



**Roundtable Discussion on
Bangladesh's Strategic Autonomy:
Participation in International/
Regional Organisations including BRICS**

05 November 2023

A graphic featuring a pair of hands holding a glowing, digital globe. The globe is composed of a network of white lines and dots, with several bright orange and yellow light flares. The word 'BRICS' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the globe.

BRICS

Brazil · Russia · India · China · South Africa

**Organised By
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)**

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Publications Officer

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

1/46, Old Elephant Road (West of Ramna Police Station)

Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh.

Phone: (880-2) PABX: 48315808, 22223808, Ext. 136

Fax: (880-2) 48312625, e-mail: po@biiss.org

Website: www.biiss.org

Designed & Printed by

nymphhea

Hashim Tower, Suite 6C, 6th Floor

205/1/A, Tejgaon–Gulshan Link Road, Dhaka 1208

Phone: +88 02 222262032, +88 02 222262054

E-mail: info@nymphhea-bd.com

Website: www.nymphhea-bd.com

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON

Bangladesh's Strategic Autonomy: Participation in International/ Regional Organisations including BRICS

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a roundtable discussion on “Bangladesh's Strategic Autonomy: Participation in International/Regional Organisations including BRICS” on 05 November 2023 at the BIISS auditorium. Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc, Director General, BIISS delivered the welcome address. Three presentations were made by Dr Razia Sultana, Senior Research Fellow of BIISS, Ms Shanjida Shahab Uddin, Research Fellow of BIISS, and Md Shamsul Haque, Former Additional Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh and CEO & Principal, Coders Trust to initiate and streamline the discussion. Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman, BIISS Chaired the roundtable discussion. This event was a close door programme with selected participants from academia, and policy makers from various government organisations, departments, and ministries.



WELCOME ADDRESS



Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc
Director General, BISS

At the outset of his speech, Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc, Director General, BISS, paid his deepest homage to the memory of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and millions of martyrs who made their supreme sacrifice during the War of Liberation. He stated that in the present world, multilateralism is one of the important tools for developing countries to implement foreign policy priorities and development goals. It allows to bring the issues of the developing world to the negotiation table, rational decisions come out on which everyone agrees, and the participatory actors could de-escalate their existing disputes and find scope to set the norms.

The Director General gave an overview of BRICS. He said that BRICS, a bloc of emerging and global economic power comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, is assumed to be the dominant global economy by 2050. BRICS countries account for 42 per cent of the global population and around 31 per cent of the global GDP. Also, about 80 per cent of global trade is happening under the BRICS bloc, and it is expected that around 50 per cent of global trade will be controlled by this bloc.

The Director General then discussed the issue of Bangladesh's inclusion in BRICS. He remarked that the expansion of BRICS declared in the last Summit generated more discussions on the potential of the bloc. Though Bangladesh is not a member of BRICS, it is one of the early three members of the New Development Bank, an initiative of the BRICS bloc. Recently, NDB has approved 325 million loans for a pure water supply project. After the inclusion of Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in the bloc, policymakers and critics are raising the issue of Bangladesh's inclusion and potential benefits of joining the bloc. As the key priority of Bangladesh's foreign policy is to engage in any economic alliances or blocs that serve the national interests and development goals of the country, therefore, the prospects and constraints of joining the BRICS beside the NDB should be discussed and analysed more for further policy actions.

The Director General noted that by joining BRICS, Bangladesh's foreign relations with BRICS nations will be strengthened, and Bangladesh will benefit from the diversification of its external relations. Given that BRICS is the largest club of developing economies and that it is becoming more and more influential in politics and the economy, experts see this as a positive development. Bangladesh would also benefit from a stronger partnership as a result of this. However, Bangladesh must remember that this bloc is not merely a trading bloc as it has some geopolitical connotations, and joining it will not bring about any quick economic gains. Although the benefits of joining BRICS may not be seen right away, experts predict that there will be medium to long-term benefits. Bangladesh has the potential to take a more proactive stance on global issues and lead the agenda-setting in the BRICS meeting, boosting bilateral trade and technology transfer, for example.

In conclusion, the Director General opined that Bangladesh should carefully analyse the potentials and challenges of joining BRICS, keeping the geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region in mind. He hoped that all would be able to learn more from the learned speakers of the roundtable and come up with valuable suggestions for policymakers.



Dr Razia Sultana

Senior Research Fellow, BIISS

Dr Razia Sultana commenced her presentation by highlighting the profound transformations witnessed within the contemporary international system. Emphasising the proliferation of middle powers, the escalating Sino-Indian rivalry, the shifting focus towards the Indo-Pacific region, and the resurgence of Cold War-like dynamics, notably evidenced in the Russo-Ukraine conflict, she underscored their consequential impacts on the fabric of both bilateral and multilateral relationships. Of particular significance, Dr Sultana accentuated the hegemonic stature of the USA and the expansionary trajectory of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which has precipitated a deliberation on a nation's imperative for strategic autonomy. Within the current milieu of global politics, Bangladesh, positioned as an emerging power, finds itself compelled to navigate the complexities arising from great power compulsions and rivalries in shaping its foreign policy imperatives. Amidst these global dynamics, the discourse surrounding strategic autonomy intertwined with regionalism and multilateralism assumes pivotal importance in shaping the contours of the nation's external engagements and policies.

During her deliberation, Dr Razia posed three fundamental questions: What does strategic autonomy mean in Bangladeshi contexts? Which regional agreements may Bangladesh support in order to maintain its strategic independence? And what obstacles does Bangladesh currently face, and how can it get past them while maintaining its high degree of autonomy?

Reflecting on the concept of strategic autonomy in the context of Bangladesh, Dr Razia underscored a prevailing definition that underscores a state's capacity to pursue its national interests and shape its foreign policy independently, devoid of external constraints. She posited that the term 'strategic autonomy' has undergone an evolutionary process within the realms of International Relations and Strategic Studies, deeply intertwined with a nation's ideological underpinning. Dr Razia expounded upon the evolving nature of this term, elucidating its association with a country's mindset and its nexus with power, sovereignty, and independence. She contextualised its historical usage, particularly within the framework of colonialism and imperialism, where powerful nations exerted control over comparatively weaker states. Furthermore, she delineated the limited scope of strategic autonomy during the Cold War era, highlighting how influential powers manipulated global South countries, curbing their autonomy by controlling natural resource markets.

Dr Razia further expounded that within the contemporary landscape of the 21st century, the essence of strategic autonomy has expanded beyond conventional security paradigms. It now encompasses a broader spectrum, incorporating non-traditional security concerns such as climate change, energy sustainability, and market access. The evolving landscape of International Relations offers diverse perspectives on regional and global structures. Dr Razia underscored the perspective of new liberalists within these frameworks, emphasising their advocacy for free trade and competition within the international order while navigating the anarchic nature of the state system. This approach advocates for engagement through multilateralism and new regionalism, adhering to defined rules and principles. Dr Razia elucidated that Bangladesh's interpretation of strategic autonomy deviates from the Western developmental model. Bangladesh has charted its own trajectory of development, diverging from established paradigms. As such, its pursuit of strategic autonomy is contextualised within its unique path of development, steering away from conventional models prescribed by Western ideologies.

Within the Bay of Bengal region, for instance, Dr Razia delineated that the concept of strategic autonomy assumes a distinctive complexion due to the region's strategic location and maritime dynamics. She emphasised the integral link between strategic autonomy and a nation's capacity for independent action, particularly in the realm of forging alliances with like-minded partners as deemed necessary. Dr Razia underscored Bangladesh's reliance on the foreign policy doctrine espoused by the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, encapsulated as 'friendship to all and malice towards none.' This principle, she noted, forms the cornerstone of Bangladesh's pursuit of greater autonomy in its foreign policy endeavors. In her analysis, Dr Razia elucidated the interconnectedness of strategic autonomy, regionalism, and multilateralism, highlighting Bangladesh's aspirations to bolster its bargaining power within regional and sub-regional domains. The convergence of these principles was evident when Bangladesh promulgated its regional policy as a guiding tenet for the Indo-Pacific Outlook in April 2023. This Outlook, she explained, embodies a neutral stance and delineates specific parameters in response to contemporary geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic landscapes.

Dr Razia illustrated the symbiotic relationship between the Indo-Pacific Outlook and Article 25 of Bangladesh's Constitution, reaffirming principles of non-interference, peaceful coexistence, adherence to international law, and fostering cooperation. She underscored Bangladesh's inclination away from military alliances with specific blocs, emphasising the advocacy of issues pertaining to economic growth, a culture of peace, a rule-based multilateral system, equitable and sustainable development, and the promotion of a peaceful international order aligned with the United Nations (UN) Charter. She highlighted Bangladesh's active participation in various multilateral frameworks over the last five decades, reflecting these foundational notions in its journey since independence.

Furthermore, Dr Razia underscored the significance of achieving a development vision aimed at fostering a progressive and technologically advanced Bangladesh. Bangladesh has laid out strategic national plans, including Visions 2030 and 2041, with the ambition of transforming into a modern, knowledge-based developed nation. She emphasised the country's intent to realise these goals by leveraging economic regionalism and harnessing its inherent dynamism. Dr Razia highlighted the pivotal role of aligning these national development aspirations with regional dynamics to facilitate Bangladesh's progression towards becoming a smart, forward-thinking nation.



Dr. Razia underscored several pivotal regional organisations that hold considerable potential for Bangladesh's economic and strategic advancement. The foremost contender highlighted was the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a colossal free trade agreement encompassing 15 member nations. Illustrating Australia's engagement as an example—entailing free trade agreements with 14 RCEP members—Dr Razia emphasised Bangladesh's intent to submit its formal membership application. Projections indicate that such affiliation could yield a 17 per cent augmentation in potential FTA benefits and a 0.26 per cent GDP upsurge.

Another significant avenue discussed by Dr Razia was the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), lauded as a successful cooperative bloc akin to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the European Union (EU), fostering collaboration across Southeast Asia. Bangladesh, currently an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) member, aspires to elevate its status to a sectoral dialogue partner (SDP), eyeing enhanced cooperation. Notably, despite its affiliation under China's leadership, ASEAN includes pivotal US allies such as Japan and South Korea, presenting Bangladesh with a platform for engaging on multifaceted fronts—ranging from trade and investment cooperation to addressing pressing security concerns, including Rohingya repatriation issues.

The discussion also spotlighted the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), an emergent economic initiative spearheaded by the US, attracting participation from 14 nations. Bangladesh, considering its potential avenues for collaboration within this framework, is actively engaging in the groundwork. Areas of particular interest include supply chain resilience, connectivity, green growth infrastructure, and the digital economy—aligning closely with Bangladesh's core interests. Dr Razia emphasised the intrinsic alignment between these strategic areas and Bangladesh's overarching economic aspirations within the purview of the IPEF.

Dr Razia underscored the strategic significance of engaging with Mercosur, a formidable regional initiative in South America, as a focal point of discussion. Bangladesh's keen interest in joining this bloc was accentuated, especially following the visit of the Argentine Foreign Minister to Dhaka in February of this year. During this

visit, the reopening of the Argentine mission in Dhaka after 45 years signaled Bangladesh's eagerness to forge ties within Mercosur. Bangladesh proposed the possibility of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) or Preferential Trading Agreement (PTA), with a particular interest in importing ready-made garment (RMG) products, pharmaceuticals, and edible oils from Argentina. While adjustments to facilitate such arrangements were hinted at by Argentina, the groundwork for deeper economic ties was laid.

Dr Razia also highlighted the potential of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as a prospective trade arrangement for Bangladesh. The country has expressed its intent to sign an FTA with this Russia-led Eastern European economic union comprising Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. Bangladesh's export potential in frozen foods, knitwear, jute goods, and shrimp could significantly benefit from engagements within this union. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the Global Gateway Initiative, characterised as the latest connectivity endeavor. The recent participation of the Honorable Prime Minister in the inaugural Global Gateway forum held last month underscored the strategic importance of this initiative in Bangladesh's foreign policy formulation. Dr Razia highlighted the geopolitical and geostrategic implications akin to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasising Bangladesh's participation in both initiatives as a testament to its commitment to maintaining balanced relationships irrespective of geopolitical divides. The proactive engagement of Bangladesh in the Global Gateway Initiative was exemplified by the signing of a 400 million Euro agreement for renewable energy. This significant investment opens new avenues of opportunity for the country, aligning with its strategic objectives and economic aspirations. Dr Razia highlighted by emphasising the pivotal role these regional and global initiatives play in shaping Bangladesh's foreign relations and economic trajectory, showcasing the nation's commitment to fostering mutually beneficial ties across diverse geopolitical landscapes.

Dr Razia brought into focus the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a collective economic and political union comprising Muslim nations. She highlighted Bangladesh's keen interest in fortifying cooperation and exploring investment prospects within this influential bloc. Notably, Bangladesh laid the groundwork for collaboration by signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) last year, establishing a framework encompassing diverse sectors from energy to climate-related initiatives.

Turning attention to BRICS, traditionally represented by Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa, Dr. Razia elucidated on this year's significant expansion. The formal acceptance of six new members—Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, Argentina, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—augurs increased collaboration within BRICS. This expansion holds promise for bolstered cooperation across energy, trade, and investment arenas, signifying potential avenues for Bangladesh's engagement.

Finally, Dr Razia emphasised the burgeoning potential of the African continent—a domain relatively unexplored by Bangladesh. She outlined three regional blocs— The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the African Union, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—as prospective avenues for Bangladesh's engagement. However, she stressed the imperative for Bangladesh to actively pursue gains from these blocs, particularly by capitalising on opportunities for augmenting agricultural trade through measures such as effective contract framing.

Dr Razia's strategic outlook highlighted Bangladesh's concerted efforts to strengthen ties with diverse regional blocs, recognising the potential dividends and mutual benefits that lie within these engagements across the Gulf, BRICS,

and the burgeoning African region. This proactive approach underscores Bangladesh's commitment to expanding its global footprint and fostering mutually advantageous relationships. Dr Razia highlighted the potential within regional and global frameworks for Bangladesh's engagement, emphasising the imperative for comprehensive understanding and strategic acumen. However, she acknowledged the challenges that impede Bangladesh's pursuit of strategic autonomy, particularly amidst the prevailing polarisation by major global powers. Bangladesh faces limitations in exerting power akin to larger nations, impacting its maneuverability on the global stage. Structural challenges within certain regions constrain Bangladesh from aligning seamlessly with traditional product offerings, thereby rendering it comparatively disadvantaged in the fiercely competitive global market.

Moreover, Bangladesh grapples with several domestic hurdles. The absence of FTAs limits its trade options, positioning the nation with a constrained trade basket, thereby undermining its global competitiveness. Digital connectivity, while promoted under the vision of a 'digital Bangladesh,' remains deficient, especially in rural areas, posing challenges for comprehensive national development. Geopolitical and geostrategic considerations loom large for Bangladesh. Dr Razia underscored the pivotal role of geopolitics and geostrategy intertwined with geo-economics, especially in navigating the dynamics of China-US competition, India-China rivalry, and the intricate bargaining involving triangular actors. Bangladesh's lack of an inclusive economic policy hampers its ability to stand out in the global market and promote its brand identity as effectively as nations like India, Korea, or China.

Despite those challenges, Dr Razia proposed a forward-looking approach, aligned with evolving dynamics. She outlined strategic imperatives based on existing challenges. Firstly, enhancing negotiation skills and bargaining power at governmental and business levels is paramount in economic diplomacy. Secondly, investing in human resource development and technological innovation stands essential for Bangladesh's progress. Thirdly, diversifying exports, stimulating the private sector for direct investment, and expanding market reach emerge as crucial strategies. Dr Razia urged careful observation of major power competition before engaging in regional or multilateral initiatives. She elaborated by emphasising the significance of image-building to leverage the 'made in Bangladesh' brand, positioning it as a potent force in the global market landscape. Her suggestions underscored the importance of proactive measures and strategic maneuvers to propel Bangladesh forward amidst complex global dynamics.

Dr Sultana concluded her presentation with a poignant quote: "An actor that doesn't think autonomously will never act autonomously, regardless of his capabilities." This profound statement underscored the necessity for Bangladesh, as an emerging economy, to foster autonomous thinking in order to augment its capabilities. Emphasising the promotion of multilateralism and regional engagement as the gateway to greater regional autonomy, Dr. Razia highlighted the critical need for a meticulous ground-level assessment.

Before concluding her discourse, Dr Razia posed pertinent queries aimed at stimulating further discussions among the audience. She probed whether Bangladesh stands prepared to actively participate in regional initiatives, stressing the significance of readiness in embracing such engagements. Additionally, she urged contemplation on the mechanisms Bangladesh should adopt to maximise benefits while ensuring strategic autonomy—a crucial consideration in navigating the complex landscape of regional collaborations and global partnerships. Dr Razia's thought-provoking queries served as catalysts for comprehensive deliberation, urging deeper introspection and strategic planning to position Bangladesh advantageously amidst evolving regional dynamics and global interactions.



Ms Shanjida Shahab Uddin
Research Fellow, BISS

At the beginning of her presentation, Shanjida Shahab Uddin acknowledged the significance of Bangladesh's participation in various regional and global forums and stressed on the need of understanding how this participation could assist Bangladesh in attaining strategic autonomy. In this regard, she mentioned the changing global geopolitical landscape and emphasised that with the growth of globalisation and rise of multipolarity in the 21st century, countries have become more resolute in pursuing their own national interests independently, without being swayed by other countries. However, according to Ms Uddin, attaining such objective is not an easy task. There are complexities that nations face in pursuing their objectives independently amidst increasing global interdependence. It is because, in the context of the challenges posed by great power rivalry, it became difficult for countries to maintain balance between emerging geopolitical realities and promoting cooperation by reducing competition. Therefore, in this regard, she emphasised the need for partnering with various regional and global forums which may help countries to navigate such geopolitical constraints and compulsions.

While elucidating Bangladesh's options for participating in various regional and global forums, she stated that partnering such forums can have profound implications for Bangladesh in showing its unwavering support to multilateralism and maintaining its economic growth and stability. It can also give strong voice to a country in the regional and global negotiation arrangements, and according to Ms Uddin, such position obviously put some leverage in achieving strategic autonomy while projecting and securing its own priorities. Hence, collaborating with various regional and global forums may be seen as an effective strategy to overcome geopolitical complexities and promote cooperation.

Prior to delving into the main part of the discussion, Ms. Uddin provided a concise overview of the BRICS. It is a forum for economic cooperation in the Global South that represents an alternative route to assist development finance and increase trade and investment. And with the latest expansion of BRICS membership, this forum is becoming a more attractive platform for consensus-building and dialogue within the Global South and it is widely argued that it can provide the Global South a stronger voice in the world politics. Although Bangladesh submitted an application for membership, it was not successful in securing a place in this forum. However, considering that this is the initial phase of expansion and approximately 40 countries have applied for membership, there is

still a strong possibility of being included in this platform in the next round. Thus, according to Ms Uddin, it is necessary to look at how BRICS membership may bring diverse opportunities for Bangladesh by widening trade relations with the BRICS members, which may help the country to avoid over-reliance and diversify the options.

Afterwards, Ms Uddin revisited the four major phases that BRIC has gone through, in order to provide a clear picture of the evolution of this forum. She identified the first phase when Economist Jim O'Neil, first identified Brazil, Russia, India and China as rising economic powers in 2001, and coined the acronym "BRIC". Then, gradually it is seen that in a span of years, BRIC became an economic grouping and evolved into a more vital partnership. In the second phase of this grouping of economic cooperation, South Africa joined in the club and became BRICS. The inclusion of South Africa highlighted the African context in the economic cooperation and hinted the emergence of BRICS as a political platform which may reshape the world order by shifting power from the global north to the global south. During the third phase, it was noteworthy that the BRICS nations had a propensity to sideline neoliberal development policies on the back burner. During this phase, this forum came up with the concept of forming the New Development Bank in order to make development funding more inclusive and accessible. The current expansion of BRIC has been identified by Ms Uddin as the fourth phase. In this phase, the increasing global appeal towards this forum is worth notable. It has already been observed that more than 40 countries have shown their interest in joining BRICS. And the enlarged BRICS with six new members, total 11 members in the group, can call for a more equitable global governance system and make a stronger voice for the Global South.

Then, Ms Uddin discussed the rise of BRICS in the global political economy. Firstly, with the aim for greater representation and influence, BRIC countries have been proclaiming their drive for global economic growth and innovation, particularly through investments in trade facilitation and emerging technologies. The establishment of its own bank and sidelining the neo-liberal development policies, are widely argued by many that its implications can impact the global economic landscape. And the idea of using common currency, if it is operationalised in near future, can also further enhance BRICS' global influence and solidify its position as a powerful force in world politics. Secondly, regarding BRICS' growing influence in shaping the global economic governance, there is a widespread argument that the rise of BRICS is signaling the need for re-structuring the global economic governance. This argument mainly came after the inception of the New Development Bank (NDB). Because it is providing favourable funding through its unique lending policy which is making a valuable addition to the global financial landscape. Thirdly, Ms Uddin brought the concept of new global economic paradigm into the discussion. This concept refers to the initiation of another global economic inflection point where BRICS is challenging the existing globalisation paradigm by fundamentally challenging Western economies' global economic leadership. Besides, BRICS countries' foreign reserves, increasing innovation and technology leadership, and global leadership on a number of traded goods, services, and commodities, are also reshaping their relationship with the western economies. This reflects the increasing weight of BRICS in the global political economy. As a fourth point, Ms Uddin highlighted the importance of this forum for economic cooperation among the countries of the global south, as it is widely recognised that BRICS is representing the Global South since institutions such as International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank lacks adequate representation from the Global South.

After evaluating major phases of BRICS and its rise in the global political economy, Ms Uddin delved into the discussion of identifying diverse prospects of Bangladesh's possible membership in this forum. Considering BRICS' growing footprint in the global south, especially after the recent expansion, Bangladesh's interest in

membership reflects expectations of potential benefits. With these expectations, there has been a great deal of speculation that Bangladesh would be included in the list of new members of the BRICS. Considering this possibility of becoming a member of this forum, it is, therefore, crucial to have a good understanding of how much Bangladesh would benefit from the membership of BRICS.

As an economic cooperation forum, BRICS accounts for 29 per cent of the global GDP in 2023, and after the latest expansion, it is expected to grow by 36 per cent in the coming days. Despite impressive economic clout in the global economy, Ms Uddin informed the participants that BRICS is not a trading bloc. It has no economic arrangements such as intra-BRICS free trade, regional market access, and the facilities of removal of non-tariff and tariff barriers among its member countries. Hence, according to Ms Uddin, Bangladesh's primary benefit from joining BRICS, at this juncture, would be participation in various discussions at the forum. Through active engagement, Bangladesh could articulate its concerns, opinions, and highlight its priorities on global affairs through this platform.

Regarding trade relations, Ms Uddin argued that Bangladesh already maintains trade relations with two BRICS nations, China and India, but these trade relations are highly tilted in favour of these two countries. Coming to Bangladesh-Russia trade relations, it is significantly hampered due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Bangladesh's exports to Russia witnessed a 27.87 per cent decrease in 2023 which is the lowest in the last five consecutive fiscal years. On the other hand, Bangladesh has insignificant trade relations with the other two members of BRICS – Brazil and South Africa.

Considering this trade scenario, potential economic benefits for Bangladesh from BRICS membership hinge on bilateral engagements. According to Ms Uddin, since BRICS is not a trading bloc, thus, after becoming a member of BRICS, Bangladesh needs to pursue bilateral economic potentials to secure its economic benefits from member countries. The inclusion of Bangladesh in BRICS has the potential to bolster its trade relations, entice foreign direct investment (FDI), facilitate access to untapped export markets, and diversify its export-import destination. But to gain these benefits, Bangladesh needs to strengthen bilateral trade ties with BRICS countries. In this regard, considering Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement with major member countries of BRICS may bring substantial economic benefits for Bangladesh. For example, regarding the progress of CEPA between Bangladesh-India, it is expected that once it gets signed, Bangladesh can have an increased export growth to India which will have significant positive impact on the country's GDP. Currently, Bangladesh is importing goods worth around US\$ 13 billion from India compared to its export goods worth around US\$ 2 billion. Thus, CEPA can bring substantial outcome in addressing the huge trade gap exists between Bangladesh-India trade ties. Same goes to with other two giant economies – China and Russia. Bangladesh has enormous prospects in trade ties with China and Russia but there is a need for strong bilateral trade agreement with them and if Bangladesh can prudently start negotiating CEPA with China and Russia, then the country can bring some significant economic gains using the BRICS platform.

Then, Ms Uddin shed light on the issue of diversification. She considered the diversification of export-import destinations as being an imperative for Bangladesh. According to her, Bangladesh needs to look for diversification such as diversification of the export-import destinations. Since diversification is the name of the game, therefore, it is vital that the nation not rely only on few import and export destinations. Currently, Bangladesh is significantly dependent on its export market, with more than 90 per cent of its exports focused on

countries of North America and the European Union. Hence, there is an urgent need to diversify and expand the export and import destinations. African and Middle eastern countries can be explored as potential destinations and, in this regard, BRICS platform can bring prospects for Bangladesh.

Regarding the BRICS' common currency, Ms Uddin informed that the common currency by BRICS is yet to launch, as the member countries are not in a position to follow a unified monetary policy like that of the European Union. Although the launch of a common currency by BRICS remains a future possibility, Ms Uddin argued that Bangladesh could explore its prospects if the country joins this forum.

Then, Ms Uddin shed light on technology transfer through BRICS technology platform, which can be counted as another important area of interest for Bangladesh. According to her, Bangladesh needs to focus more on the technological prowess by adapting latest technology. In this regard, BRICS technology platform can offer significant prospects. She also highlighted Bangladesh's Foreign Minister's request at the Friends of BRICS Foreign Ministers' Meeting for BRICS member nations to share their cost-effective technologies with developing countries. In addition, she stated that BRICS is currently prioritising several key areas of collaboration through this platform. These include enhancing intellectual property protection, establishing mechanisms for information sharing, conducting joint-training courses for Knowledge & Technology Transfer, facilitating the establishment of high-tech companies across member countries, and enabling access to science parks among BRICS nations. Therefore, Bangladesh may explore these prospects by becoming a member of BRICS.

Ms Uddin, then, discussed one very important outcome of BRIC, which is the inception of the New Development Bank (NDB). NDB is the only tangible outcome of BRICS over the last 15 years. And Bangladesh is part of it. After joining this bank in 2021, it is widely expected that Bangladesh could gain tangible benefit from BRICS through the NDB. This bank is considered as an important step in establishing new international financing instruments in the face of huge infrastructure investment shortages and the strengthening of the global network of financial protection. And most importantly, this bank offers multilateral funding with favourable terms, including easier conditions and longer-term financing. NDB has earmarked US\$1 billion for Bangladesh. And Bangladesh is going to receive the first loan for a project of improving water supply in Dhaka. Furthermore, Ms Uddin also informed that the NDB is also interested in working closely with Bangladesh's private sectors in two ways. One way is by providing loans and another way is by directly engaging in important private-sector projects. However, the government is yet to finalise the draft law for the NDB financing, if it is finalised, it will enable NDB-funded projects to avail some tax waivers. Hence, according to her, NDB is an important outcome of BRICS which can bring substantial benefits for Bangladesh.

Finally, she ended her presentation by reiterating diverse prospects of BRICS membership for Bangladesh. According to her, BRICS membership can bring substantial gains for Bangladesh specially in the area of attracting FDI, financing from NDB and adapting latest technology from BRICS technology transfer platform. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Rohingya issue in discussions on the BRICS platform can be an added advantage of this possible membership.



Mr Md Shamsul Haque

*CEO & Principal, Coders Trust, Bangladesh and
Former Additional Secretary, Ministry of Foreign
Affairs, Bangladesh*

Mr Md Shamsul Haque thanked BIIS for arranging the roundtable. He emphasised on the United Nations Charter which adopted in 1945 and focused on security and development. However, in today's world, economic and technology development are the main agendas. The UN Charter mandates for member states to resolve regional issues at regional level which is making economic issues even more important at the present context. He also emphasised on the importance of economic development and technology in today's global perspectives. It is important to discuss the regional mechanisms for economic cooperation, stating that decisions made by regional organisations are based on consensus rather than UN Charters, resolutions, and international organisations. This allows Bangladesh to have a voice in decisions that may go against its interests. It can be argued that Bangladesh should not stay out of emerging regional processes, as it could potentially be influenced by the US and India, two leading countries in the global community. These organisations can make decisions that may go against Bangladesh or their country, and Bangladesh cannot have a say in stopping these decisions. Bangladesh should join regional organisations immediately, regardless of whether it benefits immediately or after many years. This is because Bangladesh has the right to say 'No' to decisions that may go against its interests. We should also feel the danger of staying out of emerging regional processes, as they may not have a say in stopping these decisions.

Mr Haque has five years of experience working in the foreign ministry of Bangladesh and has recently joined American technology company Coders Trust Bangladesh as the CEO. He has gained new ideas through interactions with colleagues and the industry. It is important to highlight technology transfer and smart Bangladesh, a concept discussed in various speeches. He suggested that technology is a significant player in this change, with advancements such as artificial intelligence, robotics, quantum computing, and fusion energy. He argued that without embracing technology, the country will be left behind and will not reach its full potential. They believe that technology should be a priority on the agenda to stay ahead of the curve.

The agenda for Bangladesh to join the BRICS, a global community that will be the ultimate center of gravity. He suggested shifting the focus from North to South as BRICS advances and integrates. Revitalising the disfunctioning regional organisations such as SAARC and bringing new agendas, such as technology cooperation, when joining new organisations like BRICS.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has set the vision for Smart Bangladesh 2031, which includes smart citizens, smart government, smart society, and a cashless society. To achieve this, Bangladesh must innovate and leverage technology from the West. BRICS, BIMSTEC, SAARC, and other organisations, such as ASEAN, are already facilitating technology transfer from the West. To benefit from these advancements, Bangladesh must train its people and join organisations like BRICS, BIMSTEC, and SAARC. This will enable the country to adopt and benefit from technology.

He opined that the university education system in Bangladesh is primarily providing knowledge-based. However, it lacks skill-based education, leaving students without job opportunities. To achieve a smart Bangladesh, citizens, and economy, employment generation is crucial. The State Division of Speaking at the University of Hawaii highlighted the challenges faced by Bangladesh, including the ongoing wars in Russia and Ukraine, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Technology brings new opportunities and challenges, but embracing it is essential for economic development. Mr Haque believed that a skilled nation is needed to understand and utilise technology effectively. The challenges faced by Bangladesh include the ongoing wars in Russia and Ukraine, as well as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Overcoming these challenges requires a combination of education, employment, and technology.

Mr Haque suggested that Bangladesh needs a skilled generation of young people, and the ICT ministry is already providing skills through agencies like Coders Trust and Bangladesh. However, there are barriers to outreach to Western countries, and the focus should be on economic autonomy through regional cooperation and other means. As a nation-state, bilaterally, the country must bring technology transfer and skill transfer from technologically developed countries like the USA and European Union. Collectively, our strength will be better. India is an example of a technologically highly skilled country that provides skill training and education, with graduates earning hundreds of millions of dollars as freelancers within three to four months.

Bangladesh has many young people earning hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, even a minimum of several hundred dollars per month. This trend is causing a need for organisations to join to enhance their negotiation and collaboration power. The SAARC Circle, which was born in Bangladesh, aimed to work with South Asian neighboring countries in collaboration. After a decade, the organisation evolved into SAARC, which is a wonderful organisation that has evolved over the years with various branches, institutions, and organs. However, the ground was different at the time.

In present perspective, he suggested a smart SAARC, which should merge SAARC to focus on overlapping agendas such as connectivity, human resources, development, trade and investment, security, and agriculture. By discarding some members and incorporating new members from the East, the organisation can become more effective. Bangladesh has a leading role in bringing its voice to the table, and its diplomats can make a difference in bringing the agenda to the table. Discarding many agendas, such as technology transfer, education, connectivity, and trade, can help make the existing SAARC more effective. SAARC has been successful in making free trade partially workable, but it is essential to consider the potential for new members from the East to join the organisation.

Technology can be used to transfer skill development, allowing the entire nation to be trained through skill development. By focusing on these areas, the existing SAARC can become more efficient and effective. Filipinos and Southeast Asian countries are sending less skilled workers to the Middle East, earning more money than

Americans. Post-construction, household workers will require high-skilled workers, while unskilled labor is being sent. Change in this trend is crucial to avoid missed opportunities and billions of dollars in remittances, as unskilled labour will be sent back.

He discussed the shortcomings of the ready-made garments sector in Bangladesh, stating that they are not innovative and follow market trends. The BGMEA university is working on design but is not leading the way in the West. The technology sector, particularly skilled development, offers a solution as it does not face immigration issues in Western countries. Workers can work remotely from anywhere with an internet connection, earning money for multiple companies. Bangladesh already employs one million people, earning almost a billion dollars. Another concern is the need to repair some organisations, as the sector is fragile and vulnerable to the West's influence.

Mr Haque stressed that Bangladesh can promote technology agenda and skill transfer through a member of organisations like SAARC. However, if members are not prepared, they may not agree. For example, in India, the Indian community is second only to Chinese in the Silicon Valley. However, many Indians have shifted to new Silicon Valleys in India, such as Hyderabad, Chennai, and Bangalore, where they are training their own people and earning money. Bangladesh must follow the suite and leverage its connections bilaterally, multilaterally, and regionally with these leading countries in the sector.

Mr Haque believed that high priorities should be given in terms of involving stakeholders and sectoral stakeholders in decision-making processes. He highlighted the challenges of implementing decisions, including negotiations, discussions, and adoption. The implementation of these decisions is the most difficult task, and Bangladesh should not only participate and participate in the process but also involve people, stakeholders, and sectoral stakeholders through activities, projects, and seminars. He suggested that the Minister of Foreign Affairs should lead the collaboration with other sectoral ministries. There is a need to focus on the need for skill development in the industry, as the next generation still comes from Western countries. While bringing skills home to train people as an alternative to academic institutions, addressing taxation and regulatory issues is challenging. However, through collective bargaining and leveraging regional organisations, skills can be easily available. Finally, Mr Haque emphasised that regional organisations should prioritise skill development for the benefit of the global population, including southern countries, China, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and others. He hoped that by training these populations into skilled human resources, the world will belong to Bangladesh.

SPECIAL REMARKS



Dr Delwar Hossain

*Professor, Department of International Relations,
University of Dhaka, and Member, Bangladesh Public
Service Commission*

Dr Delwar Hossain said Bangladesh itself was borne out of the idea of autonomy, which was launched by Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, through his 6-point movement. Bangabandhu referred also to the 1965 India-Pakistan war, where East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) was vulnerable and insecure. This proves strategic thinking was in his mind that contributed actually to forming the movement. Autonomy, sovereignty, independence—all these ideas are very much inherent in the Westphalian state system. Unfortunately, the same system obstructs autonomy as the state is emphasised and in the global order, there are great, middle and small powers. There exist competition and rivalry between and among these entities. It is common knowledge how global politics emerged through the ideas of hegemony, dominance, conflicts, which nonetheless, is a paradox. Autonomy is very much a part of the state but the state itself not autonomous or sovereign. When Dr Delwar was a student in Dhaka University, during the Cold War era, literature mentioned only two countries were independent: the US and the USSR. Rest of the world was not so, given the dynamics of that bipolar era. This conceptual understanding should be kept in mind. While browsing the web, he saw the EU had very clear understanding of strategic autonomy. He also studied several documents promoted or developed by them and could see they had established their own perspective of this issue. Strategic autonomy had four components: One, reducing dependency, which as per Dr Hossain, is very important for countries like Bangladesh. There are different kinds of dependency—economic, strategic, cultural or military, etc. Hence, the very idea of autonomy lies with how and up to what extent, these can be reduced. Two, building hard power capabilities. A state such power to safeguard its interests. Three, resisting foreign coercion. The very idea of noninterference was enshrined in Bangladesh's constitution by Article 25 which states its importance and that Bangladesh is committed profoundly to this principle. Resisting foreign coercion came in many forms throughout the globe, be it in the bipolar world from 1950s-80s or unipolar world as John Mearsheimer spoke about its duration, i.e., 1989-2017. Today's world is a multipolar one. The attempt to deal with interference or

intervention by external powers is a very important ingredient for asserting strategic autonomy. Four, defending national interests regarding soft power—values, culture, beliefs, traditions, ideologies, etc. Every state has these elements of its own and tries to protect them.

These four elements he opined contributed into the very idea of strategic autonomy, which means not only the capacity/ability to decide, but also that for determine one's own fate and future in a given context. There should of course be foci on rationality, pragmatism and other philosophical or theoretical issues, but people should determine their future by themselves. This is what the EU emphasised in their understanding of strategic autonomy. From this standpoint, Dr Hossain said participation in international organisations was very important for countries, including Bangladesh.

He then defined participation. It is not just membership; even without being member, Bangladesh could contribute to regional or global organisations and there are different ways. It is rather membership and various diplomatic mechanisms through which the country could improve, enhance, develop participation. This is the very core of Bangladesh's foreign policy. But what benefits could the country obtain from participation in multilateral organisations, whether subregional, regional or international? First, it can help Bangladesh uphold the basic motto of its foreign policy, "friendship to all, malice to none". For that reason, increased participation in different organisations is necessary. Bangladesh is a leading developing nation from the global south which has considerable engagement worldwide but it still needs to increase that role. Second benefit is, which is related with the very nature of its foreign policy, is to emphasise multilateralism. There are two other major options in foreign policy or international diplomacy—unilateralism and bilateralism. These two are often used by big powers to serve their own interests, which jeopardise global stability and creates problems/challenges for countries like Bangladesh. Thus, multilateralism is crucial. He suggested for taking a look at the UNSC, which failed in taking a resolution on the current Hamas-Israel war in Gaza, but conversely, the UNGA was able to take the decision. They passed this decision with 120 countries in favour of a humanitarian truce. This is the power of multilateralism at the UN level where it clearly defeated unilateralism and bilateralism. The resolution may be non-binding and thus not effective but it raises moral question for the powers supporting Israel and are not backing the humanitarian truce which is desperately needed.

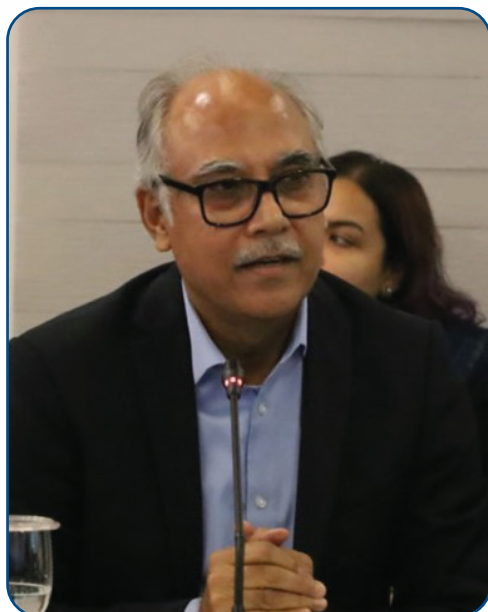
If Bangladesh wants to increase its bargaining capacity at the global level, it needs to increase participation. There is the need of augmenting the country's diplomatic space. Dr Hossain personally believed in functional approach for dealing with different issues, not legalist or very realist kind of understanding about issues. In this approach, there is scope of augmenting the aforementioned space and contribute for achieving national interests. Finally, regarding benefits, he said participation would assist in creating unity among states that would in turn, help solve problems in provision of global public goods and common challenges like climate change, pandemics like COVID-19, trade problems in particular when the SDGs are discussed. There of course, are constraints, in promoting strategic autonomy through participation in different organisations; there can be national constraints, e.g., public opinion, which can simultaneously be a positive and negative force when it comes to strategic autonomy. Resource constraint is another. He focused on importance of mindset.

In Bangladesh context, mindset is a constraint in understanding or promoting strategic autonomy. But more constraints exist at the global level where the structure of power and situations in today's world, e.g., big power rivalries, ongoing Ukraine war, and some other geopolitical developments are creating more problems. How

to overcome these constraints? Leadership is very important. Effective leadership by countries can make the difference, create opportunities and Bangladesh is showing this to the wider world: how its foreign policy, based on balance, independent stance and nonalignment, is helping to have major powers involved in the country's development through infrastructure, connectivity, other economic measures. There is also the need of building a knowledge-based society in true sense, not by quantity but quality. Hard power capacities should be strengthened at national level with hard and soft powers combined. Increase of membership, owning the country and its achievements are equally vital. In Bangladesh, everything is often viewed from narrow political perspectives. But people should become more open-minded for acknowledging the country's achievements and share it with the global community. To that end, mindset must be changed. When the issue of Bangladesh's membership in BRICS is talked about, Dr Hossain said the country could surely become a member but he did not view it as a bloc. For him, it was a platform Bangladesh could join and that could help achieve certain goals through multilateral cooperation.

Here, Dr Hossain emphasised on some achievements by other countries that Bangladesh had not attained yet. The country is quite close to the ASEAN, also a bridge and gateway between South and Southeast Asia. However, that could not make Bangladesh a sectoral dialogue partner of that bloc, not to mention a dialogue partner of them. Even countries like Morocco and Pakistan are sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN but not Bangladesh. It is an economy of US\$ 460 billion. The achievement witnessed in Bangladesh over the last decade should be enough to convince ASEAN and for that purpose, it undertook vigorous diplomatic initiatives on why it was not a sectoral dialogue partner of theirs. Another issue is long overdue that Bangladesh should become dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). He concluded by saying that countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal have already assumed such status, but Bangladesh could not. The country therefore, must work hard for achieving the status and there is also scope of obtaining observer status in this organisation.

OPEN DISCUSSION



Ambassador Md Abdul Hannan

Ambassador Md Abdul Hannan thanked the organisers for arranging the roundtable. He also appreciated the presentations for being precise and informative. He stated that there were two themes in the roundtable: one is geostrategic autonomy, and the second theme is regional and international organisations. On strategic autonomy, he found an excellent parallel between the elements that might help policymakers make decisions. One narrative is power, independence, and sovereignty. The other narrative is reducing dependence, building capability, resisting foreign coercion, and soft power promotion. The first narrative has more assertion, and the second narrative emphasises accommodation and preparedness. He hoped that this clarification would set the tone of the discussion. He opined that whether Bangladesh needs strategic autonomy or not, that must be discussed first. He suggested that Bangladesh needs to consider the second interpretation of strategic autonomy from a meow down attitude, accommodating an introspective perspective.

He commented that the foreign policy engagement of Bangladesh in the past and present depicts Bangladesh being successful in creating development partners. The country is engaged with more or less all the major powers in terms of economic interests. Multilaterally, Bangladesh is more focused on the global agenda. But there is room for improvement in terms of regional engagement. The country has not engaged much with Africa and South America. From a regional perspective, SAARC is there. He quoted from the Calcutta Speech of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman “The future generation will not forgive us if we, all together in the region, do not alleviate poverty.” Whether South Asia has grown or not remains a question. He noted that economic emancipation is more thematically linked with the discussion of how the country can engage in foreign policy assertions. In SAARC, the country has missed one great opportunity to create complementarity and connectivity for regional development. The reason behind the failure is the rivalry between the two major players.

He provided certain policy suggestions. Bangladesh may consider meaningfully engaging in economic and political dividends, which are the priorities of the country in terms of national interest. It is time to think of engagement beyond the region; specifically, South America and Africa need to be on the priority list of engagement. Besides, there is a need to engage with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The country needs to continue engaging with the European Union (EU). In addition, a strong team of diplomats with legal expertise is required. Narratives based on research are necessary as well. It is also essential to abide by WTO rules, commitments, and rulings. Finally, awareness and active engagement by the private sector are mandatory.



Professor Dr Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir

*Chairman, Department of Development Studies,
University of Dhaka*

Professor Dr Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir said he would judge an inane political perspective and try to provide an understanding of necessary conditions about what had been experienced in terms of SAARC. If one would take the three necessary conditions in terms of mobility of labour, risk-bearing needs of capital, and lastly, technology transfer. The results had not been that forthcoming. Thus, what options remained for Bangladesh? Simultaneously, there were only six foreign office officials in Myanmar. That speaks volumes about the need of designating more diplomats to that country. When there is a comparative assessment between South Asia and ASEAN, given the level of consumption, if one looked at India and gather all poor people of the world, India would be the same. This indicates there is no material basis for SAARC to function. No one creates trade and everyone expresses hopelessness about why South Asia remains the least integrated region of the world. But how to move forward from that? For Bangladesh, the Rohingya crisis is the main issue with Myanmar. Is Myanmar being termed as a comprehensive understanding? Because, without access to that and ASEAN, there could be question on how one would navigate prosperity. These are some real-life questions one would face.

If one goes to the Golden Triangle, then to China, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, it could be seen there are complementarities in terms of labour, capital, technology, etc. How to navigate that? One must ask such questions in order to frame any kind of foreign policy objective. South Asia remains a highly militarised zone and the

rate of militarisation far surpass any other continent. Here Dr Titumir questioned if deterrence and what kind of were really being talked about. What was the status of mechanisation of armed forces? What was the 3-D armed force when it comes to naval capabilities? What are the capabilities in terms of ensuring airspace security? These questions should be discussed in civil space. He said was hopeful of seeing mention of the Bay of Bengal when the Indo-Pacific Outlook was announced but this did not happen although ensuring peaceful, prosperous Bay of Bengal remains a necessity which he called part of development deterrence. Because, without deterrence, prosperity cannot be expected. These questions should be asked without getting entangled in constructive ambiguities or taking a spaghetti approach where everything is viewed as very important. Then Dr Titumir asked how a policy which has a sustainable impact, could be formed, without involving all politicians in the house. This cannot be as it is long-drawn foreign policy objective and that must be told. Moreover, without normative legitimacy, one would not be taken seriously by others. Ping-Pong diplomacy has given something, but none wants to be a ping-pong ball. Such difficult questions have to be underscored and acted upon; if Bangladesh wants to have real strategic autonomy, it must also have a Bangladesh doctrine. Is economic policy being discussed as demographic dividend, foreign policy for a peaceful, prosperous Bay of Bengal, or the country's development policies as development deterrence? There was need of looking at surrounding scenarios too, he said. Could Bangladesh's neighbourhood suffice to meet its technology, labour, capital requirements? Should the country lean towards a certain superpower? Can it balance between and among powers and shall that be sustainable? Does it need an inclusive process with deterrence capabilities? He concluded by lauding Dr Razia and Shanjida Shahabuddin for their papers.



Mr Mahbubur Rahman

Director General-1, Export Promotion Bureau

Mr Mahbubur Rahman began by praising all three presentations in the session. He said Dr Razia Sultana in her paper, provided some political thoughts on why Bangladesh joined various blocs. Here comes the question or rational choice. He said some commenters also mentioned several blocs Bangladesh could probably join. In the presentations, BRICS was at the centre of discussions. Bangladesh is in that bloc, not as a member, but has the membership of the BRICS-initiated New Development Bank (NDB), which can be considered as the group's manifestation. Bangladesh holds about more than 1.79 per cent of the bank's shares. Nonetheless,

joining the group as a member was a political decision existing members would be making some time after 2026 or so. Joining BRICS would be important for Bangladesh to obtain benefits in politics, regional issues like the Rohingya crisis and many more. But when it comes to rational choice, Mr Rahman wanted to translate it into the way Bangladesh would be economically benefitted. As most contributors said, Bangladesh after independence, began its foreign policy focussing on peaceful coexistence, it became the core of conducting the country's bilateral relations.

Bangladesh is not in a position to pursue power politics, nor can impose power on others. Instead, it is trying to receive economic benefits from endeavours by joining different organisations aimed at expanding regional cooperation. BRICS however, is not a regional cooperation organisation in that sense. It actually does not have rules on trade between and among nations and that is why Bangladesh would not obtain any immediate benefit by joining the bloc. Still, it is finding some alternative sources of finance which was important, just as the NDB. It should always be kept in mind that for engaging in trade with any region or country, Bangladesh gets trading benefits from them. Around 75 per cent of Bangladesh's trade is conducted with countries it receives GSP, duty free, quota free benefits from. This should be the central point in engaging with any country, he suggested. Bangladesh has a number of sources for financing its development activities, e.g., infrastructure projects, but its ultimate inherent strength is trade. One can borrow from different sources but that cannot be said of trade which has to be achieved instead. In this regard, the bloc or country that can produce trading opportunities or diversification of trade, is beneficial for Bangladesh. This should be at the centre of rational choice he mentioned.

On the country's foreign reserves issue, Mr Rahman said only trade could bring it out of the situation. Bangladesh should, therefore, take options like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and other FTAs as means of establishing partnerships with other countries. After 2026, there would only be the SAFTA for Bangladesh as Dr Titumir said SAARC could not really do anything. Mr Rahman differed on this case with him and said initiatives like the D-8, EU's GSP scheme would be providing Bangladesh with benefits up to 2029 (2026+3). But after 2029, there would be no GSP and the question of GSP+ would come. Bangladesh must prepare itself to qualify for availing that privilege. These are vital issues for consideration to engage with any bloc, regional, sub-regional, bilateral or multilateral. In addition, to make a rational choice, trade and economy must be at the centre point. On which power to attain, he opined Bangladesh's priority should be soft power and not hard power. That soft power should be human and economic development for which vehicles like FTAs and PTAs should be pursued.



Professor Dr Md Harun-Ur-Rashid Askari

Ex Vice-Chancellor, Islamic University, Kushtia

Professor Dr Md Harun-Ur-Rashid Askari expressed his gratitude for arranging the roundtable. He shared with the forum that he wrote an article on the subject of strategic solutions to Bangladesh's dollar crisis after attending the previous roundtable session. Here, he requested that the other participants share the ideas that were brainstormed during the roundtable sessions.

He claimed that if Bangladesh had not sided with any bloc, its creation and international recognition would not have been feasible. It is imperative for Bangladesh to join different blocs. He gave the example of Mexico in this regard. He said that Mexico is an LDC, but Bangladesh is not. According to him, Mexico has benefited greatly from being in regional blocs with superpowers like the United States. He commented that the idea of Bangladesh joining some blocs is intimidating. However, Bangladesh is a textbook example of economic development. Besides, geostrategically, the location of the country is significant as it serves as a gateway between Southeast Asia and South Asia. He remarked that the country needs to leverage it. He pointed out one limitation of Bangladesh in this regard. He stated that as far as feeder road connectivity is concerned, the country has 1,762, km of which only 4% have maintained the international standard. He emphasised that it is necessary to improve feeder road connectivity, which will pave the way for free trade agreements and cross-border supply chains.

He stated that Bangladesh has the potential to become a member of the BRICS. In the Bay of Bengal, out of 12 seaports, three belong to Bangladesh. He remarked that the status of Bangladesh will increase after the successful completion of the Matarbari Deep Sea Port. Therefore, Bangladesh can strike a balance between the regional and sub-regional blocs. Bangladesh has a huge potential for human resources, and the demographic dividend must be fully utilised. Lastly, he mentioned that putting theories into practice is imperative.



Major General (Retd) Alauddin M A Wadud

Major General (Retd) Alauddin M A Wadud wanted to discuss the problem from various angles and considered space and time are crucial to tactics. The global strategy is characterised by muscle-flexing in various nodal areas, such as Eurasia, Central America, Balkans, and Africa. This has led to an arrogance of unipolarity in the global arena, with interventions in these regions often for humanitarian assistance or weapons of mass destruction. However, Russia's rise to power in the Balkans and Ukraine has further complicated the situation.

The struggle between the major powers has also led to the rise of low-cost strategic countries like Russia, which have become high-tech technology and hard power in the global arena. This has caused tension in the global perspective. Mohan's theory suggests that whoever controls the sea, he controls the world. The ongoing Ukraine war and the blockage of the Black Sea by Russia have further highlighted this issue. The USA is now likely trying to control the oceans. The importance of time and space in strategy is highlighted, as it is crucial to act in time to maintain relevance. The Bay of Bengal, connecting Russia, China, and the USA, is an important supply route for both Russia, China, and the USA. Bangladesh is doing well in balancing its actions, but it is important to create a balance. The BRICS, for example, have a motive beyond cooperation and economic opportunities to develop an alternative currency. They are also working on bilateral exchanges to achieve this goal. However, the efforts of China and Russia to establish an alternative currency are being met with resistance. In conclusion, the global strategy is characterised by a focus on space and time, with the need for a balanced approach to maintain power and stability.



Mr MS Siddiqui

*Legal Economist NGO Adviser, Bangladesh
Competition commission*

MS Siddiqui begins by referring to Mr Shamsul Haque's explanation on the risk of not joining any trade blocks and other blocks and that the India and USA have joined maximum trade bloc and has the most bilateral and regional trade agreements in the world. He raised the question that why Bangladesh as a neighbor of India, is not following India, despite being the friendliest country of Bangladesh. He also referred to the DG for Export Promotion Bureau who said that his focus is on GSP plus after graduation from LDC and to the region of connectivity in recent time. He mentioned that for the last 20 years, he was one of the member participants in Ministry of Commerce when there were discussions about the Free Trade Agreement. He shared his experience of discussion on free trade agreement with Malaysia mentioning the opinion of the policymakers that says Malaysia does not agree to the transfer of offering service to other countries hence we should not sign any agreement with Malaysia as they were focusing on employment of our workers in Malaysia. So, we have declined their proposals. However, when there is an interesting proposal from Jordan, we see that we have trade surplus with Jordan as we are exporting many things or importing only some few minerals. So, the study says we can sign Free Trade Agreement with Jordan. He said that it was the recondition of the results from the trade commission. However, the conclusion of the study is that the benefit of this agreement is insignificant, hence, we should not sign a Free Trade Agreement.

He stresses that when there is a question of signing a Free Trade Agreement with America, the international trade is in favor of Bangladesh, we are exporting more than 10 billion US dollar garments and other things to USA. He said that although we are importing less than US \$5 billion per year, we are silent about that. When talked about the other countries like India or China, the policymakers were opposing signing Free Trade Agreement pointing that there will be a loss of tax and tariffs. Referring to the presentation of Research Fellow Sanjida Shahab Uddin where she said that we should sign CEPA with India for getting benefit, MS Siddiqui said that we have SAFTA agreement with India. He said that India also extended duty-free benefit to Bangladesh for 5000 product under AFTA agreement and despite that, our export to India is very close to one 2 billion or 1 billion at best. He added that we cannot cross a limit of US \$2 billion per year with exports to India. He raised the question on why SAFTA is not giving benefit to our export. He added that we are in agreement with India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

and under SAFTA preferential trade agreement. While we are not having the benefit out of this preferential trade agreement/regional trade agreement, we are talking about Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with India and are focusing on regional connectivity, regional agreement, and economic integration. He suggested that we evaluate the situation on why we are not getting the benefit under AFTA or SAFTA.

MS Siddique said that when the government had applied for the BRICS membership, the Ministry of Commerce recommended to Prime Minister office that we should join RCEP. He added that after a few days, the Foreign Minister said this is not the time to decide joining the RCEP and that we can consider it after the election. Ms Siddiqui suggested evaluating our weakness. Answering the question asked by Dr Razia in her presentation regarding what our problem is joining any regional trade in other blocks, he said that we are not mentally prepared to join any block because of our internal problems. In order to join a trade bloc, we shall have to integrally reform our administration, our policy. The first policy is the trade facilitation. He said that Bangladesh has one of the most restricted-protected, regressive policy of trade facilitation in the world. We have committed to WTO to facilitate trade but in practice, we're not doing that. Our Income Tax Act, our Customs Act, these are not up to the global standard. So, to join any Free Trade Agreement or any block, we shall have to facilitate trade, we shall have to reform our trade structure. We have slightly, gradually reduced our customs duty. If looked into the total revenue collection of NBR, we see that tax is going down and income duty and income is rising. So, to raise the income, we shall have to go for zero tariffs. He stressed that Free Trade Agreement means zero tariffs at customs point for customs duty, not income tax. So, our NBR is easy going they want to collect tax at entry point, they don't want to run after the taxpayer to collect tax from them. So, it's easy for them, they don't want to leave this comfort and this is where the problem lies.

Other labor law, intellectual property law, and FDI policies shall have to have a repeat before internal reform in law and regulations which we don't want to do. Ms Siddiqui referred to Professor Delwar's question on Nepal Bhutan and Sri Lanka joining Shanghai Cooperation and why can't Bangladesh join there. He asked what the problem was and who created obstacle to Bangladesh and replied that it is our mindset. Referring to the roundtable he said that if we go anywhere in the world, nobody will discuss whether should we join any trade bloc or not. Bangladesh is most probably only one nation, one country in the world where we are discussing the possibility, prospect and obstacle and others of joining a Free Trade Agreement.



Professor Imtiaz A Hussain

*Department of Global Studies and Governance,
Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)*

Professor Imtiaz A Hussain, a distinguished academic at IUB, expressed his gratitude to BIISS for the opportunity to engage in a dialogue on strategic autonomy. During his discourse, Professor Hussain highlighted certain reservations regarding the term “strategic autonomy,” deeming it somewhat contradictory. He scrutinised the term within the context of Bangladesh’s foreign policy, which historically adheres to the principle of “Friendship to all, malice to none.”

Emphasising the military connotation of the term “strategy,” Professor Hussain questioned its applicability to a foreign policy framework that prioritises friendship and harmony. He underscored the historical significance of Bangladesh’s foreign policy, quoting the foundational principle articulated by Bangabandhu in 1974. According to Professor Hussain, the essence of Bangladesh’s foreign policy aligns more closely with autonomy than with a purely strategic approach, especially considering the nation’s role as a prominent fifth-world country.

Professor Hussain delved into the evolution of Bangladesh’s standing in the global arena, noting its transition from a fifth-world country to an aspiring developed nation by 2041. He highlighted the importance of recognising and addressing endogenous factors shaping national interests, commending one of the presenters, Ms Shanjida Shahab Uddin, for her emphasis on this aspect. Furthermore, he echoed concerns raised by others about the nation’s dependence on the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry, advocating for diversification through free trade agreements.

The professor particularly acknowledged the insights provided by Dr Razia Sultana, who stressed the need to break free from the RMG cycle and explore alternative avenues for economic growth. He endorsed the idea of engaging in free trade agreements, citing ongoing negotiations on 12-14 such agreements. Professor Hussain argued that diversification, a key element in achieving Vision 2041, would be unattainable without addressing the limitations imposed by the current economic structure.

Expressing agreement with Shamsher’s cautionary remarks about neglecting the ‘Main Street’ in the pursuit of smart and strategic moves, Professor Hussain underscored the importance of considering the impact on the

population at large. He cautioned against leaving Main Street behind and urged for a balanced approach that includes the perspectives of those not directly benefiting from high-level strategic decisions.

Drawing attention to Ambassador Hannan's observations about the future trajectory of BRICS, Professor Hussain underscored the potential role of Africa in the next wave of BRICS membership. He echoed the sentiment that Africa holds significant promise, both in terms of population and resources, and suggested that Bangladesh should actively engage with the continent for mutual benefits. Professor Hussain acknowledged the demographic decline in Europe and proposed a shift in focus towards building stronger ties with Africa and Latin America.



Mr Md Rais Hasan Sarowar

*Director General (Regional Organisations Wing),
Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)*

Md Rais Hasan Sarowar presented a detailed discourse on Bangladesh's engagement with regional organisations, focusing on three primary components: exploring opportunities and options in various regional organisations, assessing the specific implications for Bangladesh, and determining the extent to which Bangladesh can benefit from multilateral frameworks.

Mr Sarowar initiated his address by providing historical context to the rise of regionalism post-Second World War and its acceleration after the Cold War. He highlighted the ideological divide between communism and capitalism, the economic forces at play, and the Cold War dynamics as catalysts for the emergence of regional organisations. He noted that more than 80 regional organisations presently exist globally, with Bangladesh actively participating in over 30, showcasing a noteworthy engagement compared to its Asian counterparts.

Mr Sarowar underscored the importance of anchoring Bangladesh's involvement in regionalism within the foundations of its Constitution, foreign policy, and the political will of the current government. Referencing the nation's pursuit of becoming a 'Smart Bangladesh' and the ongoing digitalisation drive, Mr Sarowar advocated for a strategic approach in selecting regional organisations that align with the country's economic goals. He particularly highlighted the African Union (AU) as a fitting example due to its focus on digitalisation and science and technology, providing an opportunity for Bangladesh to enhance its global visibility.

Acknowledging the global challenge of Bangladesh's limited recognition, especially in comparison to countries like Turkey, Mr Sarowar posited regionalism as an avenue to address this issue. He proposed potential partnerships with organisations such as CARICOM (i.e., the Caribbean Community), the Organisation of American States (OAS), Mercosur, and the African Union (AU), emphasising the need for Bangladesh's presence in various regions to strengthen its global footprint.

He delved into the specifics of Bangladesh's involvement in BRICS, delineating its extensive geographical coverage, population share, and contribution to the global GDP. However, Mr Sarowar cautioned against overlooking the economic asymmetry within BRICS nations and advocated for a thorough review of Bangladesh's role within the organisation. He raised concerns about potential undue influence on Bangladesh's policies and development projects, urging a re-evaluation of the country's engagement with BRICS through alternative mechanisms.

Regarding Bangladesh's future engagements, Mr Sarowar highlighted the Indo-Pacific region as a strategic focus, presenting potential gains for the nation. However, he acknowledged the government's apparent hesitation, attributing it to ongoing considerations of existing Free Trade Agreements (FTA) and the need to avoid overlapping commitments. He identified initiatives like the Thai National Initiative, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway (i.e., the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway), and others as priority areas for Bangladesh, where active participation could yield significant benefits. Mr Sarowar urged a meticulous examination of existing partnerships and a reconsideration of engagements like BRICS. He underscored the Indo-Pacific region as a potential arena for Bangladesh's growth, with an emphasis on careful deliberation to avoid conflicting commitments.



Dr Nibedita Roy

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science, Jagannath University

Dr Nibedita Roy said that as a student of political science, she wants to observe in the context of globalisation. She thinks that liberalism is shifted to neo liberalism, and our foreign policy and diplomacy are run by those ideologies. She also thinks that our situation is closely related to the concept of Amartya Sen's Capability

Expansion where we have some policies, we are signatories of some regional zones, but question remains on whether we can oppose or bargain with the actors or sub actors, with the capability. She questioned whether we are conscious about our capacity to bargain. She said that we need to solve those problems, which are our native problems. She argued that she did not see the experts negotiate with others. Dr Roy said that we have to improve our diplomacy, our capability as the political leaders who are always opposing themselves in the interests of our own development opportunities. They always fight. So, she thinks that to improve our diplomacy, first we have to develop our relations with India, Japan, China and Russia. Dr Roy suggested the need to increase networking with the alliance who can give us protection from a balanced strategy to improve our capability.



Professor Dr Md Aynul Islam

Department of Economics, Jagannath University

Professor Md Aynul Islam touched upon whether Bangladesh should join the BRICS or not. He said that the media has mentioned that the Bangladesh government has applied to join BRICS on June 19. However, the Prime Minister informed us that the country has not applied yet. He remarked that Bangladesh needs to be cautious about the geopolitical tensions before joining the BRICS. BRICS can soon become a big club with plenty of global players. And with that may come the need to make big decisions. In the long run, BRICS intends to introduce a common currency and push for dedollarisation. The main export destinations of Bangladesh are the US and EU, which may not like it. Therefore, Bangladesh needs to do a lot to position itself smartly to handle it. He remarked that Bangladesh needs to move slowly to join the BRICS.



Mr Tarikul Islam

*Additional Foreign Secretary, Africa and ME Wing,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

Additional Secretary Tarikul Islam began by putting light on the nature of BRICS and how BRICS has evolved. He mentioned that he joined the BRICS Foreign Ministers meeting in Capetown as a representative officer from Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our hon'orable Foreign Minister made the virtual speech there. He said that if we look at BRICS, it can be seen that it came as an alternative platform in order to see better leverage and reforms so that the developing worlds can have their greater voice, along with representation where there could be more institutional reforms inside World bank, IMF and in other international financial institutions by ensuring more voices to the need of the developing world. He said that if we look at the developing discussions that took place since the beginning of BRICS, BRICS really started with many local agenda and the internal agenda of the countries. It covered a broad range of issues like agriculture, trade and commerce, food and energy security, the internal and regional issues and problems. So BRICS is rather a broad-based institution. Regarding the regional outreach of BRICS, he said that it is in the process of developing certain institutions. The BRICS has already launched its think tank, it has created its business council and think tank council. He argues that BRICS has its regional outreach in the form of joined discussions with the global regional organisations. It has already joined its summit with the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, the Eurasian Economic union and the BIMSTEC. BRICS has created its Contingent Reserve Arrangement to cope with the financial crisis. So, BRICS is not limited to trade and economic window.

Mr Tarikul Islam further said that if broadly looked at the evolution of BRICS, it has 3 major pillars. The first pillar is economic and trade co-operation, the second is development co-operation including all features- infrastructure and knowledge based. And the third is regional and political co-operation. He stressed that BRICS has a lot to offer us. He further said that if it is questioned why Bangladesh was not accorded membership this time, it was for the consideration of regional distribution because three Asian countries got membership this time which are Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE. Basically, the aspects of economic performance and economic strength are considered for allowing membership. He argued that BRICS is a rather liberal organisation unless there is very strong political opposition or arguments. Mr Tarikul Islam said that BRICS is rather liberal in approach, and he hopes that in future there will be more allocation of membership including Bangladesh, and that we belong to the next list. There are a lot of advantages for Bangladesh to be flagged in with the BRICS platform taking into the demand of the day the current geopolitical and global context. Our inclusion in the BRICS is vital, it is useful and important organisation for Bangladesh.



Professor Dr Ishtiaque Selim

Department of Economics, Jagannath University

Dr Ishtiaque Selim said Bangladesh must focus on foreign direct investment (FDI), which remained hugely neglected throughout the years. If anyone would see statistics, it could be seen FDI was very meagre in this country and must be worked on more, i.e., how to attract more FDI. Another common problem was about the ease of doing business in Bangladesh, an index where the country was lagging way behind others, ranked at 168th out of 190 countries in the world. Even Nepal ranked 94th. To attract more FDI, Bangladesh must work on improving the ease of doing business index. This lag is a reflection of poor governance and institutions. Referring to former Additional Foreign Secretary, Md. Shamsul Haque's discussion, Dr Selim emphasised the importance of technology and skills transfer, incapability of Bangladeshi universities in producing graduates for catering to the need of industries. This was quite correct as per his opinion. However, there remained the need of doing more. That is, Bangladesh must focus on science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) education. If investments from some of the biggest corporations would have to be attracted, one must know these entities look into the STEM index of a particular country. If that index was high or at an average level, they would be inclined for investing in there. Unfortunately, Bangladesh had so far done nothing to improve such education.

Dr Selim's next point was that Bangladesh government must undertake actions to invest more in primary and secondary education. By this, he meant investments not in terms of logistics, but on educators. Young scholars of the country should come, teach in primary and secondary levels. They should also be granted some autonomy in teaching. Otherwise, there would not be good educators in future and the country would become trapped into a vicious cycle. This cycle must be broken to find brilliant minds from the society. In absence of that, the country would neither be able to attract more FDI. When there were not right people, the country would not be able to do well in ease of doing business index.

According to Dr Selim, trade was a very debated issue in regional cooperation. Bangladesh's nearest neighbour, India, is growing day by day and thus, labour wages there could become very high, may be in a decade or so. Bangladesh's private sector need, therefore, to explore the Indian market. Because, rising labour costs might mean it could be unprofitable for that country to produce several products in its territory. He concluded by saying Bangladesh might avail this opportunity and ask India if the supply chain could be shifted over to Bangladesh.



Dr Noor Mohammad Sarker

*Research Fellow (International Affairs), Bangladesh
Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA)*

Dr Noor Mohammad Sarker addressed the gathering, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to voice his opinions. He commenced his remarks by extending congratulations to the presenters for their insightful presentations and acknowledged the enriching discussions that had transpired among the learned participants.

In his concise intervention, Dr Sarker delineated three salient points pertinent to the subject at hand. The primary focus was on the concept of strategic autonomy, particularly as it relates to nations such as Bangladesh, positioning themselves as emerging powers. He underscored the integral connection between strategic autonomy and active participation in international organisations such as BRICS. Employing a metaphorical analogy, Dr Sarker articulated that being outside the room precludes contemplation of one's seating arrangements within. Consequently, he advocated for Bangladesh to actively engage with such platforms to bolster its strategic autonomy.

The speaker further expounded on the economic and geopolitical significance of Bangladesh's participation in international forums. He noted a correlation between the nation's enhanced strategic autonomy and its involvement in multilateral platforms. Drawing attention to a pivotal period between 2012 and 2014, Dr Sarker highlighted Bangladesh's acquisition of a substantial maritime area, attributing this accomplishment to its engagement in international organisations. Emphasising the role of participation in shaping geopolitical dynamics, he posited that strategic autonomy for countries like Bangladesh is contingent upon their active involvement in international forums.

Dr Sarker delved into the intricacies of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, characterising it as a complex bipolarity where decisions emanate from two opposing ends. In the absence of a non-aligned movement akin to the Cold War era, he argued that increased participation in diverse international organisations provides countries like Bangladesh with more robust developmental options. By navigating this complex bipolarity, nations, regardless of their size, can respond more effectively to geopolitical challenges.

The speaker concluded by underscoring a less-discussed aspect of international participation—the potential benefits in addressing non-traditional security concerns. Dr Sarker cited climate change and transnational

crimes such as drug trafficking and human trafficking as critical issues where international collaboration through organisations like BRICS could yield positive outcomes for Bangladesh. He posited that engagement in such forums could offer strategic options for securing areas related to non-traditional security threats.

In a final noteworthy point, Dr Sarker drew attention to the unique nature of BRICS as a multi-regional organisation encompassing diverse regions and interests worldwide. He advocated for a comprehensive analysis of how the six member countries gained inclusion, encouraging Bangladesh to study the potentials they demonstrated to existing BRICS members. By conducting thorough groundwork, he asserted that Bangladesh could formulate strategic options for future participation, ultimately augmenting its strategic autonomy.



Ambassador Abdus Salam

Ambassador Abdus Salam mentioned about the business opportunities a place called Ciudad del Este in Paraguay, where many Bangladeshis work due to its large market and numerous businessmen from the area come to buy goods. Many Bangladeshis work as brokers in the mall. Upon visiting the market, he found that it was a Gulistan market of Bangladesh with no consular facilities. However, they were taken by some Bangladeshis who took them to the market and showed them the opportunities available. They suggested that more Bangladeshis should be brought to the market and that they could bring their relatives and friends to work there.

He suggested that instead of going to a known markets or places, they should look for new opportunities to employ Bangladeshis and bring their people. Ambassador Salam observed that many Bangladeshis have already married and become nationals of the country after getting married. In conclusion, the speaker urges the government to focus on finding new opportunities to employ Bangladeshis and find ways to bring them to better jobs.



Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad
Former Chairman, BISS

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad delivered a nuanced and insightful discourse on Bangladesh's foreign policy, strategically navigating through diplomatic relationships, regional cooperation, and the potential accession to the BRICS alliance.

In delineating the trajectory of Bangladesh's diplomatic journey, Mr Ahmad noted that while the idea of fostering amicable relations had existed for a considerable time, its full realisation had taken some years. However, in recent times, Bangladesh has successfully and markedly improved its relations with an array of important development partners, ranging from the United States, as the largest global power, to neighbouring India, and extending to countries like China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Europe, and Russia. The Ambassador underscored the multitude of major projects underway with the assistance of these partners.

A poignant moment in the discourse was the Ambassador's anecdote about meeting the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka. This interaction became a platform to discuss the 2004 agreement between India and the United States concerning civilian use of nuclear power. The Ambassador recalled that at the time, American leaders viewed the collaboration as a means to contain China. However, the Indian response, firmly rooted in autonomous decision-making based on national interest, left a lasting impression. This narrative served as a catalyst for the Ambassador's subsequent emphasis on the crucial nexus between autonomy and strategy in foreign relations.

Transitioning to the theme of regional and global organisations, Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad highlighted Bangladesh's commitment to inclusive economic cooperation groups. The government's stance, as articulated by the Ambassador, is to participate in organisations that are not exclusive and do not seek to isolate others. He drew attention to the Bangladeshi's IPO (Input, Process, Output) model, emphasising the importance of strategy and opportunities for all in their relations with various economic collaborative organisations.

As the Ambassador delved into the topic of Bangladesh's interest in joining BRICS, he articulated a two-fold strategy. Firstly, he emphasised the importance of prioritising organisations based on the benefits they offer. Secondly, he advocated for an opportunistic approach, suggesting that Bangladesh should avail itself of

opportunities to join organisations that may not be in its initial priority list but present beneficial prospects.

The Ambassador outlined the objectives of Bangladesh's foreign relations, emphasising the quest for access to raw materials, markets, technology, funds, and political strength. He meticulously examined the potential benefits of joining BRICS, ranging from expanded trade and commerce opportunities to technological exchanges facilitated by a dedicated organisation within BRICS. The role of the New Development Bank (NDB) within the BRICS framework was particularly highlighted, underscoring Bangladesh's strategic participation in this financial institution to secure investment and financial support.

Moreover, Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad shed light on the significance of political strength, noting that Bangladesh's involvement in BRICS would contribute to amplifying its voice on the global stage. The Ambassador cited Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's invitation to the BRICS summit as a testament to Bangladesh's perceived importance as a representative of the Global South.

CLOSING REMARKS BY THE CHAIR



Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarkar
Chairman, BISS

In the concluding remarks, Chair of the Session, Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarkar remarked the session as very important which in fact are part of a series of roundtable discussions on strategic autonomy. Different soft issues like technology transfer, fourth industrial revolution, etc. will be covered in the upcoming days. He informed that this is just general frame under which BISS is having such series of sessions and is expecting from the scholars and experts distinguished scholars and think tanks to give thoughts, insights, points of view and suggestions. Ambassador highlighted that strategic autonomy is an essentiality for any self-respecting and independent country, because it is synonymous to sovereignty and independence. Independence in decision

making and in its policy pursuits for the goals as a nation. Basically, options to work with different means of achieving is a strategic autonomy and diversification of dependence on others in the process of gaining strategic autonomy. So, this is diversification of dependence, reduction of dependence on the few, and enhancing self-reliance. The session chair identified one important point that the context of strategic autonomy of Bangladesh. These are not the subjects or goals only. These are also how we can seek to attain our strategic autonomy. Bangladesh must take that in that perspective as well. Finally, Ambassador Sarkar thanked everyone for their active participation and thoughtful contributions.





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