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REVISITING BANGLADESH-RUSSIA RELATIONS: REFLECTIONS OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

Abstract

Bangladesh enjoys a longstanding relationship with the Russian Federation (the then Soviet Union), which played a pivotal role in Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971. Standing on a solid platform of friendship and trust, bilateral relations have been somewhat less productive compared to expectations. However, under the premiership of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh-Russia relations have been experiencing a revitalisation with enhanced cooperation in the areas of energy and technology, trade, and defence over the last decade. At a time when Bangladesh enjoys its golden jubilee of independence and moves forward to cross the threshold of the LDC, Russia seems to occupy a central place in the country's foreign policy. Therefore, it is essential to look back on Dhaka-Moscow relations more theoretically, which in turn would guide us to comprehend the future trajectory of this significant partnership. Despite the dearth of academic literature on Bangladesh-Russia bilateral relations, this paper primarily attempts to revisit Bangladesh-Russia relations based on a qualitative analysis of available secondary data. Relying on the theoretical tool of neoclassical realism, the paper shows how systemic constraints and domestic factors, particularly leadership factors, influenced Bangladesh's foreign policy towards Russia.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Russia, Neoclassical Realism, Cold War, Leadership

1. Introduction

Bangladesh has been maintaining a profound relationship with Russia, which originated in the early 1970s. The Russian Federation, the former Soviet Union, played a pivotal role in Bangladesh's (the then East Pakistan's) 1971

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Liberation War. It is often argued that the war was not merely a struggle against West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan), but rather had much broader significance on the global stage under the Cold War realities. The official records of the United States Department of State reveal how the war led the two superpowers—the United States (US) and the Soviet Union—close to a possible nuclear conflict.¹ The uncompromising pro-Pakistani and pro-Chinese stance of ‘Nixon-Kissinger Dyad’, however, fell short against the overwhelming support from the Soviet Union and India. Although the Cold War geopolitical calculations influenced Soviet policy towards Bangladesh during the Liberation War, the newly born state soon realised that Indo-Soviet assistance could hardly fulfil its huge economic and humanitarian demands in the post-independence era. As a result, Bangladesh sought to strengthen its relations with the Western development partners. However, that initiative did not hamper Bangladesh’s balanced approach *vis-à-vis* the two superpowers. During Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s regime (1972–75), Bangladesh relied on the Soviet Union as a trusted friend, essentially to remain under its security umbrella and receive necessary diplomatic support for the country’s recognition and admission into different international organisations. The bilateral relations somewhat deteriorated during the successive regimes of General Ziaur Rahman and General H.M. Ershad in the late 1970s and 1980s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bangladesh gave official recognition to the Russian Federation on 29 December 1991, as a successor state. It was, however, not until the latter half of the 1990s that Bangladesh-Russia relations under the premiership of Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, started to get momentum.

Since 2009, with Sheikh Hasina’s assumption of the premiership for the second time, Bangladesh-Russia relations have been experiencing a renaissance with increased cooperation in the areas of energy, technology, trade, and defence. During her official visit to Moscow in 2013, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina concluded the biggest-ever arms deal in Bangladesh’s history, worth US\$1 billion, to procure Russian weapons and military technology. Russia also committed a US\$22 billion loan to Bangladesh for the construction of its first nuclear power plant in Rooppur, which is progressing smoothly. Likewise, Bangladesh-Russia bilateral trade has made substantial headway in recent years, and both countries are working closely to boost it further. Although Russia still lags behind other global powers such as the US, China, Japan, or the European Union (EU) in terms of foreign aid, trade, and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) directed towards Bangladesh, the recent trend truly shows that “Russia is coming back to Bangladesh ‘seriously’ and ‘for a long time’,” as once

¹ “Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1954,” US Department of State Archive, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/88315.htm>.

noted by Russian Ambassador to Dhaka Alexander Nikolaev.² The present political regime of Sheikh Hasina believes that Bangladesh-Russia relations have had a firm historical foundation based on trust and considers Russia as a potential source of energy and defence cooperation, in particular. Russia, on the other hand, under the firm leadership of President Vladimir Putin, considers that bilateral relations have become increasingly dynamic and looks forward to advancing cooperation both at the state level and on different multilateral platforms.

Although write-ups on the Soviet Union and its foreign policy were frequently seen during the time of the Cold War, the post-Cold War era saw a relatively less academic focus on Russia. Russian expansionist role in recent years and the debate around Russia's return as a great power, however, have gained much academic attention since the last decade.³ Again, most of the academic pieces on Russia's bilateral relations concentrate on either its immediate neighbours or the regional and global powers. In the existing literature, there is also a limitation in understanding Bangladesh-Russia relations based on neoclassical realism. In this aspect, Lailufar Yasmin articulates the historical development and the rapprochement process between Bangladesh and Russia. The author argues that although the former Soviet Union supported Bangladesh during the Liberation War, bilateral relations began to deepen in the latter part of the 1990s.⁴ Mohammad Abdul Halim analyses the foreign policy of Bangladesh, where the author explains that bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Russia reached a low point due to the expelling of several Soviet diplomats from Bangladesh.⁵ In terms of relations between Bangladesh and Russia, Drong Adrio focuses on the shifting patterns of Bangladesh's foreign policy. The author makes the case that domestic changes in political regimes are of utmost importance for understanding these relations.⁶ In his analysis of how Russia contributed to the creation of Bangladesh, Vijay Sen Budhraj shows how the Soviet Union conducted its foreign policy during the East Pakistan crisis in light of the realities of the Cold War.⁷ After analysing the available existing literature, the authors find that there is a significant dearth of academic literature on Russia's relationship with Bangladesh. Even Bangladeshi authors have not emphasised on this bilateral

² Nurul Islam Hasib, "Russia Coming Back to Bangladesh," *bdnews24.com*, March 28, 2014.

³ Andrei Melville and Tatiana Shakleina, eds., *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005).

⁴ Lailufar Yasmin, "Bangladesh and the Great Powers," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, eds. Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 395–396.

⁵ Mohammad Abdul Halim, "Foreign Policy: A Review," in *Bangladesh: On the Threshold of Twenty-First Century*, eds. Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Fakrul Alam (Dhaka: Asiatic Society Bangladesh, 2022).

⁶ Drong Adrio, "The Effects of the Political Changes in the Relationship between Bangladesh and Russia (USSR) in 1971–2014," *Bulletin of RUDN University* 1 (2015).

⁷ Vijay Sen Budhraj, "Moscow and the Birth of Bangladesh," *Asian Survey* 13, no. 5 (1973): 482–495.

relation much during the recent decades except for time-to-time newspaper reporting. The Bangladesh-Russia relationship, which is already flourishing and promising far more opportunities in near future, therefore, demands greater academic attention. In this context, this paper intends to investigate two key questions. First, how do systemic constraints and domestic factors, particularly leadership factors, influence Bangladesh's foreign policy towards Russia? Second, what will be the future outlook of Bangladesh-Russia relations? In answering the questions, the paper not only provides a brief overview of Bangladesh-Russia relationship across some major issue areas but also attempts to analyse the bilateral relations through a theoretical lens of neoclassical realism. The paper is a qualitative work that mainly relies on secondary data collected from academic books, journal articles, newspaper reports, policy papers and verified online resources. Primary data have been collected from interviews following the telephone survey method.

The paper is organised as follows: As the key objective of this paper is to theoretically explain the foreign policy behaviour of Bangladesh towards Russia, the paper analyses the basic theoretical discussions on neoclassical realism, the latest approach in the realist tradition to study foreign policy, in the second section. In the next section, the paper discusses a brief overview of Bangladesh-Russia relations. Section four investigates the factors that influenced Bangladesh's foreign policy towards Russia based on a neoclassical realist approach to understand how systemic constraints and leadership factors influenced bilateral relations between these two countries. In section five, the paper demonstrates the future outlook of Bangladesh-Russia relations. Finally, the paper concludes by establishing the significance of neoclassical realism as an effective theoretical tool to understand Bangladesh's foreign policy towards Russia, which is expected to guide us in comprehending the future trajectory of this bilateral partnership.

2. A Neoclassical Realist Explanation of Bangladesh-Russia Relations

Among all the theories, realism, often also referred to as political realism, is the most influential and well-established theoretical perspective in understanding international relations.⁸ Although realism emerged as a dominant theoretical framework since the end of World War II, it has a long historical tradition and a number of variants. Realism, as the name suggests, attempts to explain the reality of international politics 'as it is, not as it ought to be'.⁹ Despite some disagreements among

⁸ Jill Steans, Lloyd Pettiford, Thomas Diez, and Imad El-Anis, *An Introduction to International Relations Theory: Perspectives and Themes* (London: Routledge, 2010), 53.

⁹ Knud Erik Jorgensen, *International Relations Theory: A New Introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 78.

different variants of realism, they commonly view the state to be the primary actor in world politics and consider the concept of power as the key to define state behaviour. While classical realism emphasises on ‘egoism’, neorealist tradition is centred on the concept of ‘anarchy’.¹⁰ According to classical realists, human beings are inherently selfish, and that ambition manifests itself in international politics as a struggle for power.¹¹ Neorealism, on the contrary, is a departure from such a pessimistic view regarding human nature. Neorealists focus largely on the international system and the ways the system restricts or dictates state behaviour. For them, it is the absence of a supranational authority i.e., anarchy, not the human behaviour, which leads states to act the way that they do.¹²

The prospect of progress through the establishment of international institutions like the League of Nations has been challenged by classical realists like E. H. Carr. Instead, they emphasised the ongoing influence of power and self-interest on how states behave. The rise of classical realism after the start of World War II helped shape the great powers’ post-war foreign policies, especially that of the US. In the 1970s, neorealism—associated particularly with the contribution of Kenneth N. Waltz—emerged methodologically as a more rigorous variant of realism highlighting anarchy to be the ordering principle of the international system composed of sovereign states. For Waltz, in the anarchic international system, what he termed as a ‘self-help’ system, states’ behaviours are determined by the distribution of power, rather than states’ domestic institutions, effectiveness of diplomacy, quality of statecraft, national morale or human nature. He also argued for bipolarity to be the most stable arrangement. Neorealism added a more scientific touch to the realist tradition and made it possible to envisage state behaviour and to prescribe rational policy options, such as internal and external balancing, for the states to stabilise international relations during the Cold War period. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent post-Cold War era characterised by globalisation, greater interdependence, increased influence of non-state actors, eroding state sovereignty, and ideational factors gaining importance in International Relations (IR) scholarship, led to a considerable setback to a realist tradition. Against this backdrop, the paper counts on the emerging theoretical perspective of neoclassical realism which attempts to combine neorealism with classical realist thoughts and is persuasive enough to explain the complex foreign policy behaviour of different states, be it a great power or an ordinary power. It also attempts to envisage a range of policy priorities and associated challenges under the current realities.

¹⁰ Jack Donnelly, “Realism,” in *Theories of International Relations*, ed. Scott Burchill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 31–56.

¹¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

¹² Scott Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1–321.

To Gideon Rose, who originally coined the term neoclassical realism, this theoretical approach is perceived as—

“The scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities... [T]he impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit-level.”¹³

Neoclassical realists, in other words, hold that when states carry out their foreign and security policies, they largely do so in response to the opportunities and constraints presented by the international system. However, these responses are influenced by unit-level variables such as the relationships between the state and its society, the political system in place, the strategic culture, perceptions, and the effectiveness of the leadership, among others. Neoclassical realism uses this strategy to integrate system-level and state-level variables into a single theoretical framework. Moreover, Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman refer that—

“Neoclassical realism seeks to explain variation in the foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints. It makes no pretense about explaining broad patterns of systemic or recurring outcomes. Thus, a neoclassical realist hypothesis might explain the likely diplomatic, economic, and military responses of particular states to systemic imperatives, but it cannot explain the systemic consequences of those responses.”¹⁴

While neorealists argue that systemic pressures immediately influence the behaviours of states in an anarchic environment, neoclassical realists believe that the extent of systemic effects on the states are subject to relative power and the internal factors of the states.¹⁵ In other words, neoclassical realists deny accepting states as the sole actors of the international system and consider systemic stimuli as the

¹³ Gideon Rose, “Review: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 146.

¹⁴ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman, “Introduction: Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy,” in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, eds. Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.

¹⁵ Randall L. Schweller, “Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of under Balancing,” *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): 159–201.

principles that force specific foreign policy outcomes. Neoclassical realists attempt to understand foreign policy by focusing on the relative power of states in the anarchic international system as an independent variable; internal realities of states and perceptions of decision-makers as intervening variables; and the responses of states in the international environment as dependent variables. In this way, neoclassical realism tries to overcome the deficiencies of classical realism and neorealism in analysing foreign policy of states.¹⁶

Neoclassical realists argue that national leaders of a state play a crucial role in creating perceptions based on information, cognition, experience, historical contexts, etc. Domestic constraints such as dependence of state on other political parties, civil society, business groups, civil and military bureaucracy, political coalition, organisational politics, institutional capacity, socio-political coherence, and state's resource base play a vital role in foreign policy decision making and provide leaders with different policy options. Ultimately, the outcome of foreign policy is determined by the capability of leadership to mobilise resources under different domestic constraints. For neoclassical realism, personality or capacity of leadership, who engage in a two-level game—responding to the systemic pressures on one hand and mobilising internal resources on the other hand—directly influence foreign policy of the state.¹⁷ In simple words, neoclassical realists consider leaders as the key factor in foreign policy formulation who define state's national interests and implement decisions on the basis of their own assessments and ideas regarding constraints posed by domestic factors and the anarchic international system.

It is important to understand the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Russia from the perspective of neoclassical realism, where the paper finds a close linkage between systemic constraints and leadership factors considering the development of Bangladesh's relations with Russia. When comparing the relationship between Russia and Bangladesh under various regimes, it is evident that domestic factors are crucial in determining the development of their bilateral relations. Neoclassical realists would contend that both leaders pursued policies based on their domestic political considerations and the external threats and opportunities they faced in the realm of Bangladesh-Russia relations during the Bangabandhu and Ziaur Rahman regimes. Bangladesh made an effort to maintain a balance in its relations with the Soviet Union and the US under Bangabandhu's rule. However, the foreign

¹⁶ John Baylis, "International and Global Security in Post-Cold War Era," in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–525.

¹⁷ Nicholas Kitchen, "Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation," *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 1 (2010): 117–143.

policy of Bangladesh has shifted towards a more pro-Western stance following Bangabandhu's assassination and the ensuing rise of General Ziaur Rahman. General Zia's desire to obtain US support for his regime and his view of the Soviet Union as a threat to Bangladesh's security were the main factors behind this change.¹⁸

Bangladesh has pursued a policy of upholding a balance between the region's major powers, which include India, China, and Russia, under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. To balance the influence of India and China, the current government in Bangladesh has sought to strengthen its ties with Russia in particular. The domestic factor of political leadership has a close linkage behind this. As part of its larger foreign policy objectives, the Sheikh Hasina administration is focused to improve relations with Russia. As a result, Bangladesh-Russia relations have improved under her leadership, and both nations have signed several agreements to boost trade and investment. However, relations between Bangladesh and Russia were less friendly under Khaleda Zia earlier in 1991. The Zia administration prioritised its relations with the US, the Middle East, and China while placing less emphasis on its relations with Russia. The domestic factor of bureaucratic politics may be applied to explain this. The Zia government was more concerned with domestic political issues, and the competing interests within the government bureaucracy had an impact on its foreign policy. As a result, the Zia administration did not place much emphasis on developing ties between Bangladesh and Russia, which led to a lack of progress in those ties.

The economic situation in both the countries has affected relations between Bangladesh and Russia under different regimes. Bangladesh has been eager to entice Russian investment and technology to help it in developing its economy under Sheikh Hasina's rule, and Russia has viewed Bangladesh as a potential market for its energy exports. The domestic factor of economic interests can help to analyse this. The government of Sheikh Hasina is committed to foster economic growth and development and views Russia as a potential ally in this endeavour. Like Bangladesh, Russia wants to deepen its economic ties with Bangladesh to gain access to new markets and diversify its economy. On the contrary, economic factors were significant under Khaleda Zia's administration during 2001–2006, but the emphasis was more on luring investment from China and the US. Overall, Neoclassical realists contend that a combination of systemic and domestic factors can adequately account for the relationship between Bangladesh and Russia under various regimes. The trajectory of their bilateral relations has been influenced by systemic factors like the shifting global balance of power and changing regional dynamics as well as domestic factors like political leadership, bureaucratic politics, economic interests, and cultural

¹⁸ Dr. Muhammad Faridul Alam, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Chittagong, interview with authors, June 02, 2023.

interests. Discussion, henceforth, demonstrates the neoclassical realist explanations of Bangladesh-Russia relations. However, it is undoubtedly crucial to observe the historical developments and dynamics of Bangladesh's relations with Russia to understand the foreign policy behaviour of the states.

3. Revisiting Bangladesh-Russia Relations: A Brief Overview

It seems without arguing that in order to explain relations between Bangladesh and Russia, one must comprehend Russian foreign policy toward South Asia. For Russia, South Asia is a region of geopolitical importance since it has a significant impact on its security, energy, and strategic interests. Russia's foreign policy has altered dramatically over time, reflecting both regional and global dynamics, as the geopolitical situation has gotten increasingly difficult due to the persistence of US hegemony and the rise of China.¹⁹ However, Russia has a pivotal interest in the region of South Asia to enhance its strategic presence to counter the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which led to Russia's active engagement with India, Bangladesh, and China.²⁰ In order to create Soviet-Russian policy toward the region during and after the Cold War, structural constraints in the form of rivalries with other great powers, particularly the US and China, and the balance of power, in particular, triggered significant outside-in processes.²¹ Russia has maintained a close and long-standing relationship with India, particularly under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, which is one of its key security partners and a key partner in multilateral forums such as BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that acknowledge the geopolitical significance of Russia in South Asia.

Russia's energy concerns, notably in connection with its gas and oil exports, also influence its interest in South Asia. Russia sees South Asia as a potential market for its energy resources, as it is one of the biggest producers and exporters of natural gas and oil. Russia has pursued several projects to construct gas pipelines that would link its gas fields in Siberia and Central Asia with South Asian nations like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. By diversifying its gas export routes, Russia could reduce its reliance on Europe as its main market while also strengthening its economic ties with South Asian states. The factors mentioned above constitute the primary drivers of worry for Russian

¹⁹ Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Patterns," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2016).

²⁰ Arshad Mahmood and Umar Baloch, "Enhancement of Russian Interests in South Asia During Putin's Era," *Margalla Papers* (2013), 58.

²¹ Almas Haider Naqvi and Syed Qandil Abbas, "Russian South Asia Policy: From Estrangement to Pragmatism," *Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2022): 98.

foreign policy in South Asia, where the relationship between Bangladesh and Russia also has significant ramifications in light of Russian foreign policy in South Asia.

The birth and subsequent evolution of an independent Bangladesh witnessed active and decisive roles played by the superpowers as well. During the 1971 Liberation War, Bangladesh received monumental support from the Soviet Union, which ultimately laid the foundation for Bangladesh-Russia relations in the post-Cold War era.²² The Soviet role during the war was, however, a strong response to the Cold War-driven US policy in Asia pursued during the 1950s and 1960s.²³ It was an attempt by the Soviet Union not only to limit the US influences but also to contain the military and ideological desires of China in Asia. The security arrangements called the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) naturally caused a grave drift regarding the bilateral relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union.²⁴ In response to these developments, the Soviet Union extended its cooperation to India, which was consolidated following Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev's visit to India in 1955.²⁵ Later in 1962, India's debacle in the Sino-Indian War forced India to build stronger relations with the Soviet Union, which had been engaged in a confrontational relationship with China for a long time.²⁶ Following the Sino-Soviet border conflict, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev declared 'systems of collective security for Asia' in 1969 as a part of an Indo-centric policy under the fold of communism, which created profound unease for the US.²⁷ In response, China started to rethink its policy towards the US, while President Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger used Pakistan as a conduit to open diplomatic relations with China.²⁸

In the 1970 Pakistan National Assembly election, the Awami League, led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, gained a sweeping majority.²⁹ However, in the name of forming a national government, the military regime of Yahya Khan initiated a negotiation process, which was aimed at delaying power transfer to East Pakistan. Meanwhile, troops from West Pakistan were brought into East Pakistan secretly with

²² Mizanur Rahman Shelley, "Super Powers in Liberation War," *The Daily Star*, December 16, 2012.

²³ Dr. Muhammad Faridul Alam, interview with authors.

²⁴ Himani Pant, "The Changing Contours of Russia's South Asia Policy," *ORF Issue Brief*, no. 193 (2017): 3.

²⁵ Shelley, "Super Powers in Liberation War."

²⁶ Sergey Radchenko, "Sino-Soviet Relations in the 1970s and IR Theory," in *Misunderstanding Asia: International Relations Theory and Asian Studies over Half a Century*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 47.

²⁷ Yasmin, "Bangladesh and the Great Powers," 395–396.

²⁸ Lorraine Boissoneault, "The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 16, 2016.

²⁹ Craig Baxter, "Pakistan Votes—1970," *Asian Survey* 11, no. 3 (1971): 197–218.

the intention of carrying out one of the world's most notorious military campaigns, codenamed 'Operation Searchlight'. On the night of 25 March 1971, the Pakistani army launched its genocidal campaign in erstwhile East Pakistan by mercilessly killing thousands of unarmed, innocent Bengali populations within a single night.³⁰ The Soviet Union was one of the leading countries that immediately criticised West Pakistan's genocidal activities against the general population of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). In an official message sent to President Yahya Khan, Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny expressed his deep concern over the mass killings, oppression, and arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other political leaders in East Pakistan.³¹ He also urged for a peaceful political solution to the situation, which gave life to the Liberation War in Bangladesh.³²

On the other hand, India signed a 20-year "Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation" with the Soviet Union on 09 August 1971.³³ Although the treaty did not assure India of any all-out defence from hostile countries, it successfully provided a "detering warning to both China and Pakistan," as Gary J. Bass argued.³⁴ Later in September 1971, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Moscow to reassure the military cooperation between India and the Soviet Union, which accelerated the security threat towards Pakistan.³⁵ On 03 December 1971, Pakistan launched a sudden strike against India, which turned the Bangladesh Liberation War into the India-Pakistan War.³⁶ Following several days of scuffles with Pakistani forces along its western border, India thwarted an all-out invasion of East Pakistan on 06 December 1971. The US President Nixon, doubting Indira Gandhi's so-called Grand Design to conquer the whole of West Pakistan, ordered Naval Task Force 74, which included the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, to proceed through the Malacca Straits into the Bay of Bengal.³⁷ In response, the Soviet Union dispatched two groups of cruisers and destroyers along with a submarine armed with a nuclear weapon, which ensured stopping the US military

³⁰ Taqbir Huda, "Remembering the Barbarities of Operation Searchlight," *The Daily Star*, March 25, 2019.

³¹ Jubeda Chowdhury, "Russia, Bangladesh mark 50 years of friendly ties," *Asia Times*, January 26, 2022.

³² Ankit Agarwal, "The United States and the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971: A Critical Inquiry," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 27/28, no. 1/2 (2014-2015): 28.

³³ Rudrajit Bose, "Genocide, Ethical Imperatives and the Strategic Significance of Asymmetric Power: India's Diplomatic and Military Interventions in the Bangladesh Liberation War (Indo-Pakistan War of 1971)," *Security Defense Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2022).

³⁴ Shah Tazrian Ashrafi, "How the Cold War Shaped Bangladesh's Liberation War," *The Diplomat*, March 03, 2021.

³⁵ Syed Waqar Ali Shah and Shaista Parveen, "Disintegration of Pakistan: The Role of Former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR): An Appraisal," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 53, no. 1 (2016): 183.

³⁶ Prakash Pillai, "Indo-Pak War 1971," *The Hindustan Times*, September 28, 2002.

³⁷ Roger Vogler, "The Birth of Bangladesh: Nefarious Plots and Cold War Sideshows," *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 2, no. 3 (2010): 37.

interference in Bangladesh.³⁸ On 04 and 05 December 1971, the Soviet Union vetoed twice the US attempt to enforce a ceasefire between Pakistan and India at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).³⁹ All this evidence suggests how the geopolitical calculations of the Cold War rivalry shaped the trajectory of Bangladesh's Liberation War and to what extent the Soviet Union played a monumental role in the process of achieving Bangladesh's victory over Pakistan (then West Pakistan).

Given the experiences of the Liberation War, Bangladesh forged trusted relations with the Soviet Union. It was the first major global power to come forward to establish diplomatic relations with Bangladesh on 25 January 1972, followed by its political recognition only a day before.⁴⁰ On 01 March 1972, Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman paid his second official foreign visit to Moscow (after India), heading a political and economic delegation. The Soviet Premier Alexei N. Kosygin warmly welcomed Bangabandhu stating that—

“Sheikh Mujib’s visit will lay the foundation on which to build good traditions of firm friendship and cooperation between two countries.”⁴¹

In reply, Bangabandhu expressed his gratefulness for Soviet moral and diplomatic assistance during the liberation war of Bangladesh by noting that—

It was a “great revolutionary tradition that from the very beginning placed the Soviet Government and the Soviet people on the side of our struggle for justice and freedom.”⁴²

Bangabandhu also urged for emergency aid from the Soviet Union. He stressed on the need for food, medicine, transport equipment, and construction materials to rebuild millions of destroyed homes and public infrastructure.⁴³ Consequently, both countries signed inter-governmental agreements relating to economic and technical

³⁸ Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, “Article on Indo-Pak War of 1971: You surrender or we wipe you out, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw’s message to Pakistan,” accessed November 12, 2023, <https://static.mygov.in/indiancc/2021/06/mygov-100000000986806070.pdf>.

³⁹ “UN Security Council Veto List (1946–2004),” The Dag Hammarskjöld Library, accessed July 25, 2021, <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/veto>.

⁴⁰ Chowdhury, “Russia, Bangladesh mark 50 years.”

⁴¹ Theodore Shabad, “Sheik Mujib, in Moscow, Opens Talks with Kosygin,” *The New York Times*, March 02, 1972.

⁴² Shabad, “Sheik Mujib, in Moscow.”

⁴³ Shabad, “Sheik Mujib, in Moscow.”

assistance, air services, trade, and cultural and scientific cooperation.⁴⁴ However, Soviet aid to Bangladesh was far lower than expected. By March 1973, Bangladesh received US\$136 million worth of assistance from the Soviet Union, while more than US\$318 million came from the US (the largest till that time) and US\$262 million from India (the second largest).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Bangabandhu preferred to sustain amicable relations with the Soviet Union in order to get continuous diplomatic and moral assistance on international platforms and to remain under the Soviet security umbrella given the harsh realities of the Cold War at the systemic level. On the question of Bangladesh's admission into the United Nations (UN), for instance, the Soviet Union extended wholehearted support and took a firm stand against Chinese opposition. On 25 August 1972, in response to the Chinese veto against Bangladesh's application for the UN membership, the Soviet representative at the UNSC stated that—

“The Chinese delegation, however, has obstructed the admission of Bangladesh to the United Nations. The irony is that opposition was voiced to the universality of the United Nations by the representatives of a country which was itself for more than 20 years the victim of gross discrimination, and which was deprived by imperialist forces...”⁴⁶

The proclamation indicated the Soviet commitment to Bangladesh. After struggling for years, Bangladesh attained UN membership on 17 September 1974, which further consolidated its relationship with the Soviet Union.

Under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh followed the Soviet model of economic development by nationalising some of its industries. However, Sheikh Mujib carefully followed a non-aligned foreign policy based on the dictum of “friendship with all, malice toward none”. Before the 1973 National Elections of Bangladesh, the Soviet Union attempted to bring Bangladesh under the socialist bloc, which irked the Sheikh Mujib regime and resulted in the recall of Soviet Ambassador V. F. Popov from Dhaka.⁴⁷ Later in February 1974, Bangladesh became a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) (now Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) despite Indian and Soviet reservations. These

⁴⁴ “Overview of Russia-Bangladesh Relations,” Russian Embassy in Bangladesh, accessed February 04, 2022, <https://bangladesh.mid.ru/bilateral-relations>.

⁴⁵ Bernard Weinraub, “U.S. Has Top Role in Bangladesh Aid,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1973.

⁴⁶ “UN Security Council Official Records (1975),” accessed February 15, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N75/821/81/PDF/N7582181.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁴⁷ Mohammad Abdul Halim, “Foreign Policy: A Review,” in *Bangladesh on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Chowdhury Abdulla Momin and Fakrul Alam (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2002).

incidents demonstrate Bangabandhu's bold and independent foreign policy outlook as a leader. Moreover, Bangabandhu pursued a smart foreign policy to get the most out of the Cold War atmosphere and sought economic assistance from the US and its Western allies in the face of dire need for food and financial resources on the one hand and insufficient economic support from the Indo-Soviet axis on the other.

Following the August 1975 tragedy, numerous constitutional, economic, and political changes were brought under successive regimes in Bangladesh, which fetched grave consequences in regard to the country's relationship with the Soviet Union. Under the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981), Bangladesh's foreign policy substantially shifted towards the US, China, Pakistan, and the Arab world, which resulted in serious disappointments for India and the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ By banning pro-Soviet political parties, General Zia established closer ties with China. At the official level, Bangladesh and China exchanged numerous visits during General Zia's regime, which caused irritation for the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Moreover, General Zia's position in line with the Islamic states against the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan further deteriorated the relationship between Bangladesh and the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ When Soviet-supported Vietnamese troops occupied Cambodia in late 1978, Bangladesh immediately condemned the occupation. During the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, Bangladesh played a strong role, which solidified Bangladesh-US relations and naturally weakened its relations with the Soviets. In this way, General Ziaur Rahman preferred to maintain a reluctant foreign policy towards the Soviet Union which plunged the bilateral relations to a historic low.

The downturn in Bangladesh-Soviet relations reached its nadir with the seizure of state power by General H. M. Ershad in 1982. General Ershad emulated mostly General Ziaur Rahman's foreign policy, except for resetting a working relationship with India and revamping a closer partnership with Japan. Referring to the Soviet Union in an interview with *The New York Times*, General Ershad stated that—

“We cannot trust them so much. They are very crude. They have such a mighty military machine... We are really scared about what they may do next.”⁵¹

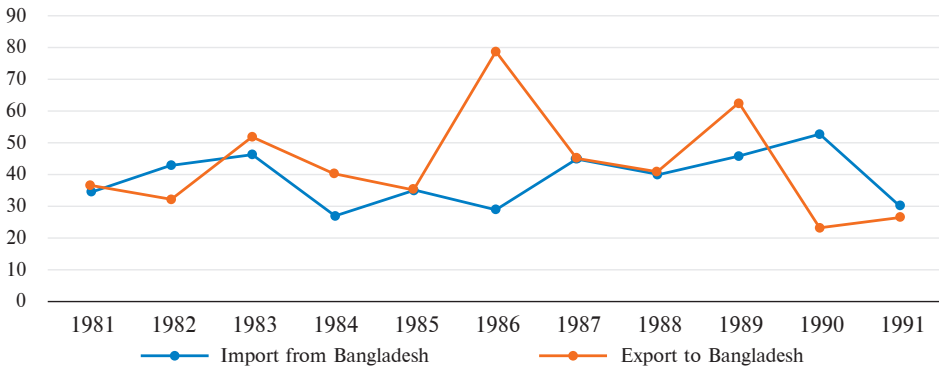
⁴⁸ Rupak Bhattacharjee, “Growing Russia-Bangladesh Ties and Their Implications for South Asia,” *Society for Policy Studies Insight* (2015): 1–2.

⁴⁹ Mohammad Amjad Hossain, “Foreign Policy under Ziaur Rahman,” *The Daily Star*, May 31, 2008.

⁵⁰ Andrio Drong, “The Effects of Political Changes in the Relationship between Bangladesh and Russia (USSR) in 1971–2014,” *RUDN University Journal Series of International Relations*, no. 1 (2015): 188.

⁵¹ Colin Campbell, “Bangladesh Military Leader Says He Fears Soviet,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1982.

Figure 1: Soviet Union’s Trade with Bangladesh, 1981-91(in million US\$)⁵²



In late 1983, charged with association with political elements, the Ershad regime summoned Soviet Ambassador Valentin P. Stepanov and asked him to reduce his diplomatic staff from 36 to 18, while the Soviet Cultural Centre in Dhaka was ordered to close with immediate effect.⁵³ However, the relations got better, if not warm, in the following years. In 1984, a delegation visited the Soviet Union to attend President Chernenko’s funeral, which initiated the rapprochement process in bilateral relations. Following the visit, the Soviet Cultural Centre in Dhaka was reopened, and the Soviet Union announced US\$80 million worth of credit to Bangladesh for developing electricity generation plants.⁵⁴ The Bangladesh-Soviet bilateral trade during 1981–1991 (Figure 1) reflects a moderate volume of trade with an inconsistent trade balance. Although the Soviet Union’s exports to Bangladesh rose significantly in 1986, the overall bilateral trade slowed down by 1991. In sum, like General Ziaur Rahman, General Ershad was also personally reluctant to advance relations with the Soviets. Both the leaders perceived India as the biggest threat to their regimes and utilised the Cold War dynamics to maintain closer relations with the US so that an external balancing could be possible against India.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a substantial shift at the systemic level by turning the bipolar world order into a unipolar one led by the US. Consequently, the Russian Federation emerged as the prime successor state, carrying the shadow of power and influence of the former Soviet Union. However, in its initial years, Russia faced an economic downturn and struggled through the transition from a command economy to

⁵² Prepared by the authors based on data collected from IMF Direction of Trade Statistics 1981-1991.

⁵³ “Around the World; Bangladesh Said to Ask Soviet to Cut Embassy,” *The New York Times*, December 01, 1983.

⁵⁴ Peter J. Bertocci, “Bangladesh in 1985: Resolute Against the Storms,” *Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (1986): 232.

a market-based one. The country also experienced unstable political conditions, ethnic problems, and tensions posed by numerous administrative regions seeking greater autonomy. Throughout the 1990s, Russia tried to redefine its identity as well as its relationship with the US and the West. Under President Boris Yeltsin, Russia showed its intention to build a new relationship with the West as an equal but independent power with a voice to determine global policies and priorities. In reality, neither the West nor Russia were able to do so. After Vladimir Putin's ascendance to power in 1999, he also attempted to reset favourable relations with the West. However, the expansion of the NATO, along with events such as the bombing in Serbia, support for an independent Kosovo, regime changes in Iraq and Libya, and US engagements in Syria, helped Putin overhaul Russia's foreign policy. Under the Putin administration, rebuilding Russia's position as a great power and creating resistance to the US and its Western allies have been the Kremlin's key foreign policy and national security objectives.

In 1991, democracy was restored in Bangladesh, and Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of General Ziaur Rahman, was elected Prime Minister. On 29 December 1991, Bangladesh officially recognised the Russian Federation as a successor state of the Soviet Union, while in January 1992, Mustafizur Rahman, the then Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, emphasised expanding bilateral trade relations during his visit to Moscow. The Begum Zia regime, however, maintained the foreign policy of General Ziaur Rahman and less interest was shown in developing further relations with Russia given the systemic transition to unipolarity. When Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was elected Prime Minister in 1996, Bangladesh-Russia relations began to take a better shape. Based on historical trust and mutual benefits, both countries attempted to expand their bilateral connections in the areas of defence, trade, investment, and energy. In 1999, Bangladesh purchased eight MiG-29 fighters from Russia for US\$124 million, attesting to emerging security cooperation between the countries.⁵⁵

In the 2001 national elections, Begum Khaleda Zia was reelected. Her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government brought corruption allegations against its political archrival, the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, regarding the purchase of MiG-29 aircraft and put those up for sale, claiming that Bangladesh could not afford the maintenance cost. This gradually deteriorated Bangladesh's relationship with Russia. Begum Zia's regime continued similar foreign policy priorities as that of her first term by nurturing friendly relations with Pakistan, China, the US, Japan, South Korea, and the Muslim countries. Later, the power transition period in Bangladesh under the caretaker regime from 2007 to 2009 witnessed

⁵⁵ Yasmin, "Bangladesh and the Great Powers," 395–396.

balanced relations with the major powers. A notable development during this period was the signing of a consular agreement with Russia in 2007 by the then foreign advisor of Bangladesh.⁵⁶ While focusing on the bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Russia since 1992 (see, Figure 2), it is observed that the overall trade volume reached its lowest point in 2002. However, the trade volume kept growing in the following years, except in 2009 and 2010. Although import volume from Russia has been inconsistent throughout the years, exports to Russia have continued to grow since 2006. Interestingly, it is difficult to understand Bangladesh’s overall relations with Russia based on their bilateral trade.

Figure 2: Bangladesh’s Trade with Russia, 1992-2011 (in million US\$)⁵⁷



Since 2009, as Sheikh Hasina came to power through a democratic transition with a huge majority, Bangladesh’s relations with Russia have resumed with greater cooperation, particularly in the areas of defence, foreign assistance, trade, and energy. During the International Tiger Conservation Forum in 2010, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina met President Putin on the sidelines and sought assistance from Russia for building the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Bangladesh, signing a long-term food-grain and fertiliser agreement, investing in natural gas exploration, and training defence personnel.⁵⁸ The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexey N. Borodavkin met former Foreign Minister Dipu Moni at the 40th anniversary of Bangladeshi independence celebration ceremony in Moscow, where the Deputy Foreign Minister stated “We are expecting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Moscow shortly, and the relations will

⁵⁶ Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, “Dhaka-Moscow Relations: Old Ties Renewed,” *ISAS Working Paper*, no. 167 (2013): 10.

⁵⁷ Prepared by the authors based on data collected from IMF Direction of Trade Statistics 1992-2011.

⁵⁸ “Hasina Talks Nuke Plants with Putin,” *The Daily Star*, November 24, 2010.

gain more momentum through her visit”.⁵⁹ The statement signifies Russian interest in strengthening mutual cooperation with Bangladesh. The bilateral trade relations also entered a renaissance period after a lapse of many years when the Sheikh Hasina regime called for profound attention towards Russia. Several business delegations paid visits to Russia to expand trade opportunities. For instance, a delegation of the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) visited Moscow in 2012 and signed US\$10 million in trade deals with Russian companies.⁶⁰ From 2010 to 2011, bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Russia increased by 40 per cent, while exports to Russia observed massive growth (see, Figure 2).

Consequently, Sheikh Hasina paid an official visit to Russia in January 2013, the first-ever state visit by a Bangladeshi Prime Minister in 40 years after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s visit to Moscow in 1972. The visit worked as an underpinning for concrete Bangladesh-Russia relations. The countries signed ten agreements and memorandum of understanding (MoU) to establish cooperation in the areas of nuclear energy, weaponry supply, oil and gas exploration, and space. After signing the agreements, Sheikh Hasina stated at the joint press conference that—

“I believe the agreements would place our relationship on a firm footing and help in taking practical initiatives in the future.”⁶¹

It was, however, not the systemic constraints alone that guided Bangladesh’s foreign policy towards Russia during the last decade. In fact, if we closely analyse Sheikh Hasina’s ‘development first’ approach, delineated initially under “Vision 2021” and later under “Vision 2041” policies, we see how the priority of leadership shaped the foreign policy objectives of Bangladesh. Accordingly, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been pursuing an independent, proactive, balanced, non-aligned, and peace-loving foreign policy approach.⁶² The approach has enabled Bangladesh to extend hands of cooperation to Russia.

During the 2013 Russia visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a US\$1 billion defence deal, the largest ever in Bangladesh’s history, was signed to purchase military hardware on a 4.5 per cent interest rate and an 18-year repayment period.⁶³ Dhaka and Moscow also agreed to collaborate on counter-terrorism initiatives and establish

⁵⁹ “Moscow for stronger ties with Dhaka,” *The Daily Star*, April 07, 2011.

⁶⁰ Alexander A. Nikolaev, “The Russia-Bangladesh Relationship,” *Dhaka Tribune*, June 12, 2013.

⁶¹ Dadan Upadhyay, “Hasina’s Visit: Russia Edges Out China from Bangladesh,” *Russia Beyond* (January 18, 2013).

⁶² Sheikh Shams Morsalin, “From Cold War to ‘New Cold War’: Bangladesh Foreign Policy vis-à-vis the United States and Russia,” *The Journal of Bangladesh and Global Affairs* 01, no. 01 (2022): 123–141.

⁶³ Syed Fattahul Alim, “Diplomatic dimensions of Russian arms deal,” *The Daily Star*, January 21, 2013.

a long-term defence partnership based on shared interests, trust, and credibility.⁶⁴ In 2013, the Metis-M tank-destroyer missile was purchased from Russia to modernise Bangladesh’s military.⁶⁵ In accordance with its previous defence agreements, Bangladesh signed a deal with Russia in April 2015 to purchase six Mil Mi-171Sh combat transport helicopters, including one Mi-171E medium-lift transport aircraft.⁶⁶ During 2015–16, 17 Russian Yak-130 trainers and six Russian MI161SH helicopters were procured.⁶⁷

It is worth mentioning that Russia has long been Bangladesh’s dependable partner in the energy sector. The power plants in Ghorashal and Siddhirganj, constructed with Soviet assistance, are still contributing almost 20 per cent of Bangladesh’s electricity production. Following the signing of an agreement on the construction of the Rooppur NPP at Dhaka in 2011, Russia concluded a deal in 2015 to provide around US\$12 billion in credit to Bangladesh. Consequently, the Inter-governmental Agreement on the Allocation of Loans for Funding the Construction of the Main Phase of the NPP was signed in Moscow on 26 July 2016. Russian energy giant Rosatom has provided the first shipment of uranium fuel in order to accelerate the energy production in Rooppur Nuclear Plant in 2023.

Table 1: Basic Facts of Rooppur NPP⁶⁸

Unit	Type	Capacity	Construction Start	Commercial Operation
Reactor 1	VVER-1200/V-523	1200MW	2017	2023/2024
Reactor 2	VVER-1200/V-523	1200MW	2018	2024/2025

In March 2018, a tripartite MoU on cooperation for developing the Rooppur NPP was signed among Bangladesh, Russia, and India, allowing Indian experts and mechanics to work on the project.⁶⁹ In May 2020, Bangladesh and Russia signed a US\$287.49 million agreement to develop a physical protection system (PPS) for Rooppur NPP.⁷⁰ Earlier in 2012, based on the Russian commitment to ensure the

⁶⁴ Bhattacharjee, “Growing Russia-Bangladesh Ties,” 1–2.

⁶⁵ Pathik Hasan, “50 years of Russia-Bangladesh bilateral relations: Development, assistance and economic ties,” *The Independent*, November 03, 2021.

⁶⁶ Franz-Stefan Gady, “Bangladesh to Purchase 7 Combat-Transport Helicopters from Russia,” *The Diplomat*, August 24, 2015.

⁶⁷ Hasan, “50 years of Russia-Bangladesh bilateral relations.”

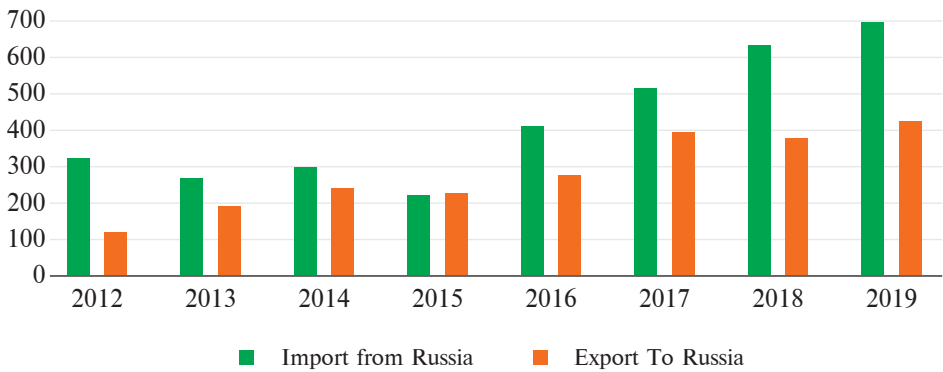
⁶⁸ Hydrocarbon Unit, Energy and Mineral Resources Division, Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources of Bangladesh, 2019.

⁶⁹ “Bangladesh, India, Russia ink MoU for Rooppur Power Plant Implementation,” *The Daily Star*, March 02, 2018.

⁷⁰ “Rooppur nuke plant: \$287.49m deal signed for physical protection system,” *The Financial Express*, May 29, 2020.

energy security of Bangladesh, two agreements between Petro-Bangla and Russian Gazprom EP International were signed.⁷¹ Accordingly, Gazprom finished digging ten wells in different gas fields in Bangladesh in 2014. Gazprom signed another deal in 2015 to drill five more wells. Later in January 2020, Gazprom and Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited (BAPEX) signed an MoU for gas exploration in Shahbazpur and Bhola North. Recently, following the fuel price hike caused by the Ukraine War, Bangladesh has been seriously pondering Russian crude oil imports as a sustainable alternative solution to the country’s ever-increasing energy demand. All these cooperation initiatives demonstrate Russia’s significant position in Bangladesh’s foreign policy considerations.

Figure 3: Bangladesh-Russia Bilateral Trade, 2012-2019 (In million US\$)⁷²



During Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s Russia visit in 2013, where two agreements and six MoUs were signed in the areas of bilateral trade, investments, and business, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister urged for quota-free access to the Russian market. Following the visits of Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister to the UN headquarters in 2016, Bangladesh’s trade with Russia started to show an increasing trend since 2016 (see, Figure 3). The trade relations were further advanced in 2017 through the signing of an agreement with Russia to form the “Inter-governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation”.⁷³ Subsequently, Bangladesh extended its economic diplomacy toward the US\$52 billion Russian market.⁷⁴ In May 2018, Bangladesh arranged a “Textile and Jute Fair” in Moscow, where Bangladesh

⁷¹ Mohammad Arifuzzaman, “Russia’s Gazprom gets priority over BAPEX,” *The Prothom Alo*, October 02, 2019.

⁷² Prepared by the authors based on data collected from IMF Direction of Trade Statistics 2012–2019.

⁷³ “Bangladesh, Russia Sign Agreement to Open ‘New Horizon’ in Bilateral Relations,” *bdnews24.com*, March 01, 2017.

⁷⁴ Mahfuz Nayem, “Bangladesh Targets to Catch Russia’s \$50 Billion Clothing Market,” *Textile Today*, May 11, 2018.

expressed its desire to expand not only bilateral trade relations with Russia but also accelerate trade relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁷⁵ In 2021, Bangladesh emerged as Russia's major trading partner in South Asia, with bilateral trade volume exceeding US\$2.5 billion, indicating the Inter-Governmental Commission's success and a burgeoning partnership between Bangladesh and Russia.⁷⁶

Moreover, throughout the last decade, Bangladesh has extended unprecedented diplomatic support to Russia on international platforms, particularly at the UN bodies. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, Bangladesh abstained from voting against Russia regarding the UN resolution on the issue.⁷⁷ In September 2016, Bangladesh signed an agreement with Russia on a "Visa-Free Visit for Persons Holding Diplomatic and Official Passports," which marked a crucial reinforcement of diplomatic relations between the countries.⁷⁸ The agreement came into force in February 2017. During the consecutive visits of Bangladesh's foreign minister to Russia and in different diplomatic dialogues since 2017, Bangladesh expressed grave concern regarding the forcibly displaced Rohingyas of Myanmar. The country also urged the Russian government to mediate the repatriation process through a "trilateral initiative," given Moscow's close relations with Naypyidaw.⁷⁹ Russia, however, voted against all the resolutions and statements relating to the Rohingya issues and humanitarian conditions in Myanmar that were put forth at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and UNSC. Nevertheless, Bangladesh continued to view Russia as an important player in resolving the Rohingya crisis and sought diplomatic assistance from the country. Recently, in the face of the Ukraine War, Bangladesh has proved its diplomatic commitment to Russia once again by taking a neutral stance. Despite massive pressure from the West, Bangladesh abstained from voting against Russia concerning the UNGA resolution in March 2022, which criticised the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁸⁰ Later in April 2022, Bangladesh also refrained from voting on suspending Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).⁸¹ In response, Alexander Mantytskiy, the Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh, expressed special gratitude to Bangladesh for its 'responsible and balanced' attitude, which hastens bilateral relations between the two countries further. From analysing the

⁷⁵ "BD should utilize the possibility of long-term export opportunity in Russia," *Textile Today*, May 28, 2018.

⁷⁶ "Bangladesh Russia's major trading partner in South Asia," *The Business Standard*, January 24, 2022.

⁷⁷ Arafat Kabir, "Crimea and Bangladesh: Behind the Controversy," *The Diplomat*, April 10, 2014.

⁷⁸ "Bangladesh, Russia agree on visa-free system for diplomats, officials," *bdnews24.com*, September 23, 2016.

⁷⁹ Mujib Mashal and Karan Deep Singh, "India and Russia Expand Defense Ties, Despite Prospect of U.S. Sanctions," *The New York Times*, December 06, 2021.

⁸⁰ "Bangladesh abstains from UN resolution criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *Dhaka Tribune*, March 03, 2022.

⁸¹ "Bangladesh abstains from voting on suspending Russia's membership of UN Human Rights Council," *The Daily Star*, April 08, 2022.

historical overview of Bangladesh's relations with Russia, it is clear that systemic constraints and leadership factors play crucial roles regarding the foreign policy behaviours of the states.

4. Factors that Influenced Bangladesh's Foreign Policy toward Russia

The formulation of foreign policy is essential to any country's worldwide external goals and objectives. A country's pursuit of a set of principles in the domain of international politics is known as its foreign policy. Like the foreign policies of other countries, Bangladesh is influenced by the dynamics of the international system, domestic politics, and the key actors who shape it. This section examines the significant international and domestic determinants that affected Bangladesh's foreign policy toward Russia in light of bilateral relations between the two countries.

4.1 *Systemic Factors*

Given the reality of international politics, the international system plays a significant role in determining Bangladesh's foreign policy towards Russia. The systemic elements of the international order, such as the distribution of world power, alliances, and institutions, influence Bangladesh's foreign policy.⁸² The key takeaways are that all the regimes in Bangladesh that ruled during the Cold War and post-Cold War eras were well aware of the systemic constraints defined in terms of bipolarity and multipolarity, respectively.⁸³ Since Vladimir Putin's return as President of Russia in 2012, following a four-year spell as Prime Minister, the country has started to expand its global reach. To advance its wide range of objectives in Europe and beyond, Russia relied not only on military instruments but also on diplomacy, intelligence, energy, cyberspace, trade, and different financial tools. In response to the mass protests of 2012 in Moscow, which were viewed as Western propagation, President Putin decided to go for a hardline policy against the US and the West. In 2014, Russia annexed the strategically significant region of Crimea and launched an undeclared war in Ukraine to continue to exert pressure on its new West-backed regime and keep the region as a natural buffer zone for Russia. For other former Soviet Republics, Russia holds a similar mindset and considers them a zone of fundamental Russian interest where it would not allow any foreign dominance. In its National Security Strategy document of 2015, Russia identified the US and its NATO allies as the

⁸² Dr. Delwar Hossain, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, interview with the authors, June 16, 2023.

⁸³ Dr. Muhammad Faridul Alam, interview with authors.

main threats to the country and accused the West of depriving Russia of its fair position in the international arena.⁸⁴

Russia's rise may also be realised through its active engagements in other regions of the world. For instance, it has emerged as a prominent power in the Middle East lately. Russia's close ties with Iran and Syria have provided Russia with special leverage in the region. Unlike his Soviet predecessors, President Putin is not attached to any ideological agenda, which gives considerable flexibility to Russian foreign policy. Moreover, Moscow has been able to establish good working relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. In Asia, Russia is closely cooperating with China to create a new world order.⁸⁵ Both countries prefer a multipolar world, opposing the primacy of the US in global affairs. They are also supporting each other at the UN and other international platforms while having growing trade relations and energy cooperation. However, the cornerstone of the relationship has been a close personal bond between President Putin and President Xi Jinping, as they both share a similar global vision for the near future. Russia also cherishes historical ties with India. The Indo-Russian relationship is primarily based on military-technical cooperation. In late 2021, President Putin visited India and signed a ten-year defence cooperation deal along with 28 agreements across a variety of sectors. The two countries also set an objective to increase their bilateral trade to US\$30 billion and their investments to US\$50 billion by the year 2025.⁸⁶ All these examples represent Russia's strong footing in the major regions of the world.

At the systemic level, the waning unipolar role of the US coupled with the evolving importance of Russia, China, and India indicate the advent of multipolarity. This new development has had a significant impact on Bangladesh's foreign policy outlook. After Vladimir Putin's ascendance as Russian President, Bangladesh, under the premiership of Sheikh Hasina, felt the urge to take bilateral relations to a unique height. However, Bangladesh is aware of the power relationships in the globalised world order and how they affect foreign policy decisions, especially in light of Russia's position as a major player in world politics.⁸⁷ For instance, there was a global outcry when Russia annexed Crimea, and many nations denounced Russia's aggressive action. However, Bangladesh adopted a neutral stance on the matter, indicating that it was not in its best interest to enrage a strong nation like Russia. In addition, Bangladesh decided to abstain from voting on the first UN resolution

⁸⁴ Robert E. Berls Jr, "Strengthening Russia's Influence in International Affairs, Part I: The Quest for Great Power Status," The Nuclear Threat Initiative, July 13, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/strengthening-russias-influence-in-international-affairs-part-i-the-quest-for-great-power-status/>.

⁸⁵ Dr. Muhammad Faridul Alam, interview with authors.

⁸⁶ Mashal and Singh, "India and Russia Expand Defense Ties."

⁸⁷ Dr. Muhammad Faridul Alam, interview with the authors.

regarding Ukraine and to vote in favour of the second UNGA resolution regarding Ukraine in order to avoid taking a stance that was too clear-cut, especially in light of the country's close historical and strategic ties with Russia.⁸⁸

4.2 *Domestic Factors—Particularly Leadership Issue*

The perception and assessment of individual leaders played substantial role in forming the country's foreign policy choices and priorities. Leadership factor is an intervening variable in Bangladesh's foreign policy formulation and decision-making process *vis-à-vis* Russia during the Cold War and Post-Cold War eras.⁸⁹ Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh perceives the growing significance of Russia in the global power structure and considers it to be an important actor in shaping the country's foreign policy. The personal rapport between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and President Vladimir Putin is one of the crucial leadership aspects that influence relations between the two countries.⁹⁰ The fact that both the leaders have signed a number of MoUs and agreements based on strategic and economic realities has been crucial in fostering the bilateral relationship's growing warmth. Following an extended meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2013, President Putin signed several agreements concerning trade, energy, and defence cooperation. The agreements between Bangladesh and Russia for the construction of the Rooppur NPP in 2017 are also a result of Bangladesh's outstanding foreign policy leadership.⁹¹ Additionally, the regular official visits of Bangladesh's Foreign Ministers to Russia are of the utmost significance in regulating the two countries' bilateral relations. The Russian President and the Bangladeshi Foreign Ministers met in 2020, and their talks were extremely productive, accelerating bilateral and regional development cooperation in the areas of energy and defence. Abdul Momen, the former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, visited Russia and made the most of every opportunity to interact with Russian officials, diplomats, and leaders in order to advance bilateral cooperation. The regular official meetings of the Foreign Ministries of Russia and Bangladesh further hasten bilateral relations between the two countries, particularly during COVID-19, when the Russian government gave humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh.⁹² Thus, the leadership factor plays a significant role in bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Russia.

⁸⁸ Md. Ali Siddique, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, interview with the authors, June 05, 2023.

⁸⁹ Md. Ali Siddique, interview with the authors.

⁹⁰ Md. Ali Siddique, interview with the authors.

⁹¹ Md. Ali Siddique, interview with the authors.

⁹² Dr. Delwar Hossain, interview with the authors.

5. Future Outlook of Bangladesh-Russia Relations

Although relations between Bangladesh and Russia have significantly improved recently, much will depend on political circumstances in Bangladesh, such as governmental changes and the country's political environment. The relationship between Bangladesh and Russia reached its highest level of cooperation under the Awami League regimes, while it was at its lowest point under other regimes. As a result of the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in recent years, the bilateral ties between the two countries have significantly improved in the areas of trade, energy, and defence. The need for Bangladesh to broaden its strategic partners in Asia and Russia's increased interest in diversifying its strategic posture in the region will likely drive further expansion and deepening of relations between the two nations in the years to come, though future regime changes in Bangladesh will be crucial. Bangladesh offers a compelling opportunity for Russia to increase its geopolitical clout in the region due to its advantageous location in the Bay of Bengal and its potential as a market for Russian investments.⁹³ Additionally, Russia's increasing tensions with the Western nations, particularly the US and the European Union, are a contributing factor in the country's pivot towards Asia. Due to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and ongoing involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, which led to the imposition of economic sanctions by the Western nations on Russia, tensions have further escalated. Thus, in order to lessen its reliance on the West and to show that it is capable of forging strategic alliances outside of its conventional alliances, Russia can seek to strengthen its economic ties with Asian countries, including Bangladesh.

Furthermore, there are a number of areas that both countries are eager to develop and strengthen their bilateral ties. For instance, Russia's exports to Bangladesh have grown significantly over time and reached US\$1.7 billion in 2020, indicating a clear future for bilateral trade between the two countries. However, Bangladesh is becoming more interested in importing Russian high-tech goods and equipment, which presents a significant opportunity for the latter to diversify its exports to the former. The joint venture of Rosatom and the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission to build a nuclear power plant is a significant investment of US\$12.65 billion that will increase cooperation in the energy sector further. Russia's desire to take an active role in South Asia and Bangladesh's mission to transform its economy will influence how both nations conduct business and interact with one another in the future. Additionally, Bangladesh has significant potential in the textile, pharmaceutical, and agricultural industries, where both nations can support to develop their respective industries, while Russia has expertise in the fields of energy, defence, and space technology.⁹⁴ The two

⁹³ Dr. Delwar Hossain, interview with the authors.

⁹⁴ Dr. Muhammad Faridul Alam, interview with the authors.

countries will harness their defence cooperation further, as they have already signed a US\$1 billion defence cooperation agreement.⁹⁵ The student exchange programme can harness people-to-people contact, which will accelerate business and technological cooperation between the states, although Russia needs to address the restrictive visa regime for Bangladesh. Last but not least, Bangladesh can harness its bilateral relations with Russia in the sector of the blue economy, where Bangladesh can use Russian technology in order to extract resources from the ocean.

6. Conclusion

Bangladesh and Russia celebrate five decades of their bilateral relations at a time when the systemic and sub-systemic levels of international politics are taking new shapes, particularly following the outbreak of the Ukraine War in February 2022. To study how Bangladesh would pursue its foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Russia in the coming years under the given reality, this paper happens to be an interesting reference point. Resorting to the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, the paper made an attempt to analyse Bangladesh's foreign policy towards Russia (the then Soviet Union) since 1971. Neoclassical realism, as it effectively synthesises classical realism and neorealism, has been utilised here because of its greater ability to examine a country's foreign policy. The paper presents that the relative power distribution at the systemic level historically created constraints on the foreign policy-making process in Bangladesh. At the same time, domestic factors—the leadership factor in this case—played a crucial intervening role in the ultimate shaping of the country's foreign policy. It is also observed that under a similar international power structure, foreign policy choices and priorities considerably differed from leadership to leadership. In general, the paper represents Bangladesh's deep-rooted relationship with Russia based on its critical role during the 1971 Liberation War. Despite this fact, bilateral relations remained less productive compared to their potential. However, under the premiership of Sheikh Hasina, bilateral relations started to experience a renaissance in the areas of defence, energy, trade, and diplomatic cooperation. The very answer to this change in the trajectory of bilateral relations lies in the shifting global power structure and the domestic leadership factor, which the paper unwraps throughout Bangladesh-Russia relations. Above all, the paper analyses how effective neoclassical realism could act as a theoretical tool to understand a country's foreign policy behaviour towards another.

⁹⁵ "Russia grants Bangladesh \$1 billion loan for weapons: Putin," *Reuters*, January 15, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-bangladesh-idUSBRE90E0HM20130115>.