grateful to Nahian Reza Sabriet, Research Officer, BISS, for his assistance in the data visualisation of Figure 2. The elaborated form of the institutions: Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka (DUIR, established in 1947); Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA, established in 1972); Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC, established in 1977); Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS, established in 1978); National Defence College (NDC, established in 1996); Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University (JUIR, established in 1998); Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT, established in 1999); Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI, established in 2000); Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG, established 2002); Department of International Relations, University of Chittagong (CUIR, 2004); Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS, established in 2007); Department of International Relations, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUPIR, established in 2014); Department of International Relations, Rajshahi University (RUIR, established in 2014); Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka (CGS, established in 2014); Department of International Relations, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University (BSMRSTUIR, established in 2015); Department of Global Studies and Governance, Independent University, Bangladesh (IUBGSG, established in 2016); Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies (BFRS, established in 2016); Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD, established in 2018); South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG, established in 2018); The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA, established in 2022); Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs (BCIPA, established in 2022).

As shown in Figure 2, there is a growing foreign policy orientation in Bangladesh that has enlarged significantly from 2010–2020, which is through the establishment of eight think tanks, centres, or departments at different universities, and this has been by far the highest since the 1940s. These institutions are involved in intellectual discussions on different facets of international relations, from foreign policy to security. However, the argument made by Interviewee 03 proved to be right, as despite the phenomenal growth of think tanks, no Bangladeshi think tank has any strong research programme focused solely on the US. Few of the universities offer courses on North American Studies. Aside from an “India focus”, Interviewee 04 argued that there is a lot of attention on Pakistan as many experts are working on Pakistan issues in these think tanks. Hence, he believes that South Asia as a region is viewed much more from the “India-Pakistan” prism. He argued that this lack of attention that Bangladesh receives is not because of any pre-existing “India-Pakistan” biases but because there is a lack of researchers working solely on Bangladesh as a country. In the last decade or so, Bangladesh received a flurry of diplomatic visits that signals a shift from Washington’s earlier position regarding Bangladesh’s importance in the US’s foreign policy. Interviewee 04 thinks this shift is a result of the emerging constellations of power, and South Asia is one of them. These newer power constellations have created attention for smaller states among the US policymakers. The US puts tremendous impetus on India as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region. India has an interest in Bangladesh due to its historical partnership and geographic location. Moreover, both the US and India have an interest in Bangladesh due to growing Chinese influence, and this brings Bangladesh to the US’s spotlight.<sup>66</sup> However, this renewed attention from the US brings opportunity as well as the cost associated with it. Images matter within the Washington DC policymaking community, and India used its diaspora to build New Delhi’s image along with its *de facto* capability.<sup>67</sup> Despite doing well in many of the economic and human development indicators, Bangladesh does not have the deserving image that it should have taking into account the positions of others. In this regard, the Bangladeshi diaspora can play a vital role as many of the second-generation Bangladeshi-born US nationals are entering mainstream US politics.<sup>68</sup> Interviewee 04 argues that the Bangladeshi diaspora carries the mental baggage of polarised national politics despite their new reality in the host country. This deters the chance for any national reconciliation or mobilisation to support Bangladesh’s cause by going beyond their support for a particular political party of the country.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Interviewee 04.

<sup>67</sup> Interviewee 02.

<sup>68</sup> Interviewee 02.

<sup>69</sup> Interviewee 03.

## 6. Conclusion

With the brewing strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region, the term “Indo-Pacific” is gradually moving from a geographic construct to a geopolitical and geostrategic construct. The US has an interest in cultivating India as a key to its Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Indian Ocean region. The US’s attempt to shape the multipolarity by nurturing India *vis-à-vis* growing Chinese influence in the South Asian region has elevated Bangladesh’s status as a strategic player to the US. Bangladesh has clarified its vision through the IPO, where development and economic prosperity received priority over strategic competition. However, the development trajectory of the country depends a lot on how Bangladesh manages its relations with great powers who are vying for influence and dominance. Nonetheless, Bangladesh’s foreign policy choices remain based on its constitutional obligations that emphasise on multilateralism, neutrality and upholding international law. However, that has been increasingly difficult due to the systemic and sub-systemic factors that affect the strategic environment of the South Asian region. Over five decades, the US has proved to be a reliable partner in economic and human development, energy and security cooperation, combatting climate change and disaster relief and in different multilateral forums. Given the strategic rivalry it has with China and Bangladesh’s other major partners, such as India and Japan’s position in this mix, Bangladesh needs to understand these systemic and sub-systemic changes that are taking place at the present time. To achieve Vision 2041 and tackle the challenges associated with the post-LDC graduation phase, export diversification will be imperative, along with tapping into opportunities that “friendshoring” brings due to the US’s competition with China. Some of the avenues they can take are also looking beyond South Asia and strengthening its relationship in multifarious regional and global platforms such as BRICS and RCEP or regions like Southeast Asia. This provides options and manoeuvring space and safeguards its strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.