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# Exploring the Intricate Future of Bangladesh in the Context of Regional Geopolitical Dynamics

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**ABSTRACT.** Bangladesh serves as a vital nexus between South and Southeast Asia, holding considerable strategic importance for all major regional and global players. This article aims to analyze Bangladesh's future within the context of complex regional dynamics and its foreign policy responses. The author investigates how the rising geopolitical competition and rivalries among major powers, along with their significant impacts on Bangladesh, generate notable challenges for the nation. To understand Dhaka's strategies towards these powers, the study has involved a detailed review of recent scholarly literature, fieldwork, and in-depth interviews. The analysis posits that Bangladesh adopts a moderate foreign policy to sustain hedging relations with all key regional and extra-regional powers. Nevertheless, Dhaka's capacity to implement its foreign policies effectively is hampered by its inability to establish leverage over dominant powers. The article concludes that the influences of key powers in Bangladesh's political landscape could lead the country to

align with a specific power bloc or maintain neutrality in the near future, contingent upon the evolving regional and global political dynamics. Thus, the study suggests that by devising its short and long-term plans and strategies, Bangladesh can create leverage and remain on the right track without falling into the trap of geopolitics.

**KEYWORDS:** Bangladesh, South Asia, hedging foreign relations, geopolitics, rivalries, Non-Aligned movement.

## Introduction

Bangladesh's emergence as a significant player in South Asia has attracted considerable attention both regionally and globally. Strategically located at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh has become an important hub for regional and extra-regional powers [Hussain, 2019]. Recognizing its strategic importance, powerful states and organizations have actively engaged with Bangladesh, extend-

ing their influence in various internal and external affairs. Following its territorial gains in the Bay of Bengal [Faruque, 2018; Yasmin, 2019], Bangladesh has established itself as a key regional hub for political and economic activities, demonstrated by the increasing involvement of major powers [Hossain, Islam, 2021].

Geographically, Bangladesh is bordered by India on three sides but occupies a crucial position in the Bay of Bengal, ensuring vital connectivity with other countries and key powers [Rahman, 2016]. With the exception of a narrow land corridor, Bangladesh encloses India's Northeastern states, compelling New Delhi to maintain a robust relationship with Dhaka [Chaudhury, 2020]. Conversely, China views Bangladesh as a substantial opportunity for trade and commerce, leading to its incorporation into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [Anwar, 2020]. China has made the largest investments in this project thus far [Saimun, 2020]. Amid the intensified Sino-Indian rivalry, the United States, Bangladesh's largest trade partner, has increasingly focused on the country due to its broader national interests in the Indo-Pacific region [Chakma, 2019]. While Russia's historical influence on Bangladesh's domestic and foreign affairs has been limited [Riaz, 2022], recent significant collaborations, such as the nuclear power plant project, have gained attention [Ahmed, Kabir, Jyoti, 2022; Abul Hasan, 2024].

Bangladesh's foreign policy is driven by the desire to maintain regional peace, stability, security, integration, and global stability [Yasmin, 2022]. The country's growing significance brings with it both opportunities and challenges. It is widely believed that sustained economic growth is essential for Bangladesh to ensure regional and global peace, contingent upon

the implementation of effective strategies by Dhaka<sup>1</sup>. However, Bangladesh faces complexities due to China's expanding influence in the region and counteractions by India, the United States, and their allies to limit Beijing's sway. If the geopolitical landscape shifts back to a bipolar structure, with the U. S. and China as opposing poles, Bangladesh must consider whether to align with a specific bloc or maintain neutrality. These considerations are crucial for the country's future trajectory.

While previous studies have not thoroughly addressed this issue, and some experts argue it is premature to do so, this study emphasizes the need for long-term planning and strategies to anticipate potential risks or threats. Bangladeshi authorities must proactively address these issues to ensure continued progress. This study aims to enrich the existing literature on these topics, contributing to the broader discourse.

The purpose of this study is to examine Bangladesh's future within the framework of complex South Asian regional dynamics and geopolitical competition among major powers. It is important to note that this study focuses primarily on regional perspectives and does not address domestic issues such as political instability or corruption. Additionally, the article does not advocate for any specific policy stance, such as alignment or non-alignment, that Bangladesh should adopt. Instead, it analytically explores the advantages and disadvantages of various potential actions the country may undertake. This research is intended to prompt policymakers to engage in deep reflection and assist them in policy formulation.

Qualitative research methods were employed in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the recent literature on smaller and weaker states in South Asia,

1 Ahmad M. Bangladesh and the China-India Conflict // The Diplomat. – 2020. – July 8. – Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/bangladesh-and-the-china-india-conflict/>, accessed 05.05.2024.

with a particular focus on Bangladesh. It conducts a comparative analysis of major power politics in South Asia vis-à-vis these weaker states. The study aims to investigate the foreign policy strategies employed by regional powers (China, India, and Pakistan) and extra-regional powers (the United States and Russia) concerning Bangladesh. Qualitative analysis techniques were utilized to analyze the complex South Asian political landscape and international relations, and their impact on Bangladesh. A triangulating qualitative approach was adopted, consisting of content analysis, literature review, and in-depth interviews, to rigorously examine and evaluate key issues and fundamental questions. Additionally, primary data were gathered through interviews during a one-and-a-half-month fieldwork trip in Bangladesh.

The article is structured as follows: first, it provides a concise overview of the historical background of Bangladesh's geographical situation in South Asia. Next, it investigates the geopolitical landscape within South Asia and elucidates how Bangladesh manages the rivalries among major powers. It then examines the current challenges facing Bangladesh and potential future obstacles. Finally, the article concludes with a detailed presentation of the key findings from this study and their possible implications.

## Towards the conceptual background

Among the eight nation-states in South Asia, Bangladesh historically belonged to greater India and subsequently East Pakistan before achieving independence in 1971. It stands out as the only country born during the Cold War era, serving as

a unique battleground for political maneuverings [Yasmin, 2019]. Despite its modest geographic size, Bangladesh boasts a substantial population, exceeding those of many medium- and large-sized countries. It shares borders with India to the west, north, and east – the world's fifth longest land border – while Myanmar lies to the southeast and the Bay of Bengal to the south. Bangladesh's strategic position and recent economic growth have drawn significant attention from foreign investors eager to engage in its development projects [Ogden, 2022].

Contrary to its early characterization as a 'bottomless basket'<sup>2</sup>, Bangladesh is now recognized as a 'South Asian Miracle' [Hossain, 2021]. If the country maintains its current trajectory, it is projected to become one of the world's top 25 largest economies by 2035<sup>3</sup>. Achieving this goal will require strong foreign policies and strategies [Yasmin, 2016, 2022]. Guided by the principle of "friendship towards all and malice towards none," Bangladesh has committed itself to adopting a neutral stance in its foreign relations and decision-making processes; however, it often struggles to do so [Hasan, 2024].

As geopolitical and economic competition heightens in the South Asia region, Bangladesh is determined to maintain a moderate stance in its foreign relations and decision-making processes; however, it often struggles to do so [Hasan, 2024]. The primary aims of Bangladesh's foreign policy are to maintain regional peace, stability, security, integration, and cooperation, while also promoting global peace and stability. The country strives to foster regional integration and economic cooperation through various initiatives, including the formation of SAARC [Chakma, 2020]. Nevertheless, Bangladesh

2 Rahman Z. Bangladesh's geopolitical position provides for unique opportunities // The Daily Star. – 2021. – November 4. – Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/bangladeshs-geopolitical-position-provides-unique-opportunities-2221461>, accessed 22.03.2024.

3 Ali M. Bangladesh's economy to be 25th largest by 2035 // The Business Standard. – 2020. – December 27. – Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/bangladeshs-economy-be-25th-largest-2035-177334>, accessed 22.03.2024.

faces several challenges, such as trade barriers, security threats, and the Rohingya crisis. Additionally, geopolitical rivalries between major powers like India, China, the USA, and Russia significantly impact Bangladesh's internal and external policies. Despite these challenges, Bangladesh remains committed to its foreign policy objectives through affiliations with regional and extra-regional institutions, agreements, treaties, and dialogues with other countries and organizations [Houda, 2020].

### Geopolitical competition in South Asia and Bangladesh

Kishore Mahbubani, a distinguished 21st-century Asian diplomat and Singaporean policymaker, and author of the highly regarded book *Has China Won?*, argues that “*Geo-politics is a cruel business; nothing to do with values, sentiment, love, or ideology; only interest matters.*” He further explains that nations with substantial economies and powerful militaries typically wield the most influence globally, including in the Indo-Pacific region. Ongoing rivalries between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have stalled South Asia's progress in regional security, stability, integration, and cooperation [Shankar, 2022; Ogden, 2022]. As Islamabad's influence diminishes, Beijing's assertive presence has significantly reshaped the regional landscape [The Routledge Handbook..., 2024]. Consequently, India, Japan, and Western powers have coalesced to counter China's extensive influence in the region.

To grasp the geopolitical competition in South Asia, it is essential to consider four key aspects: first, India's perception of China's encirclement strategy; second, the impact of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the region's power dynamics; third, the strengthening Indo-U. S. security partnership and the formation of QUAD; and fourth, Dhaka's position on the geopolitical competition among major powers.

India regards Chinese commercial activities within its sphere of influence as a significant threat to its strategic objectives [Kuchhal, 2022]. The potential use of these infrastructures by the Chinese military to enhance their blue-water capabilities in the future is a particular concern. Chinese investments in South Asian countries, especially in port construction projects in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – regions close to India – could position China advantageously within the strategic framework of the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean [China and South Asia..., 2022]. Additionally, such investments might allow Beijing to influence the foreign policies of these recipient countries, aligning them with Chinese interests [Saimun, 2020; Saimun, Talukder, 2022].

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a Chinese trillion-dollar project designed to closely interweave Asian countries and their economies with China [Saimun, 2020]. As Beijing effectively collaborates with smaller nations in the region, New Delhi recognizes its economic and military limitations but has abstained from directly opposing the project and refrained from pressuring its neighboring countries. Instead, India seeks to forge new economic alliances, invest in socioeconomic projects, and enhance military cooperation with smaller nations. Unfortunately, India has lost its unique hegemonic power in the region, as it has been unable to meet the economic and military demands of its neighbors, according to Md. Touhid Hossain, former Foreign Secretary and current advisor to the foreign ministry of the interim government of Bangladesh.

The growing Chinese bilateral trade and investment in smaller countries in the Indo-Pacific region have raised significant concerns for not only India but also the USA [Khan, 2021] and its allies in the Indian Ocean Region. As a response, India has sought cooperation with other dominant powers, such as the USA, Japan, and

Australia, through the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), aimed at limiting Beijing's influence in the region [Paul, 2019]. Recently, regular joint military exercises and frequent dialogues between top officials have strengthened the Indo-U. S. partnership in maritime security and cooperation. Moreover, New Delhi has been actively attempting to disrupt and counter Beijing-backed projects in South Asia.

The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh have emerged as pivotal areas of strategic interest for major powers, including Washington, New Delhi, Beijing, and Moscow. With China's growing and assertive presence in the maritime domain, India has sought to strengthen its ties with neighboring countries to pursue its Indo-Pacific objectives [Bose, 2023]. In this endeavor, Bangladesh, located north of the Bay of Bengal and India's immediate eastern neighbor, plays a crucial role. China's efforts to expand its influence in the Bay region by penetrating Bangladesh have spurred India to further develop its relationship with the country.

In recent years, the Bangladesh-India relationship has deepened significantly, with Dhaka granting India the right to use its territory for the transportation of goods between the northeastern provinces and mainland India. Meanwhile, China has emerged as Bangladesh's highest bilateral trading partner since 2005 [Sahoo, 2013], far surpassing other powerful nations such as India, the USA, and Russia, and becoming a key contributor to the country's development initiatives<sup>4</sup>. The Bangladesh Navy's acquisition of two Chinese submarines has raised concerns in India, further highlighting Bangladesh's strategic significance in the region<sup>5</sup>.

Bangladesh is of great importance to the United States due to its large market for garment products. Historically, the U. S. strategy towards South Asia has primarily focused on India and Pakistan. However, Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, has confirmed that the Biden administration has shifted its foreign policy to emphasize individual countries within South Asia<sup>6</sup>. High-level visits to Bangladesh illustrate this change in U. S. foreign policy. Washington remains cautious of Beijing's and Moscow's growing influence in Bangladesh and actively seeks to undermine their presence [Rajagopalan, 2022]. One approach includes pressuring Dhaka to join the QUAD alliance, thereby enhancing military and economic cooperation to counteract the influence of China and Russia in South Asia.

Considering its strategic importance and the geopolitical competition in South Asia, Bangladesh takes a balanced approach to addressing rivalries among major powers [Riaz, 2022]. Comprehensive analysis of Bangladesh's foreign policy indicates that Dhaka engages with various regional and extra-regional military and economic powers and organizations to secure its strategic interests, territorial integrity, and economic prosperity while also reducing India's substantial influence in its internal and external affairs. Bangladesh's geographic significance, particularly its three ports – Chattogram, Mongla, and Payra – among 12 in the Bay of Bengal, which account for over 90% of trade through this Bay, plays a crucial role in this geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape [Hossain, Islam, 2021]. As a result, India, China, the U. S., and Russia are increasingly attentive to Dhaka's strategies and

4 Imam S.H. Closer China-Bangladesh ties shouldn't worry India // The Daily Star. – 2017. – December 1. – Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/pleasure-all-mine/closer-china-bangladesh-ties-shouldnt-worry-india-1498687>, accessed 05.05.2024.

5 Mishra V. China Is Moving into the Indian Ocean // The National Interest. – 2018. – April 14. – Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-moving-the-indian-ocean-25380>, accessed 05.05.2024.

6 Molla M. Al-M. US, India, and the election in Bangladesh // The Daily Star. – 2023. – February 25. – Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/us-india-and-the-election-bangladesh-3256391>, accessed 06.05.2024.

policies. It is important to recognize that Bangladesh faces several challenges, including power rivalries, trade barriers, and security concerns, which it must navigate in the near future.

## Navigating challenges for Bangladesh

### Bangladesh is in between major powers

Bangladesh's strategic location has garnered significant attention from both regional and extra-regional powers, viewing the country as a vital hub for trade, investment, and strategic interests [Karim, Uddin, 2016]. The longstanding rivalry between China and India has contributed to an environment of volatility, instability, and mistrust in the South Asia region [Ansari, Baghernia, 2021]. In this context, China's growing influence in the region has intensified power competition among key players. Professor Ali Riaz notes that China's substantial trade and investment in Bangladesh, surpassing that of India and the United States, has alarmed these major powers. They perceive Bangladesh's deepening engagement with Beijing as a threat to their trade and security interests in the Bay of Bengal. Conversely, China views Bangladesh as a key partner in securing access to vital import routes and achieving full-scale blue water capability to protect its cargo ships and tankers from potential U.S. Navy disruptions [Saimun, Talukder, 2022]. In addition, Bangladesh's active role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has attracted upwards of \$ 22 billion in Chinese investments through various bilateral agreements, indicates a low probability of Dhaka opting to disengage from the initiative.

The intense competition among great powers for Bangladesh underscores the country's strategic significance. The growing concern of the United States and India to-

wards China's strong presence in Bangladesh and the region presents a major challenge for Bangladesh. These powers closely monitor China's activities in Bangladesh, viewing them as threats to their security, influence, and power. Whenever there is an agreement between Bangladesh and China, Indian policymakers and media express concern, prompting Delhi to counteract by forging an agreement or treaty with Dhaka [Chakma, 2019]. However, India's apprehension towards China's engagement with friendly neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal is contradictory. Singh [Singh, 2012] highlights concerns about the shifting stance of China and its traditional allies, such as Pakistan, towards India's smaller neighbors, previously considered India's steadfast allies (p. 55). He also contends that Beijing's supply of 'conventional weapons' and other 'sensitive technologies' to Dhaka is not a positive development for New Delhi. Consequently, Indian literature suggests that Indian policymakers are discontent with Bangladesh's increasing engagement with China. Similarly, the United States seeks to limit Bangladesh's engagement with China, as evidenced by the frequent visits of its top officials to Bangladesh in the last two years. Additionally, Moscow's first summons to Bangladesh's Ambassador in Russia for refusing to allow Russia's materials for the Rooppur nuclear power plant to enter its port has created an unfavorable environment. Thus, it is undeniable that Bangladesh is caught in the complex web of great power competition.

### Bangladesh's trade with SAARC member countries

The promotion of intra-regional trade was a key objective of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), initially perceived as the first step towards establishing a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 1993 [Paul, 2020]. However, intra-regional trade in South Asia represents a mere 5 percent of

the region's total trade, compared to nearly 50 percent in the East Asia and Pacific region and 22 percent in the Sub-Saharan African region. The lack of progress on SAFTA [Hossain, 2013], trade liberalization [The Routledge Handbook..., 2024, p. 326–338], and mutual distrust and suspicion<sup>7</sup> have made South Asia one of the least economically integrated regions.

Bangladesh's initiatives led to the establishment of SAARC, with the aim of enhancing economic cooperation among South Asian countries [Saleem, 2012]. Despite some progress over the years, the desired outcomes have yet to be realized. While ASEAN member countries engage in intra-regional trade at rates exceeding 25 percent, SAARC members have a trade volume of less than 5 percent [Nayak, 2024]. Although Bangladesh has a substantial bilateral trade relationship with India, there remains a significant trade imbalance between imports and exports. According to the Export Promotion Bureau Bangladesh report of 2022, Bangladesh's total export earnings from goods and services in FY 2021–22 amounted to US\$ 60,971.26 million, while total import payments were US\$ 91,932.20 for the same period. The report also indicates that among the top 20 exporting countries, only India, as a South Asian nation, imports the highest value of goods from Bangladesh, while Bangladesh's exports to Asian countries amounted to US\$ 5,938.13 million, with ASEAN member countries accounting for US\$ 841.95 million and SAARC nations contributing US\$ 2,281.33 million. Despite this narrow margin, India alone has received an overwhelming 87.29 percent of Bangladesh's exports. According to Ali Riaz, Bangladesh has consistently sought to enhance trade among SAARC countries by strengthening the association. Howe-

ver, the resistance of India, the dominant power in South Asia, and the longstanding animosity between India and Pakistan have hindered these efforts. It is evident that small nations in South Asia are unable to achieve regional economic cooperation and success without robust Indian participation and leadership in specific initiatives [Singh, 2012]. Consequently, Bangladesh's success in trading with other South Asian states is largely contingent on India's cooperation.

### **Rohingya crisis and major powers' roles**

Myanmar's military crackdown on Rohingya Muslims, followed by their subsequent displacement from the Rakhine province to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, has severely strained the relationship between the two neighboring countries [Khanam, Ali, 2022; Trapa, 2023]. Furthermore, the roles played by the most influential powers, both regional and extra-regional, in the Rohingya issue are questionable and unprecedented for Bangladesh [Fair, 2018]. Despite the International Criminal Court's (ICC) verdict that Myanmar must repatriate the Rohingyas as citizens, Naypyidaw has yet to show any positive response. While Rohingya Muslims have faced similar circumstances in the past, international pressure previously compelled Myanmar to take many of them back. However, the current question is how Myanmar authorities can ignore the ICC's verdict. According to Nasir Uddin, a professor in the Anthropology department at Chittagong University, Bangladesh, and an expert in international migration and refugee issues, "*There are primarily two reasons: the contradictory behavior of key powers and the anti-Muslim attitude of*

7 Balachandran P.K. BIMSTEC shows the way to regional cooperation // The New India Express. – 2015. – June 27. – Available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2015/Jun/27/bimstec-shows-the-way-to-regional-cooperation-775471.html>, accessed 05.05.2024.

*Myanmar's military and its religious leaders towards the Rohingya population."*

The refugee crisis resulting from the military's brutality against Rohingyas in Myanmar has political, religious, ethnic, and geo-strategic dimensions [Saimun, Talukder, 2022]. Adding to the complexity is the geopolitical competition among Sino-Indian and China-USA-Russia in Myanmar and the region, which exacerbates the Rohingya crisis [Datta, 2021]. According to Hossain and Islam [Hossain, Islam, 2021], the conflicting interests of India and China in the Rakhine state have made it challenging to find a peaceful resolution to the Rohingya problems [Nuruz-zaman, 2023]. China's support for Myanmar is critical due to its energy security, geostrategic considerations, and economic development in the southeastern region. Myanmar's strategic location in the Bay of Bengal makes it an essential economic connecting hub and a potential military launching pad for China, which is why it plays a crucial role in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [Shahriar, Luong, 2023]. According to Professor Nasir Uddin, while China's interest in Bangladesh is less significant than in Myanmar, its policy towards Bangladesh is intrinsically linked to its Myanmar policy because both countries are part of China's grand design.

Four factors account for India's subdued approach to the Rohingya issue: first, concerns about China's growing influence in Myanmar; second, political and ethnic upheavals in India's Northeast; third, access to the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia; and fourth, India's energy interests in Myanmar. Indian policymakers view the China-Myanmar trade corridor as a threat to the stability of India's troubled Northeast, where numerous ethnic rebel groups actively engage in hostilities against Indian security forces. Consequently, India requires strong bilateral relations with Myanmar to serve its interests.

Yasmin [Yasmin, 2019] notes that Bangladesh, whose foreign policy is often characterized as proactive rather than grounded in sound calculations, was surprised by the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Myanmar during the peak of the Myanmar military's brutalities against the Rohingya refugees.

Bangladesh's long-standing ally, the Russian Federation, has shown limited interest in actively assisting the country or exerting pressure on Myanmar. In a personal communication, Dr. Tareq Arefin, Assistant Professor at the Department of Economics at Jagannath University, Dhaka, stated that Russia has several interests in Myanmar, including the supply of weapons and military equipment. Moreover, Naypyidaw remains silent in the United Nations regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict. To date, the only positive outcome for Bangladesh has been receiving support from Western powers, particularly the United States. Bangladesh and Myanmar officials have held multiple meetings with U. S. representatives present and have received pledges from Myanmar's authorities to address the issue for future progress. However, these efforts have thus far yielded minimal results.

Currently, the presence of Rohingyas in Bangladesh is considered an economic, social, demographic, and security problem [Halim, 2023]. They have also been implicated in various crimes in recent times, including killings, abductions, and drug and human trafficking [Mallick, 2020]. The profitable drug trafficking business often uses refugees as 'carriers' and 'intermediaries'. Additionally, Rohingya militant groups are attempting to establish their presence in Rohingya refugee camps. Consequently, Bangladesh now finds itself in a more critical situation than ever before. Moreover, Bangladesh has been unable to secure a diplomatic solution to the crisis, primarily due to the international community's failure to pressure Myanmar into repatriating the refugees. This



was evident during the Rohingya influx of August 2017, when Bangladesh found itself 'friendless' despite the key powers' active interest in Bangladesh [Yasmin, 2019]. Ultimately, it has become evident that these major powers prioritize their own interests over resolving the Rohingya crisis.

### **Alignment, non-alignment, or balance amidst great powers**

While both regional and extra-regional powers compete for influence in Bangladesh, Dhaka has endeavored to maintain a delicate balance with all these powers to safeguard its sovereignty and national interests. As global power gradually shifts toward the East, it raises the question of what would happen if the world reverted to a bipolar structure, with the U.S. leading one group (Bloc A) and China (and Russia) leading the other (Bloc B). In such a scenario, should Bangladesh align itself with one of the blocs, remain committed to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), or continue balancing relations with all blocs? For the betterment of Bangladesh's future, it is crucial to address the advantages and disadvantages of each option in detail.

#### *Alignment with a single bloc*

Aligning with a power bloc might be challenging for Bangladesh for multiple reasons. This predicament arises from the nation's heavy reliance on foreign trade, investments, loans, and aid. Western countries, particularly the United States, are Bangladesh's largest trade partners. The U.S. and European countries collectively serve as the primary destinations for most of Bangladesh's garment products, resulting in the country's second most significant source of foreign earnings. Conversely, China has made substantial investments in Bangladesh, fostering strong bilateral relations. Similarly, Russia plays a pivotal role as a major supplier of military weapons and

equipment and serves as a key development partner in various projects, including the nuclear power plant initiative.

As Chinese influence continues to grow in Bangladesh, India, the dominant regional power and largest trade partner in South Asia, closely observes the engagement between Beijing and Dhaka on numerous issues [Jha, 2011]. Moreover, India exerts a significant influence over Bangladesh's domestic and foreign policy-making processes. Indian policymakers consistently express serious concerns about Dhaka's potential over-reliance on China, citing security concerns related to its geographically isolated northeastern states. Consequently, Bangladesh faces significant challenges in evading India's involvement in matters that align with Indian regional interests. Given the nation's dependence on external resources, there remains a pressing need for substantial foreign investments and loans across various sectors and infrastructure projects. In this context, only China has expressed a commitment to fulfilling these needs through considerable investment, while other countries, such as India and the USA, have either shown disinterest or lack the capacity to support Bangladesh adequately, as noted by Md. Touhid Hossain.

Given these factors, Bangladesh must diligently analyze its policies, strategies, and interests in the context of major global powers. Before establishing alignment with any bloc, it is crucial for Bangladesh to perform thorough strategic evaluations to determine the feasibility and attractiveness of potential alliances.

First, the possibility of India joining a Chinese-led bloc remains uncertain. India has been actively collaborating with regional and extra-regional partners through initiatives like the QUAD to counter Beijing's influence in the Indo-Pacific. Given this backdrop, a pertinent question arises: is it possible for Bangladesh to bypass New Delhi in favor of aligning itself with Chi-

na? The answer is intricate; Dhaka's geographical closeness to India complicates any efforts to bypass its neighbor, while the country's considerable reliance on Chinese imports and the extensive Chinese investments in infrastructure projects further complicate this dynamic.

Second, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has significantly shifted the global order. Despite its active collaboration with the United States through initiatives like the QUAD and other partnerships, India has chosen not to impose sanctions on Russia and has instead strengthened its ties with Moscow. Moreover, India's key role in BRICS, which includes China as a major member, adds another layer to this dynamic. Thus, experts do not rule out the possibility of India aligning more closely with China, particularly as both countries work collaboratively to contest the dominance of the U. S. dollar in international trade. In this context, would it be practical for Bangladesh to align itself with this bloc? The answer leans towards an affirmative stance; however, Bangladesh must identify alternative export markets for its goods or engage in negotiations with Western buyers.

Third, Bangladeshi experts are closely analyzing China's broader policies and recent initiatives in Myanmar, such as the construction of a deep-sea port in the Rakhine Province. These initiatives may serve as a strategic counterbalance to the influence exerted by India and Western nations in the region. However, if China successfully implements these projects, what consequences might this have for the Rohingya Muslim population? Furthermore, how would Dhaka manage its diplomatic relations with both China and Myanmar if the prospects for Rohingya repatriation appear bleak? Would aligning with the U. S. bloc represent a judicious strategy for Dhaka? To adequately address these inquiries, it is essential to evaluate the positions of China, Russia, and India concerning the Rohing-

yas in the near future before committing to any geopolitical alignment.

Fourth, the historical connection between Bangladesh and Moscow is deeply embedded in the substantial support offered by the former Soviet Union during the nation's fight for independence. In the contemporary context, Russia has committed resources to various developmental and infrastructural projects in Bangladesh, notably involving a nuclear power plant, in addition to supplying military equipment. Should Bangladesh pursue alignment with a particular geopolitical bloc, it is reasonable to expect that such a development would not be welcomed by Moscow, potentially leading to strained diplomatic relations in light of Russia's connections with opposing factions to U. S. interests.

Finally, if Dhaka were to join any bloc while India remains neutral and refrains from aligning with any power bloc, would this be a wise decision for Bangladesh? In this scenario, if Bangladesh avoids policies that could jeopardize Indian sovereignty and interests in the region, it may not pose significant concerns for Bangladeshi policymakers.

#### *Joining the non-alignment bloc*

During the Cold War, Bangladesh aligned itself with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), joining many other Asian nations and remaining a member of the movement. However, Riaz [Riaz, 2022] argues that Dhaka has never been entirely neutral in its foreign relations. If Bangladesh is faced with a decision in the near future between aligning with a bloc or remaining neutral and opts to work under the NAM, what potential impacts could this have on the country? In such a scenario, Bangladesh may experience pressure from both sides, although this could be alleviated if more neighboring and developing countries also align with and work alongside the movement.

If Bangladesh and India remain committed to working under NAM, Dhaka's security concerns might be somewhat alleviated. Conversely, if New Delhi aligns with one bloc while Naypyidaw aligns with another – potentially allowing China access to land or ports in the Rakhine province – what actions might Bangladesh take? Would maintaining neutrality be a viable policy when its two neighboring countries are pursuing divergent paths? In this context, Dhaka should adopt a robust foreign policy stance, given its strategic importance to both nations, and navigate these challenges effectively.

Another important factor to consider is the potential alignment of all ASEAN member countries with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), along with all SAARC nations. In this scenario, it is unlikely that anyone would oppose Bangladesh's decision to work under NAM. However, the influence of major powers like the USA and China in South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka raises questions about whether these nations will align with or distance themselves from any bloc. While many countries in South and Southeast Asia may express a desire to join NAM, Bangladesh could face significant challenges due to its extensive bilateral relationships with major powers like the U.S., China, and Russia. If these powers decide to limit their cooperation with Dhaka, how many viable alternatives would Bangladesh have? In today's interconnected world, particularly in economic terms, Bangladesh must seek new markets globally. Nevertheless, it is assumed that no single power would completely sever its bilateral relations with Dhaka, as they must consider their own interests in the region.

#### *Hedging relations with great powers*

In recent years, Bangladesh has reinforced its balancing foreign policy approach towards major powers, considering its multifaceted interests, which include

safeguarding national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and advancing economic pursuits. Dhaka's astute decision to warmly embrace key powers, thereby attracting substantial investments for infrastructural development projects throughout the country, is widely regarded as a prudent move for Bangladesh. Furthermore, Bangladesh has skillfully exploited the rivalries among major powers to its advantage, deftly navigating regional competition and forging balanced relationships with them. Notably, Professor Nasir Uddin and many other Bangladeshi experts advocate for a perpetually balanced stance towards all powers. However, the sustainability of such a hedging approach for Bangladesh remains in question. Bangladeshi foreign policy experts, including Riaz Ali and Shahidul Alam, assert that Dhaka presently adheres to a 'pragmatic' foreign policy, striving to maintain relations with all powers. Nonetheless, politicians and academics like Colonel Oli Ahmed and Ali Riaz contend that the Awami League government under Sheikh Hasina's regime has significantly tilted Bangladesh towards India (and China).

Recent developments in Bangladesh, including the formation of an interim government following Sheikh Hasina's resignation amid widespread student protests, have generated significant scholarly debate. It appears that the current interim administration is more likely to align with Western ideals, such as democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech. This foreign policy orientation may persist with future governments. However, this does not imply that relationships with other powers – namely India, China, and Russia – will diminish, given the region's shifting geopolitical landscape and Bangladesh's strategic significance.

There are legitimate concerns that while hedging relationships may be effective in the short term, Bangladesh could eventually be compelled to choose a definitive

alignment. This process seems to be underway. Therefore, it is crucial for Bangladesh to navigate these challenges strategically and work towards enhancing its leverage to avoid becoming ensnared in the geopolitical maneuvers of major powers.

## Conclusion

Bangladesh's emergence as a significant player in South Asia constitutes a noteworthy development, primarily due to its strategic location at the heart of South and Southeast Asia. This positioning has rendered the country a focal point for regional and global powers competing for influence. The nation's economic growth and access to the Bay of Bengal have further amplified its strategic importance to major nations. Fortunately, Bangladesh has managed to maintain favorable relations with most countries in the region. However, various factors, including trade barriers and the Rohingya crisis, have impeded progress despite efforts to strengthen bilateral ties and economic cooperation with both SAARC and ASEAN countries.

The recent geopolitical competition and adversarial behavior among major powers such as India, China, the USA, and Russia in the region have placed Bangladesh in a precarious position. While Dhaka continues to pursue a moderate foreign policy and play a significant role in regional politics and the economy, there are doubts about how long it can sustain such a delicate balance. While maintaining good relations with all powers may work in the short term, it may become unsustainable in the long run, potentially necessitating a decision to align with a specific group of powers or maintain neutrality while balancing relations with all.

In this context, India's influence is crucial in shaping Bangladesh's decision-making process due to its geographical proximity and established connections in domestic politics, culture, and the economy.

There is speculation that New Delhi may collaborate with Washington to counteract Beijing's growing influence in the region. However, the possibility of India aligning with China through their partnership in BRICS cannot be dismissed. Recent developments in Bangladesh raise important questions about its future foreign policy – whether it will align with a particular bloc or maintain a neutral stance through a strategy of hedging.

In view of these dynamics, Bangladesh should carefully assess its long-term policies and strategies to proficiently navigate the intricacies of regional and global power rivalries and maintain a positive developmental trajectory.

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## Исследование сложного будущего Бангладеш в контексте региональной геополитической динамики

### Мд АБУЛ ХАСАН

аспирант Аспирантской школы по международным отношениям и зарубежным региональным исследованиям

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**ЦИТИРОВАНИЕ:** Абул Хасан М. Исследование сложного будущего Бангладеш в контексте региональной геополитической динамики // *Контуры глобальных трансформаций: политика, экономика, право*. 2024. Т. 17. № 3. С. 110–127.

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**АННОТАЦИЯ.** Бангладеш служит важным связующим звеном между Южной и Юго-Восточной Азией и имеет важное стратегическое значение для всех основных региональных и глобальных игроков. Цель данной статьи – проанализировать будущее Бангладеш в контексте сложной региональной динамики и внешнеполитических реакций самой страны на них. Автор

исследует, как растущая геополитическая конкуренция и соперничество между крупными державами, наряду с их значительным влиянием на Бангладеш, порождают серьезные проблемы для страны. Чтобы понять стратегию Дакки в отношении этих держав, в исследовании проведен подробный обзор новейшей научной литературы, полевых исследований и углубленных ин-

*тервью. Анализ показывает, что Бангладеш проводит умеренную внешнюю политику, чтобы поддерживать отношения со всеми ключевыми региональными и внерегиональными державами. Тем не менее способность Дакки эффективно проводить свою внешнюю политику сдерживается ее неспособностью создать рычаги влияния на доминирующие державы. В статье делается вывод о том, что влияющие ключевых держав на политический ландшафт Бангладеш может привести к тому, что страна присоединится к определенному силовому блоку или сохранит нейтралитет в ближайшем будущем – в зависимости от меняющейся региональной и глобальной политической динамики. Таким образом, исследование предполагает, что, разрабатывая свои краткосрочные и долгосрочные планы и стратегии, Бангладеш может создать рычаги влияния и оставаться на правильном пути, не попадая в ловушку геополитики.*

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА:** Бангладеш, Южная Азия, хеджирование международных отношений, геополитика, соперничество, Движение неприсоединения.

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