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## CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITIONS IN THE BAY OF BENGAL REGION: IN SEARCH OF GREATER STRATEGIC AUTONOMY FOR BANGLADESH

### Abstract

The idea of strategic autonomy has received greater attention among scholars of politics and international relations in recent times amid the shift of epicentre of global power politics to Asia and growing geopolitical competition in the Asian region. The paper aims to discuss the concept of strategic autonomy and relevant debates as well as contextualise the concept while considering Bangladesh's geostrategic challenges and potentials in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) region. The BoB, being situated at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, has become a hub of communication and connectivity. It has become a crucial route for trading ventures across Asia and beyond. Hence, the strategic interests of the regional and extra-regional powers have made the region a locus of competition. Bangladesh, being an emerging economy and a key littoral of the BoB, is facing dilemmas in projecting its national priorities amid the growing competition in this region. Therefore, maintaining a delicate balance and equidistance with all the powers and upholding national interests have become a challenge for Bangladesh. The paper argues that attaining greater strategic autonomy could be instrumental for Bangladesh to project its national interests in regional and global affairs, and would help to navigate the challenges emerging from the geopolitical competitions in this region. The paper has divided the position of Bangladesh into three broad angles—strengths, both strengths and limitations simultaneously, and challenges or limitations. It has also analysed various aspects of those angles. The paper also suggests some policy options to find solutions to the limitations and act towards attaining greater strategic autonomy for Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Geopolitical Competition, Bay of Bengal (BoB), Strategic Autonomy, Bangladesh

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## 1. Introduction

Since the inception of the ideas such as nationalism and the nation-state, understanding the behaviours of the states has become a critical part of the relationships in the international system. Besides, the ideas of ‘hegemony’ and ‘autonomy’ received growing attention among realist scholars on politics and international relations during the colonial and Cold War periods. Those ideas became an integral part of the discourses regarding the status of the state in the international system. In the post-colonial period, nation-states started seeking territorial independence and freedom of choice in foreign policy making. However, they were hardly able to come out from the neo-colonial architecture built by the colonial powers. As a result, new types of dependency emerged, and the powerful countries started to influence and control the developing and weaker nations across the global South by manipulating markets and natural resources. In the Cold War period, with bipolarity in line with ideological schism, developing and poor countries rarely enjoyed freedom in making their foreign policy and pursuing national interests without external influences. Although the idea of a non-alignment movement received significant momentum, the concept of the ‘satellite state’ also got prominence. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the growth of globalisation and multipolarity, countries became more assertive/hopeful about pursuing their own national interests on the global stage without being directed by others. The interdependency of the nations, the rise of multipolarity and multiple geopolitical hotspots have created concerns among the countries of the globe regarding their strategic choices in maintaining foreign relations. Notwithstanding that, shifts in the centre of the gravity of global powers and geostrategic competitions have created opportunities for developing nations as well. More manoeuvring spaces are being created for developing countries to expand their strategic autonomy and enhance their ability to take decisions independently on issues of national interests and foreign policy goals.

The (re)emergence of China and India as the major powers in the regional and global power architecture has relocated the geostrategic gravity towards Asia. Strategic initiatives like the Asian Rebalancing Strategy of the United States (US), China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) promoted by different regional and extra-regional powers, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US (AUKUS), etc. have appeared in the Indo-Pacific region leading towards a more complex regional order. Those strategic initiatives aimed at addressing the issues of security threats; also, they craved for creating norms and

building alliance, developing infrastructure, and the overall economic development. However, such power politics in this region have created more geopolitical hotspots, overlapping political and economic partnerships, and increased risks of conflicts. Therefore, balancing the emerging realities and enhancing cooperation by minimising competition within great power rivalry became a major challenge for the countries of this region. For example, if the Chinese and Indian visions in the Indo-Pacific clash, the smaller and emerging states might be pushed to make choices like bandwagon with either one, in particular, by offering military bases and naval facilities,<sup>1</sup> which will create a serious dilemma for them.

The strategic significance of the BoB is well known. The Bay, being at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, has been operating as a hub of communication—commercial and cultural interactions among the littorals for centuries; therefore, it can act as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> It became a crucial route for international trade, having a combined population of around 1.7 billion and a US\$7 trillion total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). One-fourth of the world’s traded goods pass through the Bay, including huge volumes of Persian Gulf oil and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). Hence, the Bay has become a crucial corridor for energy-scarce countries to secure energy resources.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the BoB contains vast untapped natural resources of oil, gas, mineral ores, and fishing stocks, prompting investment and economic interest from major competing powers like India, China, Japan, and the US. Hence, the strategic interests of the regional and extra-regional powers have made the region a locus of competition.

Bangladesh, being a key littoral of the BoB, bears a great geostrategic significance in the BoB region in particular, and the Indo-Pacific region in general. It is considered as the gateway to South and Southeast Asia, making itself a hub for regional and interregional trade and commercial activities. However, recent geopolitical development in the region has created some dilemmas. When the US invited Bangladesh to join the IPS, China showed its reservations; while maintaining good terms with the US, Russia’s strong reactions came in (sanctioned ship issue and recent summon of a Bangladeshi envoy in Moscow). In its foreign policy approaches, Bangladesh maintains the dictum of “friendship to all, and malice towards none”,

<sup>1</sup> Paul, T. V., “When balance of power meets globalization: China, India and the small states of South Asia,” *Politics* 39, no.1 (2019): 50.

<sup>2</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Harsh V. Pant, eds., *Anchoring the Bay of Bengal in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (New Delhi: ORF and Global Policy Journal, 2024), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Anu Anwar, “The Bay of Bengal Could Be the Key to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, *War on the Rocks*, June 17, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/the-bay-of-bengal-could-be-the-key-to-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

but recent dilemmas turned such a gesture into a volatile situation. The question that comes about is how long Bangladesh could maintain its hedging posture. Since Bangladesh has trade relations with the US, energy dependency on Russia, particularly for nuclear energy, has dependency on China for infrastructural development, and has impulses for maintaining good relations with India—the biggest neighbour, balancing all those major powers became a tough game for Bangladesh. The recent voting behaviour of Bangladesh in the United Nations (UN) testifies to this dilemma to some extent, particularly on the issue of the Russia-Ukraine War that began in 2022. Besides, there are some potential flashpoints that could be emerged from the divergent approaches of interactions by the major powers like the US, China, India, and Russia in Bangladesh, particularly on issues like norm-setting, the Rohingya issue and infrastructural development.

In this context, maintaining a delicate balance and equidistance with all the powers and upholding national interests have become a challenge for Bangladesh. Hence, attaining strategic autonomy could be instrumental in dealing with those dilemmas in the coming days. Strategic autonomy can equip with some sort of politico-economic leverage, for example, India's import of energy from Russia amid global sanctions could be the best example. Now, the issue is that strategic autonomy is related to the question of how regional and global powers perceive the strategic importance of a country or the involvement of the competing powers on particular issues of a country. Moreover, it depends on the subjective view of a country and how it projects its future position in the international system. Here, Bangladesh has scope to work on enhancing strategic autonomy since the presence of contending powers in the BoB region becomes inevitable; and major powers have divergent approaches on some burning issues relevant to Bangladesh. In this context, enhancing strategic autonomy will enable Bangladesh to construct and expand on its own narrative(s) regarding the security, development and cooperation trajectory in the region and beyond.

Having this brief overview, the key objectives of the paper are - to define the challenges for Bangladesh in the BoB region emerging from the changing realities and geopolitics in the region; examine the relevance of the idea of strategic autonomy in the context of Bangladesh; and explore different options for enhancing strategic autonomy of the country. In order to meet the objectives, the paper employs three basic questions: (i) how does geopolitical change in the BoB region impact Bangladesh's foreign policy behaviour? (ii) what are the basic parameters of strategic autonomy and how can those be contextualised for Bangladesh? and (iii) how can Bangladesh

achieve greater strategic autonomy? This research is qualitative in nature and based mainly on both primary (key informant interviews) and secondary sources. Books, journals, official documents, online resources, newspapers, reports, etc., will be consulted as secondary sources. The paper is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, the second section deals with the literature review and research gaps; the third section discusses the theoretical framework; the fourth section discusses the evolving strategic scenario in the BoB region and balancing dilemma for Bangladesh; the fifth section deals with the strategic autonomy of Bangladesh and strategic outlook; and the final section concludes the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of strategic autonomy is defined in distinct ways by different scholars worldwide. Niklas Helwig mentioned three approaches for advancing strategic autonomy for the European Union (EU). First, autonomy through protection which means decreasing dependency on trade partners and allies; second, autonomy through the provision incapsulates supporting political and economic integration and foundation; and third, autonomy through projection which encompasses shaping the political and security environment in favourable ways.<sup>4</sup> He further argued that the great power rivalry between the US and China, technological disruption related to digital transformation, and the leveraged interdependence among states to further their geostrategic interests are some of the larger global trends driving the current debate on strategic autonomy and placing pressure on the EU and its member states.<sup>5</sup>

Mario Damen compared strategic autonomy with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Figure 1). He argued that Maslow's 'self-actualisation' could mean such an EU where citizens recognise their European identity and realise its full autonomous policy potential.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Niklas Helwig, ed., *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU: New Agendas for Security, Diplomacy, Trade and Technology* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, April 2021), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Helwig, *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Damen, "EU strategic autonomy 2013–2023: From concept to capacity," EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor, European Parliament, July 2022, accessed December 10, 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733589\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589_EN.pdf).

**Figure 1: Strategic Autonomy Compared to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs<sup>7</sup>**

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs	Areas of strategic autonomy
<p><b>Self-actualisation</b> desire to become the most that one can be</p>	<p>EU identity, autonomous democratic federation, global role model</p>
<p><b>Esteem</b> respect, self-esteem, status, recognition, strength, freedom</p>	<p>EU as a normative power, values EU multilateralism/partnerships</p>
<p><b>Love and belonging</b> friendship, intimacy, family, sense of connection</p>	<p>EU military security</p>
<p><b>Safety needs</b> personal security, employment, resources, health, property</p>	<p>EU economic independence (supply chains)</p>
<p><b>Physiological needs</b> air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing, reproduction</p>	<p>EU health security; EU energy security; EU food and water security</p>

He further contends that the EU faces both external and internal obstacles in its quest for strategic autonomy, including its economic reliance primarily on Asian nations, on raw materials and semi-conductors. It also faces obstacles due to supply chain disruptions brought on by unanticipated events (like COVID-19) or acts by third parties seeking to establish dependency (like China’s BRI projects or Russia’s energy delivery policy); and member states’ objections to an expansion of the EU’s authority to act, which results in limitations in the area of defence policy; and lastly, struggle for developing homogeneous strategic culture, etc.<sup>8</sup>

According to Jakob Lewander et al., Europe needs strategic autonomy to strengthen its capabilities in several sectors i.e., industrial transition, defence, digital union, the Euro, etc. without jeopardising the Union’s core principles of single market and competition policy.<sup>9</sup> Pol Morillas suggested some policy options for the purpose of expanding the use of strategic autonomy by the EU i.e., broaden the focus of strategic autonomy to the whole of external action, promote thematic and regional steps forward in the operationalisation of strategic autonomy, and foster political consensus on strategic autonomy at the highest level.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Damen, “EU strategic autonomy 2013-2023,” 5.

<sup>8</sup> Damen, “EU strategic autonomy 2013–2023,” 8–9.

<sup>9</sup> Jakob Lewander, Niklas Helwig, Calle Håkansson, Tuomas Iso-Markku and Christine Nissen, *Strategic Autonomy – Views from the North: Perspectives on the EU in the World of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, December 2021), 71.

<sup>10</sup> Pol Morillas, *An Architecture Fit for Strategic Autonomy: Institutional and Operational Steps Towards a More Autonomous EU External Action* (Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, November 2021), 13–14.

Richard Young points out that the EU's drive for strategic autonomy will affect its external actions, particularly creating concern over its possible implications on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the US security engagement with Europe.<sup>11</sup> Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis argued that European strategic autonomy is seen as an additional component that could support NATO rather than as a replacement, as it could help countries build their own defence industry, national military capabilities, and resistance to non-military challenges. Additionally, they argued that national approaches to European strategic autonomy generally ignore grand strategic concepts in favour of practical national security and foreign policy considerations.<sup>12</sup> Alexander Conway, in this aspect, added that open strategic autonomy could allow the EU to preserve its economic openness to the outside world, while also advancing and defending a global rule-based trading order and setting global norms.<sup>13</sup>

Ina Choi opined that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries are under increasing pressure to preserve their strategic autonomy as the US-China rivalry heats up.<sup>14</sup> She asserted that the ASEAN Outlook towards the Indo-Pacific region was prepared aiming at reducing tensions between big powers in the region and to reinforce ASEAN's centrality in addressing the emerging challenges of Indo-Pacific construct. Ralf Emmers discussed the point that since its foundation in 1967, the ASEAN has opted to stay out of great power competition. Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), declared in 1971, has encapsulated ASEAN's will to keep Southeast Asia free from outside interference. ZOPFAN accommodated different strategic viewpoints within the ASEAN while avoiding the legal ramifications of the neutrality principle. Neutrality is frequently cited as a crucial component in ASEAN's success.<sup>15</sup> Jie Jhang, in this regard, argues that by forging internal consensus, enhancing and growing its cooperation network, and influencing the regional agenda of major countries to include ASEAN objectives, ASEAN has restored its centrality. To guard against "a new Cold War", ASEAN has started a new non-aligned movement and is encouraging multipolarity. He further argued that for

<sup>11</sup> Richard Youngs, "The EU's Strategic Autonomy Trap," Carnegie Europe, March 08, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/03/08/eu-s-strategic-autonomy-trap-pub-83955>.

<sup>12</sup> Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis, *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security: In the Shadow of Power* (London: Routledge, December 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Conway, *Strategic Autonomy: A Spectrum of Choices for the EU and Ireland* (Dublin: The Institute of International and European Affairs, March 2021), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ina Choi, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Aoip) and Korea's New Southern Policy," *KIEP Research Paper*, no.183 (March 31, 2020): 183.

<sup>15</sup> Ralf Emmers, "Unpacking ASEAN neutrality: the quest for autonomy and impartiality in Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40, no. 3 (2018): 349–370.

enhancing strategic autonomy and rebuilding unity and centrality, the ASEAN has—(i) enhanced its sense of unity in a number of ways: building a community; strengthening the internal culture of the ASEAN and addressing the issues of Myanmar, East Timor, and others; and speaking with “one voice” on major regional and international issues in a timely manner, (ii) adopted a number of initiatives to maintain the centrality of the ASEAN: expand and upgrade various dialogue relations, extended its “circle of friends” through multi-tier regional dialogues; sought to strengthen ties with China and Australia and make commitments to comprehensive strategic partnership (engaged with the US and India in partnerships in 2022); used host diplomacy to improve worldwide recognition of ASEAN’s diplomatic role. Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia assumed the rotating chair of the ASEAN, G20, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 2022, and (iii) established an economic community and tried to lead in different issues of regional cooperation.

According to Swasti Rao, the Indo-Pacific region would be used as one of the testing labs for experimenting EU’s strategic autonomy. It needs to transform its image as a union with too many structures and not enough dynamism, while leadership and consistent political will are essential for this transformation.<sup>16</sup> The concept of “strategic autonomy” in India’s foreign policy, according to Kabir Taneja and Hasan Alhasan, is seen as a more recent iteration of “non-alignment”. India views strategic autonomy as alignment with partner states based on issues rather than ideologies. India’s management of this diplomatic design has always been difficult given its historical links to Moscow, rising strategic ties to Washington, and far more tense bilateral relations with its neighbour—China.<sup>17</sup>

India’s foreign policy, as mentioned by Priyanka Chaturvedi, is not predicated on adopting the “construct” of aligning with any power axis; rather, the nation is free to consider its own interests and take a stand. She argued that strategic autonomy does not mean unilateralism, but rather, building strategic partnerships.<sup>18</sup> Tomoko Kiyota at this point mentioned that Japan could learn from India’s strategic autonomy. She also argued that India does not line up with the majority of states when their policy might harm its national interests. Hence, India has achieved such

<sup>16</sup> Swasti Rao, “The Idea of Strategic Autonomy as Pushed by Emmanuel Macron: Key to EU’s Strategic Performance,” *The Diplomatist*, January 18, 2022, <https://diplomatist.com/2022/01/18/the-idea-of-strategic-autonomy-as-pushed-by-emmanuel-macron-key-to-eus-strategic-performance/>.

<sup>17</sup> Kabir Taneja and Hasan Alhasan, “The coming of strategic autonomy in the Gulf countries,” *ORF Commentaries*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-coming-of-strategic-autonomy-in-the-gulf/>.

<sup>18</sup> Priyanka Chaturvedi, “India’s Strategic Autonomy Does Not Mean Unilateralism,” *The Diplomat*, October 18, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/indias-strategic-autonomy-does-not-mean-unilateralism/>.

a strategic position by joining QUAD, pursuing neighbourhood and Act East Policy, and the latest Vaccine Moitri.<sup>19</sup>

S. Jaishankar in his book titled “The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World” argued that India rejects all alliances in the name of national interests, advocates plurilateralism and prefers multilateralism over alliances. He also delineated that India would accept contradictions resulting from the plurilateralism.<sup>20</sup> As the US and China are attempting to (re)shape the present world order, P S Suryanarayana argued that India is steadfast in its commitment to maintain its strategic autonomy and the country perceives both China and the US as partners.<sup>21</sup> According to Mohanan Bhaskaran Pillai, India has a strategic culture deep-seated in its history, and the idea of strategic autonomy, which was taken from the text of ancient Arthashastra of Kautilya, is its modern expression.<sup>22</sup> Aditi Malhotra and Usama Nizamani argued that India’s long-standing mistrust of reliance on or dominance by a single foreign power is a factor in the country’s desire for strategic autonomy.<sup>23</sup>

According to Sunil Khilnani et al., the main goal of India’s strategic autonomy is to give it the most options possible in its interactions with the outside world. By improving its strategic space and capacity for independent agency, India will have the most options possible for its own internal development.<sup>24</sup>

Herbert Wulf and Tobias Debiel argued that India applies a threefold approach i.e., promoting multilateralism at the global stage, bilateralism at the regional level with selected strategic partners and increasing involvement in clubs to create strategic space and self-assertion.<sup>25</sup> Shyam Saran argued for India’s integration with the global economy and achieving a high-growth economy to expand strategic

<sup>19</sup> Tomoko Kiyota, “India’s strategic autonomy: A lesson for Japan,” *Pacific Forum*, April 20, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (India: Harper Collins, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> P. S. Suryanarayana, “India’s Strategic Autonomy Mantra,” *ISAS Special Report*, no. 13 (05 July 2013): 2.

<sup>22</sup> Mohanan Bhaskaran Pillai, “Indian Strategic Culture: The Debates in Perspective,” March 16, 2020, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3555343>.

<sup>23</sup> Aditi Malhotra and Usama Nizamani, “Strategic Autonomy: Comparing India and Pakistan,” *South Asian Voices*, September 19, 2022, <https://southasianvoices.org/strategic-autonomy-comparing-india-and-pakistan/>.

<sup>24</sup> Sunil Khilnani et al., *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century* (India: Penguin, 2012), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Wulf and Tobias Debiel, “India’s ‘Strategic Autonomy’ and the Club Model of Global Governance: Why the Indian BRICS Engagement Warrants a Less Ambiguous Foreign Policy Doctrine,” *Strategic Analysis* 39, no. 1 (January 2015): 27–43.

autonomy.<sup>26</sup> Chietigj Bajpae expressed concern that with the changing geopolitical scenario, although India is in a good position to play a significant role in a number of important geopolitical flashpoints, its involvement often remains insignificant which may weaken its strategic autonomy.<sup>27</sup>

In his most recent book, “Strategic Autonomy and Economic Power: The Economy as a Strategic Theatre”, Vitor Bento made the case that the availability of strategic alternatives in state-to-state interactions is contingent upon strategic autonomy. He identified strategic control of the national economy to guarantee national economic strength that may serve as strategic power for a nation and grant it strategic autonomy. In this context, he used the examples of China and Germany.<sup>28</sup>

Johannes Plagemann observed that competition among major powers over connectivity projects blesses smaller countries. Bangladesh’s track record of spending on significant infrastructure reveals how Dhaka’s autonomy has been enhanced while Beijing, New Delhi, and Tokyo are eyeing for improving their connectivity to the East and South. He further argued that major powers practically recognise Bangladesh’s claim of being a “system ineffectual”, allowing the nation to garner benefits from relations with all major powers at the same time, so long as they do not press the country to take a side.<sup>29</sup> Lailufar Yasmin argued that Bangladesh is increasingly demonstrating its assertiveness and agenda-setting capacity in matters that affect its national interest in the regional context, even though it may take some time for the country to become a powerful agenda-setter in international politics.<sup>30</sup>

Akmal Hossain argued that economic interdependency among the Asian countries could encourage Bangladesh and the country is trying to join the regional economic groupings, and multilateral diplomacy could be complemented by bilateral initiatives.<sup>31</sup> The leitmotif of Bangladesh’s strategy, according to Rajiv Bhatia, has

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<sup>26</sup> Shyam Saran, “To expand India’s strategic autonomy, we need to get back to high growth economy fast,” *The Print*, October 07, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/to-expand-indias-strategic-autonomy-we-need-to-get-back-to-high-growth-economy-fast/746566/>.

<sup>27</sup> Chietigj Bajpae, “Is Strategic Autonomy a Boon or Burden for India?” *The Diplomat*, April 09, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/is-strategic-autonomy-a-boon-or-burden-for-india/>.

<sup>28</sup> Vitor Bento, *Strategic Autonomy and Economic Power: The Economy as a Strategic Theater* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Johannes Plagemann, “Small states and competing connectivity strategies: what explains Bangladesh’s success in relations with Asia’s major powers?” *The Pacific Review* 35, no. 4 (2022): 756–757.

<sup>30</sup> Lailufar Yasmin, “Bangladesh at 50: The Rise of Bangladesh that Can Say No,” *Security Nexus Perspectives*, (January 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Akmal Hossain, “Bangladesh’s New Foreign Policy Directions in Southeast and East Asia: Perspectives and Goals,” *Journal of Development and Cooperation* 12, no. 1 (2005):11.

been to acknowledge India's security and geopolitical sensitivities while defending Bangladesh's right to autonomy in managing its relations with China, Russia, and other countries. He then stated that Bangladesh needs to lead by example in promoting regional cooperation and strike a balance between its relations with China and India.<sup>32</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed contended that in order to minimise the constraints of foreign policy and make the choices a reality, Bangladesh must enter a new phase in its pursuit of energy and climate diplomacy and make a significant investment in soft power.<sup>33</sup> M Zakirul Islam argued that the current non-alliance foreign policy standing of Bangladesh has been generating satisfactory results so far in a peaceful environment. But in the recent changing environment, it may not produce satisfactory results. As such, Bangladesh needs to re-visit its policy and strategic stature by analysing the present situation and the international order.<sup>34</sup>

According to Ali Riaz, ongoing and gradual shifts in global geopolitics have moved the centre of gravity of power—both political and economic—to Asia and China. As a result, Bangladesh finds itself in a precarious but advantageous position due to the Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia and the US-China contestation in the Indian Ocean region. Additionally, he argued that while Bangladesh's foreign policy increasingly taking a hedging stance toward China and India, the nation's geographic constraints make it difficult for the country to pursue a dramatic realignment course. Given that the US is set to re-engage and concentrate on the Indo-Pacific region, he recommended that Bangladesh needs to seize the chance to deviate from the China-India binary choice and enhance its balancing capacity. He offered four options: status quo, muddling through, revising the course, or a radical realignment.<sup>35</sup>

Bangladesh, Anu Anwar argued, has been attempting to strike a balance between the difficulties brought on by solid strategic links with India and strong economic ties with China. This delicate balancing act, though, might become more difficult in the future as the region's great-power rivalry heats up and relations between Beijing and New Delhi deteriorate.<sup>36</sup> According to C Raja Mohan, Dhaka would be able to seek out new maritime opportunities in the Indo-Pacific and

<sup>32</sup> Rajiv Bhatia, "Bangladesh's India-China Balancing Strategy," Gateway House, March 07, 2019, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/bangladesh-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>33</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, "Bangladesh's Foreign Policy: Constraints, Compulsions and Choices," *BIISS Journal* 32, no. 3 (July 2011): 207.

<sup>34</sup> Commodore M Zakirul Islam, "Evolving Rivalry in the Bay of Bengal: Strategy Options for Bangladesh," *NDC Journal* 18, no. 2 (2019): 117.

<sup>35</sup> Ali Riaz, *Geopolitics of Pandemic: The Bangladesh Scene* (Dhaka: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, April 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Anu Anwar, "Bangladesh at 50: Navigating Strategic Survival," *Texas National Security Review*, April 26, 2021, <http://warontherocks.com/2021/04/bangladesh-at-50-navigating-strategic-survival/>.

play a bigger role in this area and beyond as a result of the significant geopolitical ramifications of Bangladesh's economic growth, including a shift in South Asia's centre of economic gravity to the east.<sup>37</sup> In order to maximise its economic gains from the BoB, Pathik Hassan contended that Bangladesh must uphold peace and the rule of law, regardless of its participation in the IPS or the BRI.<sup>38</sup> Shariful Islam mentioned that Bangladesh's foreign policy is based on peace, friendship and cooperation, and it maintains economic and development partnerships with both India and China.<sup>39</sup>

Analyses of the above literature show that most of the works on strategic autonomy are from the EU, the ASEAN, and Indian perspectives and they defined the strategic autonomy parameters for the EU, India and the ASEAN countries. Besides, a few literatures focusing on Bangladesh's geostrategic dilemma and balancing approach are available. Moreover, most of the literatures hardly gave detailed discussions on the strategic balance, but rather, they portrayed some policy suggestions in a short, cursory, and scattered way. Although the literatures are discussing the necessity for effective balance for emerging geopolitical realities, they provide no account of how effective the existing balancing strategy is and how it could be sharpened to face the emerging dilemmas. Based on the detailed analysis, this paper now attempts to bring the balancing strategy under a comprehensive approach which is the 'strategic autonomy' approach. Moreover, this paper has defined the parameters of strategic autonomy for Bangladesh and suggested some policy options to enhance strategic autonomy and sharpen its balancing capabilities.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 *Strategic Autonomy: Understanding the Concept and Relevant Debates*

The concept of "strategic autonomy" is essentially a contested one both in academia and politics. The meaning of the concept varies based on the timeframe, context, strategic environment, and desires of the subjective actors. It is not a new idea, rather, its origin can be traced back to millennia. The articulation of an 'ideal state' as being strong, confident and self-sufficient in ancient politics can be linked with it. Ancient Greek philosopher Thucydides admired the virtues of the city-state

<sup>37</sup> C Raja Mohan, "50 Years After Independence, Bangladesh Bursts into Geopolitics," *Foreign Policy*, March 25, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Pathik Hassan, "Bangladesh's balancing politics in the strategic Bay of Bengal," *South Asia Monitor*, December 28, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Shariful Islam, "Interpreting Sheikh Hasina's Foreign Policy," *Modern Diplomacy*, September 27, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/09/27/interpreting-sheikh-hasinas-foreign-policy/>.

of Athens and advised the citizens to “strengthen the empire in most respects so that it is sufficient for itself both in peace and in war”.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the idea of strategic autonomy has been centred on the fusion of power projection and self-reliance. Again, the concept was put forth in the 1998 St. Malo Declaration, which was signed by French President Jacques Chirac and British Premier Tony Blair with the intention of establishing a European security and defence policy, including a European military force with the capacity of autonomous action. The phrase itself then entered into the official discourse of EU policy, most notably in the 2013 Council Conclusions on Common Security and Defence Policy and the 2016 EU Global Strategy. In fact, the notion originated from the EU’s wish to conduct security and defence operations independently of other players, primarily the US.<sup>41</sup> Later, the concept gained new focus in the scholarship of international relations and politics when Indian foreign policymakers came up with the idea of the ‘India Way’—what they started to call ‘non-alignment 2.0’ or ‘strategic neutrality’ or ‘plurilateralism’. The prime objective of the idea is to enable India to navigate and balance its relationship with the US, Russia, and China.

Before discussing the meaning of the concept, it is helpful to understand what is not about it. First, not to be confused with autarky, isolationism, protectionism, or unilateralism; second, not to be confined to the field of security and defence, but relevant to most other policy areas; third, not only about defensive (resilience and self-reliance) but also about offensive (promoting own interests and values); and fourth, not a goal itself, rather a mean to reach the end.<sup>42</sup> The phrase ‘autonomy’ has multiple meanings. Generally, it denotes the ability to determine one’s own course and self-regulate (in an etymological sense), or a condition of less dependence, and more influence. Moreover, scholars distinguished between autonomy as ‘freedom to act’ and autonomy as ‘freedom from dependencies’ for deeper understanding. For example, Daniel Fiott argued that autonomy is not a binary choice (having autonomy or not), but rather, a spectrum that represents various degrees of autonomy and dependency.<sup>43</sup> Again, as Giovanni Grevi observed, perfect autonomy is not always desired or even feasible, but progress can be made to become more independent in

<sup>40</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War, Books I and II*, trans. Charles Forster Smith (London: William Heineman Ltd and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1935), 321.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Borrell, “Why European strategic autonomy matters,” EEAS, December 03, 2020, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en).

<sup>42</sup> Analysis and Research Team (ART), “Strategic Autonomy, Strategic Choices”, Council of the European Union General Secretariat, February 05, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49404/strategic-autonomy-issues-paper-5-february-2021-web.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Fiott, “Strategic autonomy: towards ‘European sovereignty’ in defence?” *EUISS Brief*, no. 12 (November 2018): 07.

pursuing one's own goals and ideals.<sup>44</sup> Since no other nation would have the ability to withstand pressure from other states and maintain overwhelming economic, industrial, military, and technical capabilities, only a lone superpower in a unipolar international system could theoretically hold ultimate strategic autonomy. Because even superpowers can be subject to pressure from their peers in bipolar or multipolar systems, their strategic autonomy is only relative rather than absolute.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, the phrase 'strategic' could be seen from three perspectives. First, from a narrow point of view, the interpretation of the word 'strategic' is synonymous with 'military', that means, strategic autonomy could merely be seen as the 'ability to use military force autonomously'. Second, from a broad perspective, it means reducing external dependencies on strategic areas (this perspective is in line with the core interests of the political community). Third, from an analytical perspective which derived from the classic Clausewitzian understanding of strategy argues that strategic autonomy is the "ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through."<sup>46</sup> There is another debate about whether strategic autonomy deals with the issues of isolationism or unilateralism or not. But critics argue that those phrases include "alone or in cooperation with third parties". For example, the EU's ambition for strategic autonomy does not exclude NATO; similarly, ASEAN's desire for autonomy always acknowledges China's role in economic affairs of the region. That means strategic autonomy is not only a foreign policy issue but also an issue linked with domestic political economy, security, and integration.

### 3.2 *Theoretical Lens*

Strategic autonomy is related to the question of how regional and global powers perceive the strategic importance of a country or how a country projects its national interests and pursues them. Moreover, it depends on the subjective view of a country and how it projects its future position in the international system. Here, Bangladesh has a scope to work on enhancing strategic autonomy since the presence of contending powers in the BoB region becomes inevitable; and major powers have a divergent approach to some burning issues relevant to the country. In this context,

<sup>44</sup> Giovanni Grevi, "Strategic autonomy for European choices: the key to Europe's shaping power," *EPC Discussion Paper* (July 19, 2019): 11.

<sup>45</sup> S. Kalyanaraman, "What is 'strategic autonomy'?" accessed September 20, 2023, [https://idsa.in/askanexpert/strategicautonomy\\_indiasecurity](https://idsa.in/askanexpert/strategicautonomy_indiasecurity).

<sup>46</sup> Barbara Lippert, et al., "European strategic autonomy: actors, issues, conflicts of interests," *SWP Research Paper*, no. 4 (March 2019): 5.

enhancing strategic autonomy will enable Bangladesh to construct and expand on its own narrative(s) regarding the security, development, and cooperation trajectory in the region and beyond. In this paper, the lens of neoclassical realism has been employed to explain how strategic autonomy relates internal and external realities with national interests and facilitates the state to navigate geopolitical dilemmas. Also, the classic Clausewitzian understanding of strategic autonomy has been reflected in the course of discussion of the paper. The following section delves into identifying some parameters of the strategic autonomy that a country should explore to make itself self-reliant and project its own priorities in the international theatre of politics.

### **3.3**     *Parameters of Achieving Strategic Autonomy*

Since the concept of strategic autonomy is contested and has no universally accepted definition, it is tough enough to identify its parameters. However, based on the literatures and interviews with the experts, this section tried to identify some key parameters of strategic autonomy.

First and foremost, a country needs a foreign policy doctrine. This doctrine will guide all other policy instruments, institutional actions, diplomatic efforts and material resources towards achieving foreign policy goals. The priorities of the state and the nature of its relationship with other regional and global powers will be determined based on this doctrine. A country may formulate a region-wise doctrine and make necessary changes in response to the changing realities. That means doctrine is not always like one size fits all, particularly in the case of powerful countries. A country may have multiple doctrines which may be a collection of some foreign policy strategies. For example, Rebalancing Asia is a doctrine of the US towards Asia; Neighbourhood First, Look East, and Plurilateralism, etc. are the doctrines of India; the Confidence Doctrine, Global Community and Global Contribution, etc. are the doctrines of Chinese foreign relations.

Second, a country needs economic might. Steady economic growth strengthens the country's confidence in the negotiation. The country should have the capacity to expand its export market abroad, the ability to draw Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), equip enough to sign Preferential Trade Agreements (PTA) and Free Trade Agreements (FTA), capitalising demographic dividend, etc. Self-sufficiency in producing raw materials might give extra economic milage to the economic prowess of a country.

Third, a country needs military prowess. It should have military deterrence in any adverse situation to its sovereignty. A country may have both defensive and offensive military prowess. The military should be well-trained and equipped.

Fourth, strategic geographic position is critical for achieving strategic autonomy. The size of the country, number of population (trained and educated), nature of the neighbourhood state, having a sea boundary or land lock position, having a sea port, etc.— all are equally significant factors in the pathway of achieving strategic autonomy.

Fifth, leadership role is another important criterion. A country needs not only to participate in global fora but also negotiate and play a leadership role, and contribute to the norm-setting. It should have the capacity to innovate new ideas for global peace and stability and turn itself into a role model for others. The ability to host and render leadership to regional, sub-regional and global platforms could help her achieve strategic autonomy.

Sixth, a country should have technological prowess and the capability of technological innovation. That means the country should have the ability to adapt to the new technology, digital governance and smart citizenship. The country needs innovative power in technology to join the race of innovation in the digital world, and to try to play some degree of leadership role. Moreover, the country should be introduced to newer technology of defence.

Seventh, a country needs soft power and the capacity to mobilise the soft power to achieve national interests or foreign policy goals. Economic solvency, rich cultural heritage, enriched history of art and music, geographic indicators, tourism potentials, etc. could enhance soft power. Popular diplomacy, people-to-people contact, mobilisation of diaspora, global cinema, etc. could be used as a critical tool for advancing the soft power towards attaining foreign policy goals and national interests.

Eighth, a country needs domestic political stability and consensus on projecting national interests. Domestic stability and consensus help to determine the doctrine and prioritise national security and development.

Ninth, the national character of a country impacts strategic autonomy. Democratic values, hard-working mentality of the people, the culture of peace, religious tolerance, etc. contribute to achieve strategic autonomy.

Tenth, a country needs to promote multilateralism and multilateral partnerships to advance strategic autonomy. Multilateralism could be promoted at global, regional or sub-regional levels. Multilateralism brings the issues of small states to the negotiation table, rational decisions come out on which everyone agrees, and the participatory actors can de-escalate their existing conflicts and they find scope to set the norms.

Last but not the least, a country should pursue continuous research on how to enhance strategic autonomy and project national interests in undertaking more assertive actions.

Now, before analysing the strategic autonomy of Bangladesh, it is important to understand the strategic background of the BoB region—its strategic significance, competition around it, the significance of Bangladesh as a littoral of the Bay, and emerging challenges or dilemmas of Bangladesh as a littoral country. Then, it would be easier to justify why the country should look for achieving greater strategic autonomy.

#### **4. The Evolving Strategic Scenarios in the BoB Region and the Dilemmas for Bangladesh**

##### **4.1 *Significance of the BoB and Strategic Competition***

The BoB, for centuries, has been a highway for trade, transport and cultural exchange. Nevertheless, the strategic importance of the BoB re-emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a result of the economic transformations of the littoral states and the connectivity impulse that came along with it. The “Act East” policies of the South Asian countries and the “Look West” policies of the Southeast Asian nations have paved the way. China’s dramatic rise in economic and strategic domains, and conversely, its vulnerabilities in the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) makes the Indian Ocean and the BoB region a critical hub. The intersection of these countries as well as their strategic interests has made the region a locus of competition between the countries of the region and beyond.

The Bay bears great strategic significance. Being the largest Bay in the world, it accounts for approximately 4.7 per cent of the global economy. Also, the BoB region today accounts for a population of almost 1.78 billion, and has a combined

GDP of approximately US\$7 trillion.<sup>47</sup> The Bay is bounded by Thailand to the east and India to the west, with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka as prominent littoral. The sea route crossing through the BoB is the shortest sea route between Persian Gulf suppliers and the Asian markets i.e., Japan, China, South Korea, Indonesia, and Pacific countries. One-fourth of the globally traded goods cross the Bay, particularly huge volumes of Persian Gulf oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG). This gives nations with limited energy resources a path to secure energy supply.<sup>48</sup> Besides, the BoB leads to the South China Sea (SCS) via the Malacca Strait. Those sea routes are very crucial to the economies of the SCS, i.e., China and Japan which explains the involvement of extra-littoral players in the Bay.<sup>49</sup> It is to be noted that the Malacca Strait is the key channel linking major economies like India, China, Japan, and South Korea with Africa and the Middle East. Out of eight oil chokepoints in the world, Malacca is the second-largest after the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, the protection of SLOCs in the Indian Ocean and the Bay became significant in demonstrating maritime power projection capabilities for the littoral and extra-littoral players in the BoB which has generated further competition and created concerns for the stability of the region.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, the BoB itself has huge untapped natural resources of oil, mineral ores, gas, fishing stocks, etc. which also draws economic and strategic interests of China, India, Japan and the US and encourages them to invest in those sectors.<sup>51</sup> Experts also argue that the BoB has no maritime boundary disputes unlike the SCS which signifies its growing importance for economic growth. Here to be mentioned, Bangladesh, India and Myanmar have successfully demarcated their disputed boundary through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) and Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) peacefully. Moreover, being situated at the borderline of two regional blocs: the ASEAN and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the BoB became a connecting corridor between the nations of South Asia and Southeast Asia that joined in creating the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997 as an intermingle of two doctrines ‘Look East’ by India and ‘Look West’ by Thailand. Another important aspect of the growing significance of the BoB is the growth rate of its littorals including Bangladesh which is helping to draw investment interest from big neighbours like China and India and also from the US. The most

<sup>47</sup> Tariq Karim, “The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific region,” *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Anu Anwar, “Positioning the Bay of Bengal in the Great Game of the Indo-Pacific Fulcrum,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 2 (March–April 2022): 118.

<sup>49</sup> Mohammad Humayun Kabir and Amamah Ahmad, “The Bay of Bengal: Next theatre for strategic power play in Asia,” *CIRR XXI*, no. 72 (2015): 201, DOI:10.1515/cirr-2015-0007.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with the Key Informant.

<sup>51</sup> Anwar, “Positioning the Bay of Bengal.”

critical part is the Bay's location at the epicentre of the Indian Ocean which scholars termed as the 'great middle bay' while terming the BoB as the 'lesser middle bay' in this great middle bay.<sup>52</sup> The BoB is also a key transit route between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans and the primary conduit for trade in energy to East Asia, much like its Pacific 'twin', the SCS. Therefore, in the ensuing decades, the BoB is projected to acquire a greater geostrategic role in the Indo-Pacific vision.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, along with its immense economic prospects, strategic centrality of the BoB is pushing an unprecedented struggle for influence by major powers including those of China, India, Japan, the US, and even Russia.<sup>54</sup>

However, the above discussion reveals that the BoB is gaining more momentum in terms of strategic importance, particularly for its importance as a SLOC, connectivity potentials, and untapped natural resources. All the major players are concentrating in the region with their respective strategic foreign policy enterprises, for example, China, through its 'Look South' policy, pouring significant infrastructure investments (under BRI and Global Development Initiative (GDI)) among the nations around the Bay; the US, as part of its 'Rebalancing Strategy', advanced its new enterprise of IPS, and QUAD alliance to contain China's overarching influence and channelise US's own interests; while India, a key littoral of the Bay and a major power in the region, focusing on 'Look East' approach to strengthen connections to Southeast Asia and the US. Besides, with rise of new blocs consisting of littorals and extra-littorals like BIMSTEC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to project their own priorities in the Bay led to more complex strategic competition in this dynamic region. Again, as the Bay is assumed to be the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific concept, it is becoming a place where strategic interests of the major powers of South and East Asia intersect.<sup>55</sup> Hence, with the intensified competition among the regional and extra-regional players in the Indo-Pacific region, the significance of the BoB is growing as a new frontier of both development and conflict.

<sup>52</sup> Tariq A. Karim, "Understanding the Importance of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal and the Indo-Pacific," National Bureau of Asian Research, May 21, 2022, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-the-importance-of-bangladesh-in-the-bay-of-bengal-and-the-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>53</sup> Retrieved from the interview with Key Informant.

<sup>54</sup> David Brewster, "The Bay of Bengal: The Indo-Pacific's New Zone of Competition," *The Strategist*, December 02, 2014, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-bay-of-bengal-the-indo-pacifics-new-zone-of-competition/>.

<sup>55</sup> David Brewster, "The Rise of the Bengal Tigers: The Growing Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal," *Journal of Defence Studies* 9, no. 2 (April–June 2015): 81–104.

## 4.2 *Putting Bangladesh at the Bay of Bengal Strategic Fulcrum and Emerging Dilemmas*

The geographic position of Bangladesh is at the epicentre of the Bay. A renowned scholar of Bangladesh, Ambassador Tariq A Karim perhaps put the best expression for the geographic position of Bangladesh at the BoB from the oceanic planet perspective. He pointed out that if anyone zooms on the oceanic planet from outer space, one would see the vast Pacific Ocean on the east, the Atlantic Ocean on the west, the Antarctic Ocean on the south, and the Indian Ocean at the centre of the oceanic geosphere.<sup>56</sup> The Indian Ocean is referred as the ‘great middle bay’ by geographers, and with zooming more, the BoB is seen as what geographers titled the ‘lesser middle bay’ at the great middle bay. Further zooming on the triangular BoB, Bangladesh appears at the zenith of the inverted funnel-shaped water body, placing it at the epicentre of this oceanic planet.<sup>57</sup> The Bay is also considered as the third neighbour and the Indian Ocean is the fourth frontier of Bangladesh.<sup>58</sup>

However, being in the lap of the BoB, Bangladesh has the longest sea beach in the world, Cox’s Bazar. It has crucial Saint Martin’s Island in its southern point, the only coral island. It has successfully solved maritime disputes with its neighbours and won a vast area in the BoB with huge untapped marine resources. After the demarcation of the maritime boundary, the total sea area of Bangladesh reached 2,07,000 square kilometres (sq. km.). Bangladesh has huge potential for the blue economy in the Bay. The BoB has 475 species of fish<sup>59</sup>, 17 types of mineral sands and uranium-thorium in 13 places. Also, Bangladesh acquired control of 8 out of 10 gas blocks from India and 13 from Myanmar as a result of the maritime conquest. From those blocks, it is possible to extract around 40 trillion cubic feet of gas.<sup>60</sup> The ports of Chittagong and Mongla became an important factor for regional maritime connectivity like the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) as well as regional and sub-regional transits, for example, transit for Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) and India’s transit to its Northeast states. Besides, among the littorals of the Bay, Bangladesh has done tremendous advancement in economic growth after India. The country is ready to graduate to a middle-income country in 2026 and preparing itself to be a

<sup>56</sup> Tariq A Karim, “The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific region,” *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Karim, “The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh.”

<sup>58</sup> Md. Shariful Islam, “Mapping the maritime role of Bangladesh,” *WhiteBoard*, September 17, 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Md Sajib Hossain and Nahin Mahfuz Seam, “Realising the untapped potential of marine fisheries resources of Bangladesh,” *The Business Standard*, September 28, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Nafiz Tahmid, “Blue Economy in Bangladesh: Prospects and Challenges,” *UNB*, November 23, 2021.

prosperous, developed and smart country by 2041. All those factors enhanced the strategic significance of Bangladesh before the regional and extra-regional powers.

Since, all the major powers are involved in competition and rivalry in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB regions, Bangladesh being at the centre of the BoB cannot avoid the shocks of the rivalry and impacts of the competition. Hence, Bangladesh is trying to navigate the competition, succeeded in some cases, but faced some challenges and limitations. Bangladesh has a dynamic relationship with regional and global powers. For instance, India is the closest neighbour having historical, cultural and economic ties; China is the strategic economic partner; the US is the top market for the Readymade Garments (RMG); Japan is the time-tested friend and the largest source of Official Development Assistance (ODA); and the relationship with Russia is historical and recent cooperation fostered due to assistance in constructing Bangladesh's first nuclear power plant. However, the dynamics of the rivalry and competition among the major powers created a dilemma for Bangladesh.

Although Bangladesh's ties with China are purely economic, India considers any deep engagement between the two could curtail its interests in South Asia.<sup>61</sup> Hence, when China tried to include Chattogram Port in its MSR vision, India expressed its reservation terming it as a 'string of pearls' to encircle India. Again, when Bangladesh wished to build a deep-sea port in Sonadia and China came to bid on the project, India showed its reservation. Then after a decade, Bangladesh accepted Japanese funding under the BIG-B initiative (a 'counter initiative' of China's entry into the BoB, as critics argue) to construct a deep-sea port at Matarbari, along with a variety of other umbrella projects such as coal power stations and cross-country road facilitating connectivity with Northeastern states of India.<sup>62</sup> Again, Bangladesh allowed a US company to build an LNG terminal in the deep-sea port near Payra. Nevertheless, events regarding the building of the deep-sea port portrayed well balancing capability of Bangladesh. Besides, the US came up with China's containment enterprise, that is IPS and invited Bangladesh to join. Bangladesh has clarified its position regarding its priority in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB region articulating the Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) while not joining any containment ambition of China's rival. Hence, Bangladesh-US ties are undergoing some disagreements regarding human rights and the democratic process, but the chaos of the Ukraine war pushed Russia-US rivalry to make Bangladesh a proxy ground for their battle of strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB region.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Retrieved form the Key Informant Interview.

<sup>62</sup> Anu Anwar, "As US, China Fight Over Bangladesh, India Is the Real Winner," *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2023.

<sup>63</sup> "Ukraine war, Russia-US rivalry makes things complex for Bangladesh: Report," *Prothom Alo*, January 19, 2023.

However, Bangladesh has its own priority in the BoB and the Indo-Pacific region, for example, promoting multilateralism, inclusive security and regional peace, economic development, promoting maritime cooperation and blue economy, fighting non-traditional security threats i.e., climate change and disaster management, preventing transnational crimes i.e., human trafficking, arms and drug smuggling, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, ensuring the supply of energy, and working as a conduit of cooperation among the competing powers and maximise own national interests. Therefore, in doing so, Bangladesh needs to be assertive enough to put its own priority in the negotiation agenda in the region and beyond. To implement its IPO, Bangladesh should sharpen its strategic capability. It also should be prepared for changing its foreign policy directions (if required) in the future in order to implement its development visions.

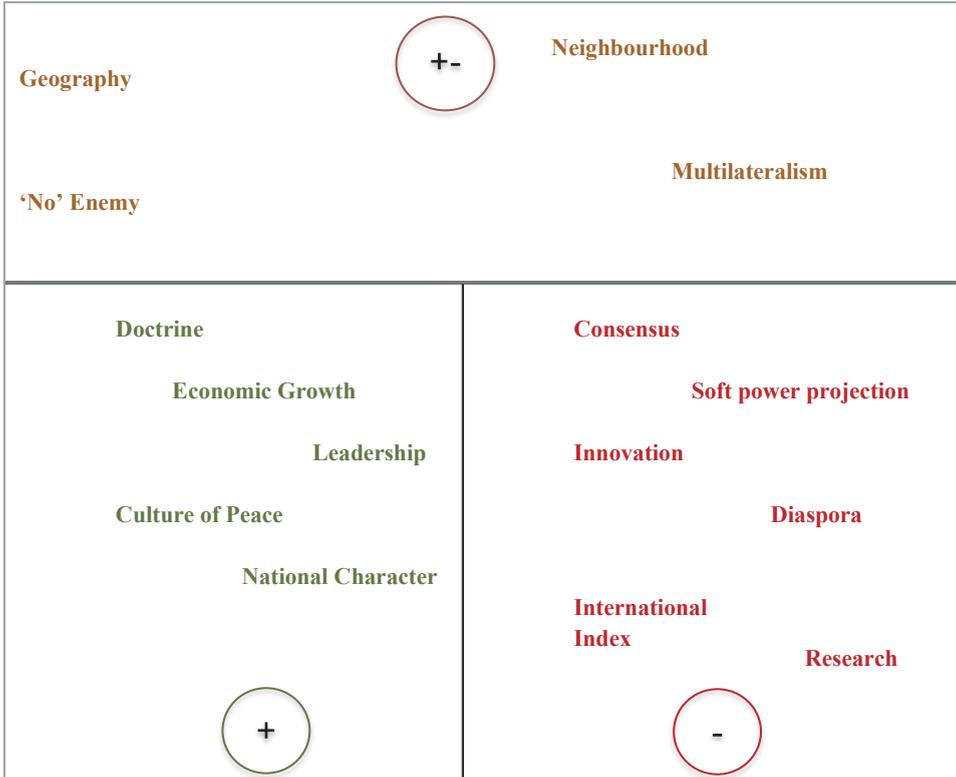
## **5. Strategic Autonomy of Bangladesh**

Before analysing the scenario of the strategic autonomy of Bangladesh, it is important to point out why Bangladesh needs to achieve greater autonomy. First, Bangladesh will be able to project its national interests and enhance its bargaining capacity at the regional and sub-regional levels. It should instrumentalise its strategic position at the heart of the Bay. Second, strategic autonomy will equip Bangladesh to assert and act towards achieving national development goals. It will also facilitate the country to extract benefits from the geopolitical competition and navigate the strategic rivalry that is going on in the BoB region. Third, strategic autonomy would help to face the potential challenges emerging after graduation from least developed countries (LDCs), and enable Bangladesh's position to prepare and adopt any alignment in the future if needed for the greater interests of the country. This section thus, has focused on the overall scenario of Bangladesh on the path to achieve greater strategic autonomy. This section primarily focuses on three types of parameters (Figure 2): strength and limitation both (+-), strength (+) and challenge/limitation (-).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Accumulated by the author based on literature and information from the key informants.

**Figure 2: Scenario of Achieving Greater Strategic Autonomy for Bangladesh**



**5.1 Strengths (+)**

To achieve greater strategic autonomy, the first strength of Bangladesh is foreign policy doctrine. All the foreign relations in Bangladesh revolve around the famous dictum coined by the Father of the Nation—“friendship to all, malice towards none”. This dictum also led Bangladesh towards the non-alignment movement and this posture largely contributed to its engagement with the international community during the troubled waters of the Cold War and still positioning the country in an easy situation while the issue of balancing or hedging comes in amid the emerging geopolitical realities. The Bangladesh doctrine is also fully reflected in Article 25 of the Constitution of Bangladesh which highlights the peaceful solution of conflicts through negotiation and dialogues, respect for the sovereignty of other countries and not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, and follow the UN Charter and

abide by international law to promote global peace. The recently published IPO could work as a doctrine of Bangladesh. This document enables the country to envision a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for shared prosperity for all. It also inspires Bangladesh's self-reliance and power projection that is for building a modern, knowledge-based developed country by 2041. Therefore, this doctrine could be crucial for achieving greater strategic autonomy for Bangladesh. This also highlights the 'culture of peace' in the Indo-Pacific societies.

The second point of strength is economic growth and development. Bangladesh is doing excellent in terms of economic development. It is the second-largest emerging economy in Asia after India. According to the latest Asian Development Bank (ADB) Report, its GDP is expected to grow at 5.3 per cent in 2023 and 6.5 per cent in 2024.<sup>65</sup> Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh's economy has shown resilience. People's livelihoods are enhanced due to the rise of per capita income, life expectancy and literacy among the population. The contribution of the service sector to GDP is increasing and Bangladesh is going to graduate from the LDCs in 2026. Therefore, economic growth has enabled its voice in the regional and global negotiation arrangements and financial institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO), and also helping to draw FDIs. Such a position obviously puts some leverage in its position to achieve strategic autonomy while helping to project its own priorities. The issue of economic growth and advancement is inherently connected with leadership roles. The key focus of present leadership is to strengthen Bangladesh's leadership role in regional affairs as well as uphold the cross-cutting concerns of the global South before the international community.

The third strong point for Bangladesh is the leadership role. Bangladesh has become a strong voice in the climate change movement. The country has become an exemplary model in climate negotiation and global norm-setting. The country was the President of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). During the presidency, it succeeded in setting several climate change priority areas: promoting international solidarity and public awareness, expanding scientific knowledge related to climate change, creating first trust fund of CVF/V20 fund and appointing thematic and special envoys for climate change.<sup>66</sup> Bangladesh has left a crucial legacy in shifting the narrative of climate vulnerability to resilience and prosperity. In 2021, the country

<sup>65</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Bangladesh Economy to Grow Moderately Amid Global Economic Slowdown* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2023), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22617/FLS230112-3>.

<sup>66</sup> "Bangladesh: Chair of Climate Vulnerable Nations' Forum," Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), accessed November 25, 2023, <https://thecvf.org/our-voice/news/bangladesh-chair-of-climate-vulnerable-nations-forum/>.

led the negotiation of Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) among the members of the WTO. As a result of the negotiation, LDCs will now have an extended transition period of 13 years, the longest extension period so far.<sup>67</sup> Bangladesh is also rendering its leadership role in sub-regional organisations like BIMSTEC and IORA. The BIMSTEC Secretariat is located in Bangladesh. The country is also leading the global peacekeeping missions being a top troop-contributing country and contributing immensely to norm-setting of the peacekeeping missions. Therefore, the leadership role of Bangladesh is gaining more acceptance amid its surprising economic transition which ultimately sharpens its capability of achieving greater strategic autonomy. Another objective of Bangladesh's leadership role is to promote regional and global peace through peaceful solutions to problems.

The fourth strong point for Bangladesh is a 'culture of peace'. Bangladesh is a peace-loving country. It always focuses on peaceful solutions to international disputes. It has left an incredible instance of a peaceful solution to maritime disputes with India and Myanmar. It has been trying to solve the Rohingya issue through negotiation and engaging multilateral actors for sustained and dignified repatriation of the Rohingya people in Myanmar. Bangladesh takes pride since its flagship proposal 'culture of peace' was adopted unanimously at the UN. On 13 September 1999, during the first term of government under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the resolution was adopted. The main idea behind the culture of peace is to prioritise dialogue and mutual understanding over confrontation and violence. Now, Bangladesh is raising its own views regarding the global conflicts and called for peace at the UN as well as on regional platforms. The country also called for a peaceful solution to the Ukraine crisis and solved the problem through negotiation and dialogue. Therefore, this kind of gesture of Bangladesh creates more acceptance as a peace-loving nation among the global community which is crucial to generate positive outcomes while negotiating national priorities with neighbours and beyond. The 'culture of peace', indeed, has become a major trait of the national character of Bangladesh.

The fifth strong point is national character. The culture of tolerance, peace and moderate religious belief made a unique character of the people of the country. The people are hardworking which shows their resilience against all kinds of odds. People have a special name and fame as a nation of hospitality. Resilience became a national character that speaks of the positive energy of the nation, and the resilience once was proved during the war of liberation, and now the people have shown strong

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<sup>67</sup> "Negotiations led by Bangladesh, TRIPS transition period for LDCs extended for 13 years," *The Daily Star*, June 29, 2021.

resilience in fighting natural disasters and climate change threats. Bangladesh being a climate vulnerable country, showed resilience and a path towards climate adaptation.<sup>68</sup> Despite all kinds of obstacles and resource constraints, still people are moving ahead. The country also achieved enviable success with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and preparing itself for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Therefore, national character and resilience could be essential factors for Bangladesh in international negotiations and help to achieve greater strategic autonomy.

However, although Bangladesh has strengths that could contribute to achieve greater strategic autonomy, there remains some mixed opinions as well. The following section has highlighted the areas that could be both strengths as well as limitations at a time.

## 5.2 *Strengths-Limitations (+-)*

There are some areas that can be interpreted from both ways—strengths and limitations. This sub-section focuses on those semi-strength/semi-limitation points.

The first point of semi-strength/semi-limitation is geography. Bangladesh is the largest delta in the world which hosts the longest sea beach and the biggest mangrove forest in the world. It is situated in the Tropic of Cancer. The country is blessed with numerous rivers, among them, 54 rivers flow from outside, particularly through the upper riparian India. Due to sufficient rainfall, the lands here are fertile enough for agricultural production and the attainment of food security. But the geographic position also made it the prey of man-made and natural calamities. Heavy rainfall causes severe floods bringing heavy loss of life every year. Southern parts of the country are prone to salinity intrusion which is causing severe damage to lives and ecosystems of that part of the country. Natural disasters like tropical cyclones are carrying heavy tolls every year and creating new problems of climate migration. The most severe tragedy of Bangladesh's geography is being engulfed by water politics, particularly by the upper riparian countries. This is bringing severe drought in the Teesta basin leaving thousands of people in the northern part of the country into poverty and unemployment. Therefore, this tragedy of geography shows both the resilience and vulnerability of the people of the country, which might influence the path of achieving strategic autonomy.

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<sup>68</sup> Redaktion, "Bangladesh and the resilient character of its nation," *Society*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.society.at/bangladesh-and-the-resilient-character-of-its-nation/>.

The second point is Bangladesh's neighbourhood. India and Myanmar are the two neighbours, while the BoB is considered as the third neighbour. Bangladesh and India share cultural and economic bondage, and India's contribution to Bangladesh's birth as an independent nation is undeniable. Critics argue that India has a sort of geopolitical influence over the South Asian countries—either it is trade or connectivity. For example, Bangladesh's initiative to import electricity directly from Nepal has been intervened by India. Sometimes, Bangladesh also faces backlash regarding economic cooperation with China amid the growing Sino-India rivalry. Bilateralism is another crucial limitation for Bangladesh in dealing with India. India does not allow third parties in bilateral dealings, which more or less led to the fate of the Teesta water-sharing issue into despair. Another limitation is that the West, particularly the US views its relationship with Bangladesh through the lens of great power rivalry, particularly through Sino-US and Sino-Indian competition, and is trying to decouple Bangladesh from reliance on Beijing. Finding insignificant space in the strategic partnership spectrum of the West (though only to curtail China's influence, the US is terming Bangladesh as strategic partner) is another challenge for Bangladesh to project its priorities in the Indo-Pacific and BoB region.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian neighbour of Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh and Myanmar have bilateral trade relations, the Rohingya issue emerged as a major drawback for their prospects of a functional relationship. Myanmar could be a major gateway for Bangladesh to enter into the ASEAN markets. However, complex dynamics of the relationship with neighbours could curtail Bangladesh's prospects in achieving strategic autonomy, as the famous saying goes, one can change one's friend but cannot change neighbours. The third point is 'no enemy'. In *de jure*, Bangladesh has no enemy. This became possible because of its non-alignment posture and 'friendship to all' dictum. This dictum is enabling Bangladesh to reap benefits from economic cooperation and infrastructure connectivity. But, considering the perspective of strategic autonomy, the point of 'no enemy' denotes some kind of dormancy in asserting foreign policy interests in the international system and power projection remains weak. If there remains an 'enemy' in front, preparation and enthusiasm become strong on all fronts—in economy, technology, and innovation.

The fourth point is multilateralism. Bangladesh is the ardent proponent of multilateralism both at global, and regional or sub-regional levels. The country believes in multilateral engagement and collective efforts ranging from economic

<sup>69</sup> Mubin S Khan, "Washington increasingly views its relationship with Dhaka through the lens of great power rivalry," *The Business Standard*, November 26, 2023.

affairs to energy to climate change. The country is a responsible member of the UN system and considers it as the crucial platform to mitigate conflicts and ensure shared prosperity and global justice. Moreover, Bangladesh tries to avoid any type of military or security alliances, other than economic alliances or blocs. Bangladesh coined the idea of SAARC to promote cooperation among the South Asian countries. Bangladesh is also partnering in BIMSTEC, IORA for ensuring greater connectivity in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB region. Multilateralism bears some leverage for Bangladesh i.e., helps in standard setting, particularly gives a voice for the customised needs and helps to work as a conduit between conflicting parties and extract benefits from the competition among the major powers. However, although multilateralism is an effective response strategy for Bangladesh, the strategy receives setbacks while dealing with its biggest neighbour India. This is because—India follows bilateralism in its foreign policy while dealing with issues with its neighbours. Here, challenges ensue while dealing the problems of a transnational nature and seeking a multilateral response, for example, the transnational water sharing issue and water negotiation between Bangladesh and India is the best example of irony begets from the dilemma of bilateralism vs. multilateralism. China is blamed for unilateral withdrawal of water from the Brahmaputra River and the river serves as a proxy of Sino-Indian conflict.<sup>70</sup> However, India is not willing to engage China in the water negotiation process as the country is committed for bilateralism. Therefore, the multilateralism of Bangladesh and the bilateralism of India generated a kind of irony, and the Teesta water sharing issue remained unresolved bringing untold suffering to the millions who depend on the flow of Teesta water on Bangladesh's side.

### 5.3 Challenges or Limitations (-)

There are some challenges that might impede the possibility of achieving greater strategic autonomy for Bangladesh. This section, in particular, focuses on those challenges or limitations.

The first limitation is a lack of national consensus and continuity on foreign policy goals. Domestic political stability and consensus, and continuity of foreign policy goals are *sin qua non* for integrated projection of national interests in the international arena. Bangladesh, however, lacks such consensus. Domestic political changes bring shifts in foreign policy doctrines and national interests are projected in line with the divisive agenda of domestic politics. For example, major two political

<sup>70</sup> Sharma, Kiran, Sanskrita Bharadwaj and Faisal Mahmud, "Bangladesh, Brahmaputra serve as proxy for Sino-Indian conflict," *Nikkei Asia*, July 26, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-s-Age-of-Hydropolitics/Bangladesh-Brahmaputra-serve-as-proxy-for-Sino-Indian-conflict>.

parties maintain different foreign policy orientations towards neighbours India, Myanmar, Pakistan, even the US, Russia, or towards the Middle East. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's regime maintained a good relation with India but post-Mujib regimes pivoted away from that stance. Military regimes, and later BNP emphasised (as economic factors dominated the discourse) strengthening alignment with the US, China, and the Arab states which were long-standing allies of Pakistan. During the Zia and Ershad regimes, the relationship with India experienced a significant downfall, which continued during the Khaleda Zia regime as well. Later, after the assumption of AL in power again in 2009, both countries consolidated the partnership and started working together to solve the mutual problems.<sup>71</sup> Such differences between the political parties in foreign policy directions, sometimes, hinder the negotiation strategy and reduce the bargaining capacity of Bangladesh towards a win-win relationship. Thus, this divisiveness and non-consensus in foreign policy directions weakened the potentiality of achieving greater strategic autonomy by shrinking bargaining space from time to time. India and the US can be the best examples in that case where any changes in domestic politics of those countries, it does not mean any fundamental change in the basic foreign policy directions.

The second limitation is absence of soft power projection. Though Bangladesh's brand value increased by around 37 per cent (US\$508 billion in 2023, up from US\$371 billion in 2022)<sup>72</sup> and stood second after India in Asia, it has fallen in Soft Power Ranking 2023. The country ranked 97<sup>th</sup> position which is even farther below the Maldives (59<sup>th</sup> position) and Pakistan (84<sup>th</sup> position). Again, Bangladesh ranked 105<sup>th</sup> in the Global Innovation Index (GII) out of 132 countries. Although the country has done better in innovation output (ranked 89<sup>th</sup>), but poorly performed in innovation input (ranked 114<sup>th</sup>).<sup>73</sup> However, Bangladesh faces many obstacles in carrying out its soft power initiatives, particularly in trying to establish itself as a global brand because of a lack of digital knowledge and innovation, a dearth of skilled manpower and investment in infrastructure. Besides, negative impacts in brand value might come from Bangladesh's appearances in global media due to incidents like illegal migration, industrial accidents, traffic jam and road accidents, political violence in the street, etc.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, Bangladesh needs to improve its competitiveness through enhancing creativity and innovation. Soft power projection

<sup>71</sup> Bibhuti Bhusan Biswas, "Domestic Bases of Foreign Policy: The case of Bangladesh's Policy towards India," *Bangladesh Political Science Review* 15, no. 1 (June 2022): 258–162.

<sup>72</sup> "Nation Brands 121 2023 Ranking," Brand Finance, accessed December 23, 2023, <https://brandirectory.com/rankings/nation-brands/>.

<sup>73</sup> "Global Innovation Index 2023," accessed December 23, 2023, <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-2000-2023/bd.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> Razia Sultana, "Global Soft Power Index 2023: How is Bangladesh doing?" *The Daily Star*, April 16, 2023.

is connected with popular diplomacy. Despite Bangladesh possesses numerous soft power capabilities, it remains unprojected. Here, projection is important. Soft power capability should be projected to promote national doctrine and achieve the national goals. For example, Bangladesh has a rich culture of arts, music, Geographical Indication (GI) products and so on, but those should be channelised through public diplomacy, people to people contact. Global cinema could be the best instrument to uphold Bangladeshi culture, as well as it could leverage economic benefits through monopolising box-office economy.

The third limitation is the divisive diaspora. Diaspora plays an important role in a country's politics, economics and society. They become a great source of remittance. But diaspora can help their origin country by joining the politics of the host country. Indian diaspora influences the politics of the host country and tries to make favourable policy outcomes for India. In the UK, the US, Canada, South Africa, the Indian diaspora became an influential factor. They are exerting electoral impact, and spreading soft power through yoga, ayurveda, Bollywood, and Indian cuisine across the globe. The irony is that despite being the big source of remittance, the Bangladeshi diaspora failed to spread soft power and exert political influence in the host country due to their divisiveness in line with the domestic politics of Bangladesh.<sup>75</sup> Sometimes, AL and BNP supporters among the diaspora became divided and committed clashes in many cases.<sup>76</sup> The spectre of divisiveness in national politics also grasped diaspora unity which is generating unhealthy practices and conflicts. Bangladeshi diaspora can play a significant role through trade facilitation, remittances, FDIs, entrepreneurial endeavours, facilitating aid, and knowledge and skill transfer. For example, during COVID-19 pandemic, the Bangladeshi diaspora played a significant role in securing vaccines. Bangladeshis living in Australia have applied to the parliament of the country to deliver 50 million vaccines to Bangladesh as a gift. However, the Bangladeshi diaspora can enhance the brand image of Bangladesh as they are contributing to politics, society and scientific fields of the host nations through specialised skills, knowledge, and technical capabilities. Such a role could play a crucial role in facilitating the country's foreign policy goals in return. Therefore, it must engage the diaspora in the process of advancing national interests through proper policy intervention (the government has prepared the Diaspora Policy 2023). Bangladesh's global standing can be enhanced by ensuring the diaspora's engagement in critical sectors such as country branding, diaspora diplomacy, trade, diaspora tourism, and the creation of diaspora networks.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Interview with the Key Informant.

<sup>76</sup> "AL rally attacked outside UN headquarters in NY," *The Financial Express*, September 29, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Nasim Ahmed, "Integrating Bangladeshi diaspora into Bangladesh," *The Daily Star*, October 24, 2023.

The fourth limitation is technological prowess and innovation. Though Bangladesh is digitalising itself and doing better in information and communications technology (ICT) exports, its technological prowess and innovation are lagging far behind than the other countries of Asia. Indian people, for example, are leading tech giants like Google, IBM, etc. The innovative skills of the Indian diaspora and their tech-savvy attitude largely contribute to their host and origin country. They are growing their information technology (IT) industry in the Silicon Valley. Indian diaspora has a global presence in multinational corporations as well.

The fifth limitation is an international index. Despite Bangladesh is performing well in human development and economic index, it is doing the reverse in other indexes particularly in the Democracy Index (DI 2023: 73<sup>rd</sup>), Corruption Perception Index (CPI 2022: 147<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries) and World Happiness Report (WHR 2023: 118<sup>th</sup> out of 137 countries) etc. Those indicators create such a gloomy image which might hamper foreign investments and economic assistance. Therefore, a fall in the global image may curtail the leverage of attaining strategic autonomy.

Last but not least, there is a lack of extensive and dedicated research on projecting national capacity, sector-wise self-reliance and assertion in projecting self-interests in the international arena. Nevertheless, to achieve greater strategic autonomy through minimising the challenges, new strategic options need to be explored. The following sub-section has focused on potential policy options to overcome the challenges and achieve greater strategic autonomy.

#### **5.4 Policy Options and Strategic Outlook**

Based on the suggestions of the key informants and individual research of the authors, this paper has suggested the following steps to enrich the path of achieving greater strategic autonomy for Bangladesh to balance the delicate geopolitical realities in the BoB as well as in the Indo-Pacific region: first, Bangladesh needs to initiate a “community” comprising the BoB littorals. The idea of building a community would provide a sense of cohesiveness among the societies, cultures, economies, and cooperation mechanisms of the BoB region. The BoB region has all the features to be a community<sup>78</sup> with about 1.7 billion people, nearly US\$7 trillion of GDP, fast-growing economies, dispute-free maritime space, shared history and culture, and also the region became a strategic ground of competing narratives of the major powers.

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<sup>78</sup> Karim, “The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh.”

Again, existing mechanisms of sub-regional cooperation like IORA, BIMSTEC, SAARC, etc. could facilitate and contribute further to the idea of cohesion. Therefore, building a sense of cohesive “community” could be instrumental to combat ecological threats and ensure benefits from a sustainable blue economy. For example, the BoB Community could be fostered through establishing the Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation Association (BoBECA). This framework could be used to foster peaceful connectivity, trade and social development. To foster the BoB Community, the idea of “BIMSTEC-Plus” appeared in the discourse<sup>79</sup> since SAARC remained non-functional due to the India-Pakistan rivalry. Two ASEAN countries are already boarded in BIMSTEC, other countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore could join to form a wider community. By doing so, the extended neighbourhood would be a part of immediate neighbourhood and the BoB Community would become a common agenda of all littorals.

Despite being an emerging nation, Bangladesh has constantly proved its worth by showing courage and vision to take on ambitious projects. Bangladesh has pioneered the SAARC movement, successfully championed sub-regional cooperation i.e., the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), BIMSTEC, BBIN configuration, etc. Since 2009, Bangladesh has shown a strong desire to restore and take up its historically significant role as the centre of communication between Southeast, East Asia and South Asia.<sup>80</sup> This desire for a leadership role may face emerging geopolitical challenges, but if Bangladesh could remain at the forefront of advocating for the gradual expansion of the current BBIN-BIMSTEC process into a larger BoBECA configuration, it could continue to stay at the course and render farsighted statesmanship.<sup>81</sup> Such kind of leadership would serve the self-interests of Bangladesh and also collective regional interests which would ultimately enhance its national security. This regional governance framework, nevertheless, would be a model for the region. It would also enhance strategic autonomy by allowing Bangladesh to play a conduit among the conflicting parties in the region and balance the rivalry.

Second, Bangladesh should avoid any security alliances in the BoB and the Indo-Pacific region, rather extend its economic diplomacy in multiple spectra of cooperation to achieve more resilience in economic development; third, Bangladesh

<sup>79</sup> Tariq A. Karim, “Bangladesh’s Role in Forging a Bay of Bengal Community,” National Bureau of Asian Research, February 18, 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/bangladeshs-role-in-forging-a-bay-of-bengal-community/>.

<sup>80</sup> Tariq A. Karim, “Imagining a Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation framework: Towards a Bay of Bengal Community,” *Dhaka Courier*, April 16, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Karim, “Imagining a Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation framework.”

should devise a plan of action to implement its IPO and project its own priority in the region. A plan of action would help to define sector-wise actions required and select economic ventures within it; fourth, Bangladesh should ensure domestic political stability and greater domestic consensus on national interests and foreign policy doctrine. Major political parties should prioritise national interest other than narrow party interests; fifth, Bangladesh should be proactive and exert diplomatic efforts to pursue developed countries to consider Bangladesh affairs separately, and explain Bangladesh's own security and development agenda in the region; sixth, Bangladesh should not only focus on the new soft power potentials, but also concentrate on utilising existing capability, and use available platforms like global cinema, social media to make a positive image of the country; seventh, Bangladeshi missions should work intensely to bring all the diaspora under a single umbrella and inspire them to be united about national interests without political division. Missions could arrange regular briefings on the national interests and spread the message through social media platforms to reach the diaspora; eighth, Bangladesh should invest more in technological innovation (through promoting scientific research) as well as technological education; ninth, Bangladesh should strengthen its functional relationship with Myanmar, particularly in trade and connectivity; and finally, Bangladesh should capitalise its brand name, and recover its image through improving in the corruption index.

## **6. Conclusion**

The concept of strategic autonomy is contested as its definition varies depending on the nature of the power structure of international relations, the interests of the individual states, and the significance of the individual state before the international community. Again, achieving absolute autonomy is impossible whereas every sovereign country has some sort of strategic autonomy. Hence, due to this ambiguity, the term 'greater strategic autonomy' has been used in the context of Bangladesh. Although the idea is not new, its recent use has come into the limelight through the discussion of India's new navigation strategy between the US, China and Russia. However, the definition of this concept lacks universal acceptance, and thus, this paper has used the classic Clausewitzian understanding, "ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political, and material wherewithal to carry these through". In this paper, some key parameters of strategic autonomy have been identified i.e., a foreign policy doctrine, military prowess, economic might, technological power, strategic geographic location, soft power projection capacity and research on how to achieve strategic autonomy.

However, the discussion on strategic autonomy is important amid the new realities in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB regions, particularly for Bangladesh, a key littoral of the Bay. The BoB becomes a critical hub of competition, cooperation and confrontation among the major powers due to its immense geoeconomic and geopolitical significance. Since Bangladesh lies at the epicentre of the BoB, any rivalry or competition will affect the country. Nevertheless, Bangladesh has its own priorities and agenda in this region. Therefore, to maximise its own national interests by minimising the competition among the powers, balancing the geopolitical rivalry, and enhancing its economic interest, the country needs to equip itself. Achieving greater strategic autonomy could be the best way for emerging countries like Bangladesh to navigate or balance the troubled waters and strategic game across the BoB and the Indo-Pacific region.

Bangladesh has a number of strong and weak points in its course of achieving greater strategic autonomy. Its strong sides are—it has a well-articulated foreign policy doctrine, maintains leadership roles in the international arena and bears a unique national character. Semi-strength/semi-limitation points (can be both strong and weak points simultaneously) are neighbourhood (dominant India and Myanmar), the tragedy of geography, and the status of ‘no enemy’. Besides, Bangladesh promotes multilateralism and collective engagement i.e., the UN, subregional blocs i.e., BIMSTEC, IORA, etc. which is a key strength of its foreign policy. However, irony of multilateralism while dealing with issues with some countries is a limitation as well. The further points of limitations include a lack of domestic consensus on national interests and doctrine, poor ability to project its existing soft power, divisive diaspora, unpleasant position in some indices, lack of dedicated research on autonomy, and poor status in technological innovation and leadership. However, Bangladesh should be proactive to channelise its resources to achieve greater strategic autonomy: promoting and establishing a BoB Community of Littorals could enhance Bangladesh’s leverage in the BoB region, avoiding security alliances and extending economic diplomacy to achieve economic resilience in the Indo-Pacific as well as the BoB region. Besides, Bangladesh should devise an action plan to implement the IPO, and initiate sector-wise actions; ensure domestic political stability and greater domestic consensus on national interests and foreign policy doctrine; bring the diaspora under a single umbrella and inspire them to be united on national interests without political schism; strengthen functional relationship with Myanmar; and invest more on technological innovation and research to play a leadership role in the digitalised world.