

# EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES: BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY AMID GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES

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## ABSTRACT

*Bangladesh is critically shaping its foreign policy to address contemporary global dynamics, particularly in South Asia. This paper examines the key factors that influence future geopolitical shifts and analyses their implications for Bangladesh. It employs a qualitative approach, allowing for in-depth analysis and interpretation of the complex dynamics surrounding Bangladesh's foreign policy in anticipation of geopolitical shifts. By exploring emerging trends in international relations, regional dynamics, and technological advancements, this study identifies potential challenges such as increased competition for resources, shifts in alliances, and the rise of non-traditional security threats. Additionally, it highlights opportunities for Bangladesh to leverage its strategic location, economic potential and diplomatic initiatives to enhance its position on the global stage. Through a comprehensive assessment of these factors, this paper aims to provide insights for policymakers to navigate the complexities of the evolving geopolitical landscape and effectively advance Bangladesh's national interests in the coming years.*

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Bangladesh foreign policy, power dynamics, anticipation

## INTRODUCTION

A country's foreign policy primarily reflects its socio-economic and political needs in international politics. In an era of rapid globalisation, technological advancements, and shifting power dynamics, foreign policy formulation has become increasingly complex for nations worldwide (Luo, Y., 2024). Historically, Bangladesh has maintained a non-aligned foreign policy. She has emphasised "*friendship towards all, malice towards none*" as the guiding concept of its diplomacy since gaining independence in 1971. As a part of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), she has generally refrained from aligning herself with larger nations (MoFA, 2023). However, the country that emerged so forcefully in 1971 differs from what it is now. Bangladesh, formerly called a "*bottomless basket*," is today called a "*South Asian miracle*." Despite the difficulties that come with economic expansion, especially in light of the extreme wealth disparity

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in the nation, overall economic development is still going well. The nation is rapidly leaving the group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) fifty-three years after gaining independence. By 2035, it is expected to rank among the top 25 economies in the world (Rahman, 2024). As its economy booms and the balance of world power moves eastward, her role on the world stage becomes increasingly prominent daily. Bangladesh is situated at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia; anticipating future geopolitical shifts presents challenges and opportunities that will significantly shape its foreign policy agenda in the coming years. As the international order undergoes profound transformations, driven by the rise of new global powers, changing security threats, and economic interdependence, Bangladesh finds itself at a critical juncture where strategic foresight and proactive engagement are imperative. Bangladesh is uniquely suited to play a vital role in furthering regional integration and allowing all neighbouring regions to prosper together (Haque, 2023). This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted nature and trends of the geopolitical landscape and its implications for Bangladesh, examining the potential challenges that lie ahead and the opportunities that can be harnessed to advance the country's interests on the global stage.

The paper is divided into nine sections, including introduction and conclusion. The following section is a review of the relevant literature. The paper in the third section focuses on Mackinder's Heartland Theory as a theoretical construct. The fourth section of the paper highlights the methodology of this study. The fifth section draws insights into the geopolitical analysis of Bangladesh. The sixth section analyses anticipating future geopolitical shifts with reason and significance. This section presents the discussion in two sub-sections—internal and external—on the challenges for Bangladesh's foreign policy. The eighth section of the study analyses the opportunities of Bangladesh's foreign policy. The paper in the final section summarises the arguments and presents the concluding remarks.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Global Trends 2040 emphasises how geopolitical trends and technological advancements pose increasing environmental, migration, and foreign policy challenges. These challenges are further intensified by environmental changes, extreme weather events, and demographic shifts, as discussed in the report "Making Migration and Integration Policies Future Ready."

Amin et al. (2023) underscored Bangladesh's energy security's critical importance and susceptibility to geopolitical dynamics due to its reliance on imported fossil fuels. The study delves into the impact of global energy dynamics and the behaviour of major energy-producing countries on Bangladesh's energy landscape, emphasising the necessity for strategic policies to mitigate geopolitical risks and ensure sustainable development. Bangladesh's transition from an agricultural economy to an emerging powerhouse is attributed to robust economic reforms and strategic energy policies. The study highlights the strides made by the country in achieving energy security amidst global challenges. It emphasises sustainable solutions to meet growing demands and navigate geopolitical complexities for sustained development.

Kabir et al. (2018) discuss the geopolitical importance of South Asia, especially the historical tensions and nuclear dynamics between India and Pakistan. The paper

examines the region's strategic significance because of its location and natural resources. It analyses the influence of major powers such as China and the United States on shaping its geopolitical landscape.

Yasmin (2019; 2023) emphasised Bangladesh's evolving foreign policy dynamics in response to the shifting global order, mainly influenced by the rise of China and India. It delves into Bangladesh's strategic position between these major powers and examines its strengths and challenges in navigating its policies. Ultimately, the article aims to shed light on the strategies of small powers amidst the changing geopolitical landscape and their potential role in shaping the future of international politics. The emergence of Bangladesh as an assertive player in international politics is driven by its internal stability, economic strength, and pragmatic foreign policy choices. It highlights Bangladesh's transition from a recipient of foreign aid to a self-reliant nation that sets its agenda, positioning itself as an emerging middle power in the global arena (Yasmin, 2022).

Abedin (2015) highlights that despite infrastructure shortage and political instability, Bangladesh's remarkable economic growth is driven by its small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It emphasises the significance of foreign direct investment (FDI) for employment generation, technology transfer, and market efficiency, particularly in a globalised and competitive environment. Bangladesh's journey in attracting FDI, marked by policy changes and sectoral openings, reflects progress and room for improvement compared to other South Asian countries like India and Pakistan.

Chaturvedi (2014) explores how geopolitical fears drive the climate change discourse in Bangladesh and its region, analysing the production of climate knowledge to support political agendas. It discusses the implications for human security and rights, advocating for counter-imaginative geographies of hope in addressing climate-induced migrations in the global South.

Tunviruzzaman (2021) argued that the study depicts a strategy to counter India's declining economic influence in Bangladesh and the importance of the One Belt-One Road (OBOR) for Bangladesh. However, it does not provide any solution to shape Bangladesh's foreign policy in the future.

Following the literature review, a potential research gap emerges regarding the intersection of Bangladesh's energy security, geopolitical dynamics, and its evolving foreign policy. Specifically, existing studies have discussed Bangladesh's reliance on imported fossil fuels, its economic growth fuelled by energy reforms, and its assertive foreign policy choices. However, there must be a gap in understanding how energy security concerns influence Bangladesh's diplomatic engagements with these countries, especially in emerging global energy dynamics and the country's transition towards sustainable energy solutions. Thus, crisis management will concern the following Bangladeshi foreign policy with diplomatic negotiation in world politics.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

As Bangladesh seeks to navigate the complex realm of global geopolitics, an analysis based on Mackinder's Heartland Theory (1904) highlights the challenges and opportunities that will influence its foreign policy. Positioned at the intersection of South Asia and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh's strategic importance extends beyond its borders, impacting broader regional dynamics.

Mackinder emphasised in the article of the “Geographical Pivot of History” paradigm lies the notion of geographical determinism, positing that control over the Eurasian Heartland equates to global dominance. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bangladesh only directly commands this pivotal territory, besides its strategic location and economic prowess related to the regional power dynamic. Bangladesh's foreign policy is central to its relationship with neighbouring states such as India and China. Mackinder's theory analyses the criticality of these ties, portraying them as instrumental in shaping regional power balances. Bangladesh must deftly navigate the complexities of its bilateral relations, leveraging economic and diplomatic overtures to forge mutually beneficial partnerships while guarding against undue influence or coercion.

The maritime domain emerges as another focal point in Bangladesh's geopolitical calculus, mirroring Mackinder's emphasis on control over strategic waterways. With its coastline along the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh commands a vital nexus of maritime trade routes, offering opportunities for economic growth and vulnerabilities to external coercion. As global powers vie for dominance in the Indo-Pacific, Bangladesh must fortify its naval capabilities and diplomatic ties to safeguard its maritime interests. Additionally, the theory underscores the imperative of regional cooperation, advocating for collaborative frameworks to mitigate maritime disputes and foster collective security.

Moreover, Mackinder's theory invites reflection on Bangladesh's role within broader regional and multilateral frameworks. As a member of organisations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC, Bangladesh wields a platform for collective action and diplomatic engagement. However, the theory cautions against the pitfalls of regional fragmentation and power struggles, urging Bangladesh to foster inclusive partnerships grounded in mutual respect and shared objectives. By embracing a nuanced understanding of its strategic imperatives and leveraging diplomatic finesse, Bangladesh can navigate the complexities of global power dynamics while advancing its national interests and contributing to regional stability and prosperity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses qualitative methods, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the topic. It employs a qualitative approach, enabling in-depth analysis and interpretation of the complex dynamics surrounding Bangladesh's foreign policy in anticipation of geopolitical shifts. Content analysis collects data, examining government documents, policy papers, academic articles, and reports from international organisations to provide additional context and insights.

Data analysis includes both thematic and interpretative analysis. The thematic analysis aims to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings within the qualitative data obtained from document analysis. On the other hand, interpretative analysis involves interpreting the data using relevant theory in international relations, providing

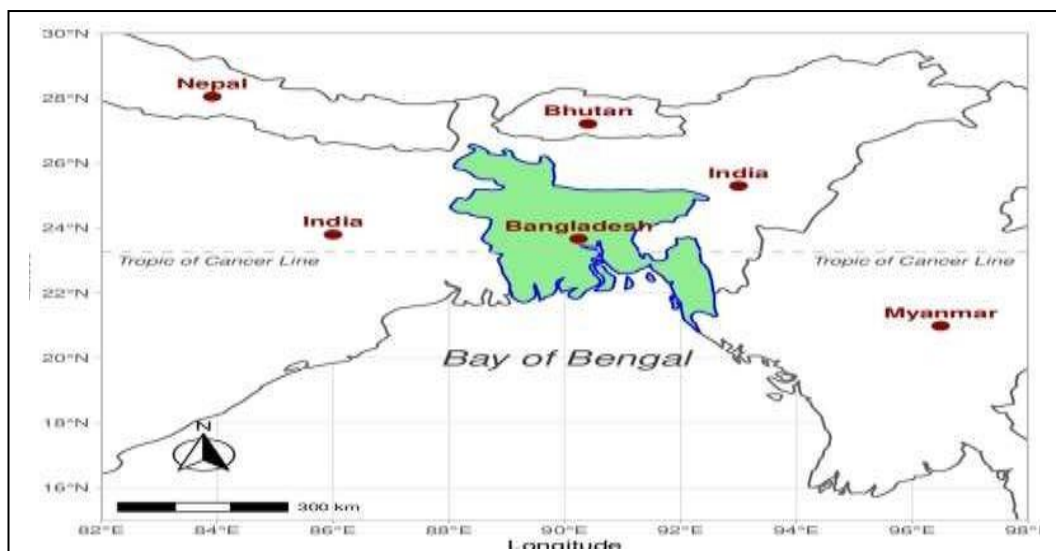
deeper insights into the underlying dynamics shaping Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions and strategies. The triangulation of findings from multiple data sources enhances the validity and reliability of the research findings.

## GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF BANGLADESH

The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 marked the first successful instance of an ethnic-linguistic nationalist movement, creating a new state in the post-colonial period (Jahan et al., 2015). Bangladesh shares its borders with India to the east, West, and north and with Myanmar to the southeast. To the South, it is bordered by the Bay of Bengal. The country is between the Indian mainland and the Seven Sisters and shares borders with four states of the Seven Sisters: Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The only connection between the Indian mainland and the Seven Sisters is the Chicken Neck Corridor, also known as the Siliguri Corridor.

It is located in the northern part of the Indian state of West Bengal. Bangladesh is at one end of the corridor, and Nepal and Bhutan are at the other. Transporting goods from India's mainland to the Seven Sisters via the Chicken Neck Corridor takes longer and costs more. Transporting goods through Bangladesh under transit facility takes less time and is less costly. So, India needs a transit facility. Myanmar is located on a small portion of the frontier to the southeast. Without a common border, Bangladesh is connected with the entire Southeast Asian region through Myanmar. The land border of Bangladesh with Myanmar is about 243 kilometres, and the land border with India is about 4025 kilometres. Without sharing a direct border, Bangladesh's closest neighbours are China (distance of 100 km), Nepal (22 km), and Bhutan (distance of 22 km). Bangladesh's neighbours include three nations with nuclear power (Kabir, 2018).

**Figure 1: Map of Bangladesh's neighbouring borders**



*Source: www.britannica.com, 2024*

Bangladesh's exclusive geographical position, fast economic progress, and

global collaborations have made it an influential middle power (Ara, 2023). The unique position of Bangladesh as a gateway between South and Southeast Asia, along with its strategic location on the Bay of Bengal, has motivated major powers to seek increased influence within the country actively. India, China, Russia, Australia, Britain, and Japan are critical South and Southeast Asia players. The Bay of Bengal is very significant based on geographic location.

**Figure 2: Map of the Bay of Bengal**



*Source: www.britannica.com, 2024*

It is linked with the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Straits. In addition, South and Southeast Asia, as well as the Indian Ocean, are directly connected with the Bay of Bengal. In the light of natural resources, navigation, oil, gas and the Maritime Silk Road, the Bay of Bengal is now a hotspot of regional competition. For both China and India, the natural resources of the Bay of Bengal are of great significance. China wants to have direct connectivity with the Indian Ocean via the Bay of Bengal, via Southeast East Bangladesh or the Rakhine state of Myanmar (Ahmed & Rahman, 2020). Regional and global powers are now competing to ensure their presence in the region of the Bay of Bengal (Scott, 2006; Islam, 2018).

It is very natural for Bangladesh that an emerging Southeast Asian economy, which is fighting many social and economic problems such as poor infrastructural development, massive population, unemployment, poverty, etc., will accept every opportunity and investment offered to develop its position. Bangladesh is getting this facility in a regular flow from China. But this does not mean that Bangladesh has accepted all the diktats with blindfolded eyes, being not subservient by not agreeing to the Chinese conditions on the construction of the Sonadia deep-sea port in 2014 (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

To expand trade through the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), the Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the Bay of Bengal is needed for China. China has a significant naval presence in the Bay of Bengal. Currently, the BNS Sheikh Hasina Submarine Base is being constructed by China in Pekua, Cox's Bazar. Despite having the most extensive naval

base in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the United States of America plans to leverage the Chittagong Sea ports to enhance its strategic dominance in South Asia, which is attached to the region's significance in global politics.

Bangladesh is bounded by India, both inland and maritime, except for a small border with Myanmar. A country's geopolitics may be negatively impacted by being landlocked or having a common border with only one other nation. The building of the Farakka barrage and the potential for building further barrages also emerged as vulnerabilities given by the nature of Bangladesh, which the country views as a geopolitical disadvantage. If Siligiuri Corridor were Bangladesh's part, it could have brought an advantageous position. Through this, Bangladesh could directly contact Nepal and Bhutan and make a more accessible linkage to China.

India has demonstrated itself as Bangladesh's all-time ally and time-tested neighbouring friend. Still, China's approach towards Bangladesh is mainly criticised by Indian scholars, although there is proof that India itself is trying to develop its relationship with China (Uddin & Bhuiyan, 2011). Experts are alarmed that the growth of Sino-Bangladesh relations can destabilize Indo-Bangladesh's trust in one another economically and politically. However, Bangladeshi diplomats have shredded Dhaka's neutral and impartial position between New Delhi and Beijing. Michael Kugelman, the Deputy Director of the Asian Program of Wilson Center, believes the growing Sino-Bangladesh relation has intensified the Indo-China geopolitical rivalry over the last few years and can damage the relationship of Dhaka with New Delhi. He also claimed that the status quo could lead Bangladesh to the Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' like Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Bodetti, 2019).

## **ANTICIPATING FUTURE GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS**

Bangladesh, independent during the peak of the Cold War, finds itself intricately intertwined in the complexities of geopolitics. Bangladesh has consistently been entangled in the rivalries of dominant nations, including the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan, the Cold War contest between the USA and the USSR, and, presently, the competition between China and the Western block (Rahman, 2021). The relationships between the United States and Bangladesh, China and Bangladesh, and India and Bangladesh are closely intertwined with Bangladesh's growing geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic significance (Ara, 2023; Shovon & Rahman, 2023). The United States, China, and India are actively competing to exert influence in Bangladesh, driven by their respective interests and goals. The impact of each of these countries in Bangladesh can be observed in different areas such as trade, investment, military and diplomatic relations.

In the geopolitical landscape of Bangladesh, India has consistently occupied a central position, while the United States has considerable influence. On the other hand, regional powers such as China have a peripheral role (Anwar, 2019). In recent years, China has quickly established itself as a key player in Bangladesh's geopolitical scene alongside the United States and India. China's aspiration to revive the ancient Silk Road and Bangladesh's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have significantly increased the relationship between China and Bangladesh. BRI membership has

brought Bangladesh an influx of Chinese investment totalling USD 38.05 billion. This is approximately 10% of Bangladesh's gross domestic product (GDP). It is the most significant single-country investment in the nation's history (Anwar, 2022). China now holds Bangladesh's top trading partner, direct foreign investor, trade importer, and military hardware supplier.

The United States and India consider the rise of China in Bangladesh to be an opposing development that will reduce their geopolitical space in the region. Bangladesh is India's most trusted South Asian neighbour; however, China's growing influence has led to Indian worries about security. Over the years, India's policy towards Bangladesh has revolved around three core objectives: preserving influence, limiting foreign and defence policy options, and exerting control over Bangladesh's political and social landscape to serve India's interests (Anwar, 2023a). India's recent engagement with Bangladesh through various connectivity initiatives, such as the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) road network and investments in the energy and infrastructure sectors, reflect its aspiration to maintain its influential position in the country. India responded to the substantial Chinese investment in Bangladesh by announcing a record-breaking \$5 billion in loans, marking the most significant investment India has made in Bangladesh to date (Anwar, 2019).

On the other hand, Bangladesh's relations with the US have witnessed remarkable growth in trade, investment, and people-to-people connections despite occasional ups and downs. The United States is the largest market for Bangladeshi-made garments (the backbone of Bangladesh's economy) and the largest source of remittances. The United States is Bangladesh's third-largest trading partner after China and India. Bangladesh enjoys a trade surplus with the US, a significant aspect of their economic relationship. However, the US-Bangladesh relationship is currently experiencing an unpleasant situation. The United States has accused the current regime in Bangladesh of engaging in political violence, human rights violations, and election manipulation. In response, the US has taken decisive actions, including imposing visa restrictions. However, some argue that these accusations aim to pressure Bangladesh to reduce China's influence in the country, reflecting the broader geopolitical competition between the United States and China (Deuskar, 2023).

The US wants Bangladesh to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), both seen as mechanisms led by the US to counter China's influence. Conversely, China has categorically asserted that Bangladesh's entry into the Quad will "substantially damage" their bilateral relations. Another geopolitical competition factor is affecting Bangladesh's ties with China, India, and the US. While having amicable relations with the United States, India poses a hurdle to enhancing US-Bangladesh relations. India fears that Bangladesh's deepening engagement with other major powers could diminish its dominant position. While India welcomes US involvement to counter China's influence, it does not support the extensive US political influence in its neighbour (Anwar, 2023a). Experts believe India strategically benefits by pitting Beijing and Washington against one another in Dhaka without utilising its resources. India remained on the sidelines and capitalized on the situation while the two major powers competed against each other (Anwar, 2023b). Bangladesh's adoption of its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) outlook, abstention on a Ukraine resolution and cautious engagement with BRI demonstrate its commitment to avoid taking sides in geopolitical



power games. Bangladesh aims to work on continuously balancing and managing complex power relations. However, it is always challenging for a country like Bangladesh to achieve a balanced relationship with these powers in the current geopolitical environment. India and China's strong support for Sheikh Hasina during Bangladesh's 2024 general election, despite criticism from the US regarding democratic backsliding, highlights the convergence of geopolitics and economics. Hasina's adept management of multiple partnerships and commitment to a strategic autonomy doctrine have played a crucial role in navigating these multifaceted competition dynamics (Khasru, 2024).

The growing tensions between China and India and the escalating rivalry between the US and China will make it more challenging for Bangladesh to maintain a balanced relationship among these powers. Bangladesh must grasp the unfolding dynamics of great power competition and navigate its foreign affairs adeptly to ensure its survival in the new geopolitical era. The ability to safeguard national interests and maintain political independence will determine whether Bangladesh is caught in bloc politics or emerges successfully (Haque & Lau, 2023). Aid Data predicts that Bangladesh will remain a crucial battlefield for great power competition in the future. This is due to its strategic location and recent geopolitical trends, including the rise of India and escalating tensions between China and the US in the South China Sea (Palma, 2023).

Geopolitically, Bangladesh is more significant. The reasons of this significance include:

### **The Asian Highway**

Bangladesh recognises the importance of regional connectivity for fostering economic growth, social development and cultural exchange (Hossain & Jami, 2024). For Bangladesh, the Asian Highway is potentially more accessible and manageable at a low cost. It links India with south-eastern countries, and Bangladesh is connected with these countries through India. Even if Bangladesh has not yet joined the Asian Highway due to disagreements with India over each other's proposals, Bangladesh is still a country that should not be avoided.

### **Indo-Pacific Strategy**

Bangladesh's dilemma is based on specific global, regional and national contexts. The US and China are growing interested in having a strategic alliance with Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific region (Naomi, 2021). China has a long history of strong bilateral relations with Asian countries; recently, China has invested in Bangladesh's infrastructural sector. This rapid growth of the Sino-Bangladesh relationship has become a significant concern for a time-tested friend and neighbouring country, India. It has become a substantial debate of study, at least in the pitch of international relations and power politics. The discussion leads to some queries, such as whether China's economic approach towards Bangladesh is to check India's power, to counter the 'Pivot to Asia' policy of the USA, or to take control over South Asian geopolitics. China's continuous investments in Bangladesh also portray that China is making a field in Bangladesh to exercise its 'debt-trap' strategy in the name of a development partner and her BRI (Belt and Road Initiatives) execution to subjugate the region, just like the

cases of Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The USA has invited Bangladesh to become a partner in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. According to the United States, "Bangladesh's geographic location connecting South and Southeast Asia makes it a strategically significant nation in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific area (The Daily Star, 2023)." Bangladesh is vital to the Indo-Pacific strategy of Australia, Japan, India, and the United States due to its location.

### **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)**

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organisation comprised of seven member states around the Bay of Bengal region. It comprises five members from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and two from Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand), serving as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Certain countries within BIMSTEC have specific demands due to their particular conditions. For instance, Bangladesh and Nepal are the two least developed countries (LDCs) expected to graduate from the LDC status in 2026 (Khatun, 2022).

### **Transit Way**

Global trade dynamics are shifting, and alliances can change rapidly. If transit becomes fully operational, Bangladesh's global standing could improve significantly. On June 23, 2024, several project agreements, including transit and the Teesta Master Plan, were signed between India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh aims to achieve a 22% GDP growth by 2041, with an interim goal of officially becoming a developing country by 2026. To retain duty-free access on 97% of its exports to India. The transit-transshipment initiative will enhance India-Bangladesh strategic relations, remove trade barriers, and support the implementation of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

Transit and transshipment will also boost Bangladesh's transportation infrastructure, involving local trucks and creating economic opportunities. Also, Bangladesh will gain better access to Nepal and Bhutan through the Indian Territory, enhancing regional trade and connectivity (Jamil, 2024).

### **ASEAN and Its Role in Solving the Rohingya Crisis**

ASEAN is a regional cooperative organisation in Southeast Asia. The main principles of ASEAN are:

- i) Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- ii) Respect for each nation's national identity, sovereignty, equality, and geographical integrity;
- iii) Settlement of differences or disputes in a peaceful manner, etc.

Different ASEAN countries have varying national characters and political systems, but one thing they all have in common is a serious commitment to human rights. The Rohingya population has sought refuge in three ASEAN countries: Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. These countries have all shown a similar reluctance to accept the Rohingyas. In 2021, the US hosted a summit with the ASEAN alliance in

Brunei, where Myanmar was notably excluded. This exclusion sends a clear message that both ASEAN countries and the United States disapprove of the human rights violations committed by the Myanmar army.

During the ethnic cleansing period, Bangladesh opened its border to the persecuted and destitute Rohingya people and set a historical precedent for humanity. The locals of Cox's Bazar accepted and welcomed those stateless people, hoping they would return to their land in a safer environment with the international community's support. Locals' hopes, however, were broken when they observed that, without any sign of repatriation, those 1.1 million guests stayed in their land for over seven years. Today, hosts pay economic, social and environmental costs for demonstrating humanity. In this situation, ASEAN member states must develop a refugee and asylum policy that includes guidance for action when a member state's internal issues cause people to flee to neighbouring states (Shivakoti, 2023).

## **CHALLENGES FOR BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY**

The interactions among the United States, China, and India have far-reaching consequences for the politics, economy, and prospects of the South Asian region, especially for smaller states. Bangladesh must carefully navigate this complex landscape, fostering constructive relationships with all three powers while prioritising regional cooperation and development. Overreliance on any power within the nexus can lead to vulnerabilities and dependence. Below are some internal and external challenges discussed:

### **Internal Challenges of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy**

#### ***Human Rights***

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) is deeply concerned about the grave human rights violations in Bangladesh, in addition to validating the concerns of many member states of the United Nations. Human rights abuses and the oppression of civil society deserve public scrutiny. The UN International Federation of Human Rights has expressed deep concern about the refusal to address serious human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, torture, executions and impunity by law enforcement agencies, as well as gender-based violence and the rights of LGBTIQ people. Whenever human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Transparency International or Human Rights Watch raise allegations of disappearances, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, media suppression or impunity, the government generally denies the allegations or invents a conspiracy. The international community considers the statement of these organizations more credible than the government's statement. It is imperative to interact with international human rights organizations and create a credible image in the outside world (Hossain, 2024). Bangladesh has significant restrictions on freedom of expression (State, 2023). Human rights reporting also informs the work of civil society. These include human rights defenders, lawmakers, scholars, immigration judges, asylum officials, multilateral institutions, and other governments.

#### ***Rohingya Issue and Internal Crisis***

On August 25, 2017, the world witnessed a massive humanitarian crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Millions of Rohingya fled Rakhine State after violent attacks, and their villages were destroyed. The combined population of Teknaf and Ukhiya before this inflow of refugees was 4 lakh (400,000). After the crisis, about two and half times more people have added to this figure and have started to affect the regular financial life of the area. Below are statistics that illustrate the implications of the refugee crisis in Bangladesh.

- The number of travellers to the region has declined due to instability stemming from refugee inflows. Cox's Bazar-based tourism income has already been negatively affected by the influx of refugees.
- A survey shows that prices for essential foodstuffs have increased since the influx of Rohingya. Besides, 2,500 households dropped below the poverty level, and 1,300 became vulnerable in Cox's Bazar region.
- The Rohingya refugees primarily work in the unskilled sector, such as construction or fishery. They work for a substantially lower wage (US\$3.5 per day) than local labourers (US\$5.90 per day), generating unemployment and a sense of rivalry among the locals.
- The refugees are cutting trees to build their houses and gathering fuel for cooking, which is a fundamental contributor to rapid deforestation in the camp's region. Already, 4,818 acres of forest reserves have disappeared due to refugee settlement costs of US\$55 million. If this camp exists for eight years, the carbon sequestration loss will increase to US\$1,579,416.
- Inhabitants of sizeable foreign aid agencies, workers and refugees brought price hikes in the market from where poor local people and day worker purchase their essential commodities. Based on the annual measurements, the water level of Ukhia is decreasing, which entails a shortage of fresh water in the area. Moreover, sharing water points, toilets, and other necessary services sometimes leads to clashes between the Rohingya and the locals.
- The Rohingya are fleeing the refugee camp and are spreading to the mainland or other districts of Bangladesh to live with a Bangladeshi identity. Rohingya have a track record of using fabricated Bangladeshi passports to work abroad, particularly in Middle Eastern states. They also involve themselves in unlawful events in those states, and for that reason, the reputation of Bangladeshis on the global stage has become threatened.
- So far, 471 cases have been registered against 1,105 Rohingya alleging theft, abduction, rape, drug trading and human trafficking, which have become a security pain for Bangladesh. Due to poverty and survival, many Rohingya are now working as fellow Yabba smugglers for Bangladeshi drug dealers.
- Numerous studies suggest that militant groups like the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, the Arakan Islamic Front and the Rohingya Patriotic Front operate from Bangladesh-Myanmar border territories and integrate Rohingya into their activities. Moreover, Islamic militant groups in Bangladesh, especially the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami and Jamat-i-Islami, have been economically subsidising refugees to undertake criminal operations inside Bangladesh. This poses a security threat for Bangladesh.

The following table shows Bangladesh's projected economic losses from the Rohingya crisis.

**Table 1: Projected financial consequences of the Rohingya Crisis for Bangladesh**

Assumptions	Required Years for Repatriation	Cost of Hosting Rohingya's (Million USD)
300 Rohingya repatriated per day— Population growth and inflation rates adjusted	12 (up to 2029)	12 (up to 2029) 9,197
100 Rohingya repatriated per day— Population growth and inflation rates adjusted	42 (up to 2059)	42 (up to 2059) 75,011
No repatriation Population growth and inflation rates Adjusted	1 (up to 2019)	1,211
	5 (up to FY2023)	7,046
	10 (up to 2028)	17,204
	12 (up to 2030)	22,429

*Source: Bhuiyan & Salam, 2021*

This large number of refugees is a significant burden for Bangladesh. The government sometimes faces various political pressures and security problems with these refugee camps. The Bangladesh government has to deal with the multifaceted reality of these Rohingya refugees. There is unlimited reluctance in Myanmar to repatriate these refugees. Considering the overall situation, it is doubtful that Myanmar will take back the Rohingyas shortly. As a result, this problem is not a matter of solving in a year or two. Myanmar's insistence on taking back refugees reinforces that belief.

However, the problem has not been resolved due to Myanmar's negative role for a long time. In the context of Myanmar's negative role in repatriating the Rohingyas, the problem is a long-term one for Bangladesh (Haque, 2018). Many of the Rohingyas are leaving to go abroad, especially in the Middle East, by using their Bangladeshi passport, and they are taking out of the foreign job market. One of the interviewees (40) from Hijolia village at Ukhia Upazilla in Cox's Bazar district has lived in Saudi Arabia since 1996. He said that the Rohingyas people earned much defame in Saudi Arabia by doing different unlawful activities and that this defame directly reflects Bangladesh as they hold Bangladeshi passports; for that reason, we are losing our labour market in Saudi Arabia. A faculty of Chittagong University and a resident of Ukhia Upazila blamed the Rohingya refugees for HIV in the Cox's Bazar area. He said, "Cox's Bazar is the most vulnerable area for HIV." He also said that Rohingyas are "taking our happiness; they always give us pain in different ways."

### ***Commodity Price***

Last year, 2023, the consumer goods market was bullish almost throughout the year. Every commodity in the market has increased at an abnormal rate. According to the Bureau of Statistics, the previous year, i.e., in 2022, where the price inflation was 7.7 percent, increased to 9.02 percent in 2023 (BBS, 2024). The food inflation rate was over 12 percent in July-August (BBS, 2024). Economist Zahid Hossain said that in such a situation, it is necessary to recognise the depth of the problem' at the policy-making stage of the government. According to him, it is essential to note that the strategy taken by the authorities in 2023 to control inflation needs to be revised. If the prices of commodities, including rice, start to spike, people of limited income will suffer and

face a more vulnerable economic situation. As Bangladesh has recently graduated from a low-income to a lower-middle-income country and aspires to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a developed one by 2041, it is high time to restrict the market and ensure control over the local market.

### ***Foreign Reserve Crisis***

The data analysis shows a continuous decrease in Bangladesh's reserves from the beginning to the end of last year (2023). According to Bangladesh Bank, reserves were US\$32.22 billion in January and are expected to reduce by \$21 billion in December. According to the International Monetary Fund's accounting system, reserves were US\$24.75 billion in June and decreased to \$19.52 billion in November. Economists suggest that if unreserved money in the international market, money in the IMF's SDR sector, money held as foreign currency clearing by banks, and cash for payment of Asian Clearing Union (AKU) bills are considered, the number of reserves will decrease further. It is noted that Bangladesh needs more effective facilities to maintain the balance of foreign exchange and monitor the flow of money within the country. A small and concentrated export sector, combined with low FDI, will likely erode the competitiveness of its exports. As a result, Bangladesh may record structural current account deficits in the near to medium term.

### ***Fuel Supply***

Providing uninterrupted and reliable electricity to all at an affordable price is a significant undertaking for the governments of increasingly energy-hungry countries (Islam, 2021). Last summer of 2023, the general public suffered greatly due to temporary power outages. The power crisis affected individuals and businesses alike, stemming from a shortage of reserves and dollars to purchase fuel for power plants. Consequently, suppliers stopped providing fuel because of unpaid dues, leading to the temporary shutdown of several power plants, with others operating at reduced capacity. Additionally, unstable fuel prices, particularly for oil and gas, can lead to decreased production in various sectors and economic instability.

To address the above issues, the government must diversify the economy to reduce dependence on a few sectors and mitigate risks from global market fluctuations. For developing countries, economic diversification is often linked with structural transformation and achieving higher productivity levels. This involves moving economic resources within and between sectors such as services. To reduce dependency on any single country or bloc, Bangladesh should diversify its trade partners, particularly in markets such as Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Attract FDI from a broader range of countries by improving the ease of business and establishing special economic zones. This would mitigate geopolitical tensions and economic downturns in traditional markets.

## **External Challenges of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy**

### ***Repairing Relations with the United States***

In foreign affairs, the biggest and most important challenge for the foreign ministry is to bring Bangladesh-US bilateral relations to a rational level. The relationship was

strained long before the election. In December 2021, the US government imposed sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and some former and current officials. The United States announced on May 24, 2023, a visa ban on officials from the administration, law enforcement, politicians, and even the judiciary who would disrupt fair elections in Bangladesh. They also said the ban took effect on September 22, 2023. Bangladesh was also not invited to the Democracy Summit held in 2021 and 2023 at the initiative of the White House. The new policy on labour rights was announced on November 16, 2023. The US Secretary of State mentioned Kalpana Akhter, the leader of the garment workers of Bangladesh, as an example while making that announcement. Despite saying that the election was not free and fair, the reaction of the United States after the formation of the new government is very questionable. As a result, the government may have agreed with the United States. It should be noted that although the intensity of the US commentary has decreased in the pre-election weeks, it has always been stated in the regular briefings of the White House or the State Department that there has been no change in the US policy regarding the elections in Bangladesh.

The Secretary of State must monitor the US's future steps and continue efforts to normalise bilateral relations. No matter how cordial relations are between China and India, Bangladesh's primary export market is in the West. Expatriate income should also be kept in mind. In the 2022–23 fiscal year, US\$3.52 billion in expatriate income came from the United States. The United States ranks second only to Saudi Arabia in terms of expatriate income. So, any sanctions from the West could throw Bangladesh's current economy into further crisis. According to Atexa data, Bangladesh exported \$119 million of ready-made garments to the United States in the first two months of 2024. This export is 19.24 percent less than in the same period last year, 2023. However, exports fell by 36 percent last January. Despite the decrease in exports, there has been no significant change in the market share. At the end of February, Bangladesh's share in the US market in the export of ready-made garments was 9.12 percent. Bangladesh is the third top garment exporter in this market. So, maintaining this relationship is very important for Bangladesh's economy.

### ***Negotiation with European Union***

The election of 2024 emphasised European Union (EU) values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The ambassador's dialogue is much more flexible and positive for the government than the EU's previous position on the election or statements by the High Representative. However, among the two benefits he mentioned, the European Banking Authority EBA facility is only for less developed countries. This benefit will not be available after graduation. Conditions for receiving a Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) include human rights, labour rights, environmental protection, climate change and good governance. Due to the quality and price of Bangladeshi clothing, demand for it is increasing in European countries. Also, the factory and labour environment are among the areas of concern of the European Union. As a result, the continuous improvement of the environment of garment factories in Bangladesh is also attracting importers. Currently, the country's total number of green factories is 192, out of which 50 of the 100 most environmentally friendly green factories in the world certified by Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) are in Bangladesh. Bangladesh will have to continue its strenuous efforts to retain this market, which is the largest export of Bangladesh as a single unit (Saadi, 2022). Relations with the UK may be less critical than those in the US globally. However, this country is the third largest destination of Bangladeshi

export products. A large Bangladeshi community also lives there. The foreign ministry should, therefore, strive to maintain effective relations with the country.

### ***Relations with India***

Bangladesh's relations with India are crucial for its foreign policy. There is closeness to a great and glorious civilisation that Bangladesh can claim as its heritage, economic complementarities that both countries can explore to mutual advantage, bonds of fraternity and gratitude for India's considerable help in Bangladesh's struggle for independence. On the other hand, there are anxieties compelled by the unequal powers of the two states; there is cynicism about India's motives in helping Bangladesh in 1971; and there are misunderstandings generated by felt religious and political distances that are difficult to allay or ignore (Andaleeb et al. 2007). India has received everything it wanted from Bangladesh, including the expulsion of separatist groups, transit facilities, and increased entry of Indian products into the market. India earns large sums of foreign exchange from Bangladesh through tourism, medical visits, surveillance radars, and weapons purchases. Many Indians have entered the labour market in Bangladesh, and their annual remittances exceed five billion dollars (Kabir, 2017). The list of achievements of Bangladesh is quite complicated. It took India 52 years to ratify the Indira-Mujib Agreement on the border, which also goes in India's favour, with a slight change. The short land distance from Bangladesh to Nepal, Bhutan, and India has not yet been transit-facilitated. India has given a credit line of seven billion dollars in three instalments. The Ganges Water Sharing Agreement was signed in 1996. The Teesta water-sharing agreement has gone to the freezer at one stage, and Bangladesh does not get the water it needs during the dry season—no word on the rest of the 54 international rivers. The Assam Citizen Register and Indian Citizenship Amendment Act, designed to expel 'foreigners' from the Indian state of Assam, is unsorted yet. Above all, the issue that causes the most outrage among the people of Bangladesh is the continuous killing of Bangladeshi citizens by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) along the border.

### ***Balance Diplomacy***

The government of Bangladesh maintains congenial relations with regionally and internationally influential countries while establishing balanced diplomacy and getting its benefits. In the global and regional context, the China-India, US-Russia, China-Japan and China-US conflicts are no longer a matter of hiding. Bangladesh has developed integrated economic, commercial and strategic military cooperation with these five influential countries. Political relations with India are currently deep, and India depends on China regarding economic development. Diplomats and security analysts have warned that Bangladesh should not lose sight of national interests in balancing these two countries. The Teesta water-sharing issue with India has not been resolved. Even the Joint River Commission (JRC) has not met for seven to eight years.

In 1996, the government of Bangladesh maintained the balance in sub-continental politics, but it is no longer. In 1998, when India and Pakistan detonated nuclear bombs, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina rushed to Delhi and Islamabad with a 'message of peace'. SAARC is now utterly ineffective at Delhi's will. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said that SAARC is needed. Recently, India's senior diplomat, Muchkund Dubey, also told Prothom Alo that there is no need to bury SAARC. Can



you wake up again? Regional and sub-regional initiatives such as Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) as alternatives to SAARC were also unsuccessful. However, there is an opportunity for development in the internal affairs of Bangladesh as well as the political imbalance of the sub-continent (Rehman, 2021). One of the biggest challenges of the current foreign policy is to balance the relationship with dealing with internal problems to maintain Bangladesh's favourable position in the sub-continent.

## **OPPORTUNITIES OF BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Bangladesh has strong bilateral relations with different countries. In the context of increasing the importance of Bangladesh at the international level, the national interest and cooperation in that relationship are gaining importance. Negotiations with the European Union and France in 2023 included the purchase of Airbus. On the other hand, among the various discussions with the United States, there was also the issue of buying Boeing Company aircraft. Last year, we also noticed how vital geopolitics, economics, and national interest are in diplomatic negotiations, various statements on foreign policy, and various activities. As a result, we see a continuation of past success in Bangladesh's diplomacy in 2023. At the same time, it is essential to strengthen diplomacy in dealing with the complex situation of the present world, give it more importance and make it a higher priority to face the days ahead.

The world state of affairs is getting more and more complicated. The world never imagined that such a protracted war would break out between Russia and Ukraine. No one predicted that the war in Gaza in the context of Hamas's strong offensive is equally valid that the end of the war is unpredictable. Meanwhile, due to hostility or rivalry between China and the United States, various summits have been held between the two countries. It is undoubtedly positive, though also somewhat surprising. As a result, the world of 2023 has reflected much complexity, and Bangladesh has dealt with it skillfully. Bangladesh is expected to employ more diplomacy and foreign policy in 2024 for national interest, prosperity and development. Besides, the competition between world or regional powers regarding Bangladesh will continue. Bangladesh's presence in world diplomacy will be maintained, and new opportunities will be created. New possibilities such as:

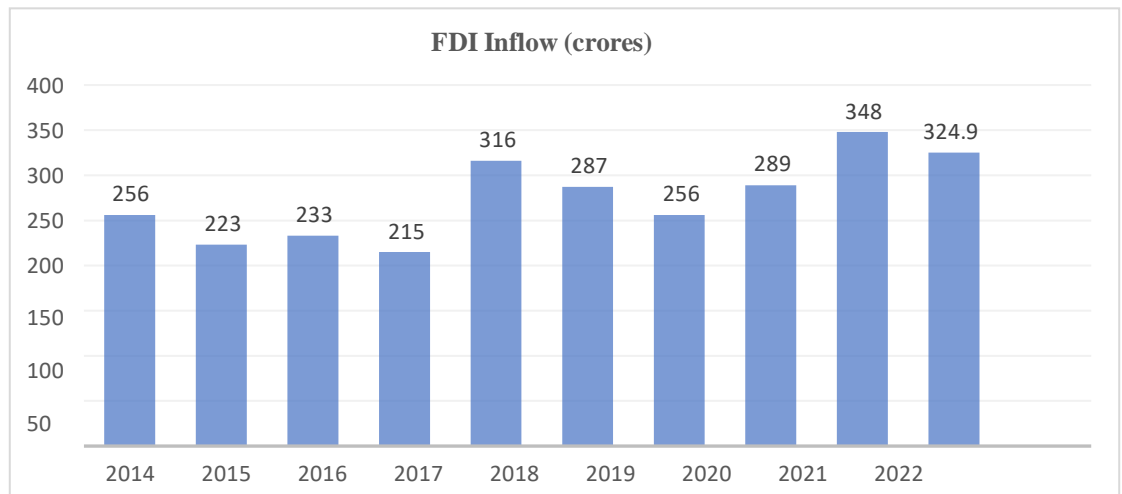
### **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)**

It is not enough to bring in foreign investment. New investors will be reassured if existing investors can share their experiences and attitudes with the world. In several cases, the elements or services with an ideal business environment still need to be added. As a result, business costs go up, ranging from transportation to logistics to fuel. Bangladesh must do more to improve the business environment (Ahsan, 2024). Bangladesh Bank published a survey related to the money brought to Bangladesh by foreign investment in situations. The last report of this survey was published at the beginning of December 2023. According to the report, the net FDI inflow in the financial year 2022–23 was 3.25 billion dollars—however, the previous year. In the financial year 2021–22, this amount was 3.44 billion dollars.

The calculations show that the net FDI inflow has decreased by 5.52 percent over the year. Against this picture of net inflows, foreign new investors brought in very

little new capital this fiscal year.

**Figure 3: Foreign Direct Investment Flows**



*Source: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023*

If someone wants to invest here in Bangladesh, he has to consider two factors. One of them is

- Exchange rate risk,
- Investment risk.

Therefore, capitals move to developed countries with no exchange rate risk. In this case, one of Bangladesh's foreign policy challenges is attracting foreign investors.

### **Achieving GSP in the European Union**

Bangladesh exports 62 percent of its garments, and 56 percent are destined for European and UK markets. The loss of substantial commercial facilities threatens Bangladesh's commercial capacity. Therefore, dealing with the adverse impact on Bangladesh's trade competitiveness due to the loss of duty-free and quota-free trade benefits in the global market, especially in the European market, is an essential issue for Bangladesh.

In 2015, the European Union introduced a preferential trade facility called the 'Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development' for low-income and lower-middle-income countries (Uddin, 2021). Bangladesh has to fulfil several conditions to get GSP Plus benefits. A country must meet the Economic Fragility Index. That is, the total export value of a country's top seven products must be 75 percent of the total value of exports under GSP. In the case of Bangladesh, the value of exported goods under GSP is 95 percent of the total value of exported goods. Therefore, Bangladesh is eligible for this indicator of GSP plus power.

There is another critical condition. More than 7.4 percent of the GSP benefits LDCs receive from the EU will not be eligible for GSP Plus. Bangladesh is one of the

garment suppliers in the European market. So Bangladesh's share here is currently around 26 percent. However, changes in this regard will benefit Bangladesh when the EU makes a new law on GSP Plus. So, Bangladesh needs to talk to the EU now to change this condition. So, there is no way to sit back. We need to prepare now to face upcoming situations and potential challenges. We should emphasise the following points while preparing. Governments and all trade organisations must collect and analyse the necessary and objective data. By which proper arguments can be presented on 'Economic Fragility' and 'Import Share' indicators for availing GSP plus benefits.

Along with developing the garment industry, we need to increase the capacity of backward linkage or backward industries. Currently, 80 percent of the exportable knitwear products in Bangladesh are produced through 'double transformation'. Therefore, the Bangladesh government's foreign policy and intelligent diplomacy are critical to holding the European market; it will require economic capacity and a dollar problem.

### **Development of Bilateral Relations with the United States**

Dhaka-Washington trade relations are very positive. US investment, in particular, helps keep Bangladesh's energy sector afloat. Above all, the geopolitical context is critical in Bangladesh-US relations. Because of this, the topic of the US's 'Indo-Pacific strategy' comes up repeatedly. US diplomatic and military activities centre on the region, and US allies are associated with it. As a result, there is a desire to get Bangladesh on the side of the United States regarding Bangladesh's role in the Indo-Pacific region.

The tension between the two countries was seen over the election of 2024, but it was removed by the letter of US President Joe Biden. President Joe Biden begins with the opening phase of the next chapter of the US-Bangladesh partnership in the letter sent to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. He wrote that I would like to say regional and global security, economic development, climate change and energy, global health, and humanitarian assistance, and mainly express the sincere desire of our administration to work together on many other issues, including the Rohingya refugees. Joe Biden wrote, 'We have a long and successful history of working together to solve problems, and the basis of our relationship is the strong relationship between the people of the two countries.' A mutual willingness to work together on regional and global security, economic development, climate change and energy, global health, and humanitarian aid was highlighted, especially for Rohingya refugees (Bangladesh, 2024). In this case, Bangladesh can develop economic relations with the United States and make strategic decisions. There will be an opportunity to restore Bangladesh's GSP benefits to the United States in June 2013, subject to improving the working environment.

### **Middle East Opportunities and Policy**

The Middle East's diplomatic position is on the right track. Just as Bangladesh condemns Israel's aggression in Gaza and demands an end to the war, Bangladesh will call for de-escalation of the turbulent environment throughout the Middle East. Bangladesh is not for anyone but for world peace and brotherhood. That is why Bangladesh is assumed to keep itself neutral from the incident. The Middle East is one of the world's biggest oil supplier markets. So, connectivity with the Middle East is essential to Bangladesh.

**Figure 4: Bangladesh Economic Zones**



*Source: b2bmap.com, 2024*

Agreements relating to the development and protection of mutual investments, Agreements for the Avoidance of Double Taxation, and Prevention of Fiscal Evasion. One of her intentions is the agreement with Qatar on the Sea Route Transport Agreement and the Joint Business Council (JBC) between the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry (QCCI). Similarly, the Bangladesh government has a challenge and opportunity to ensure the labour market, clothing, oil and gas with other Middle Eastern countries.

In December 2021, Saudi Transport and Logistics Services Minister Engineer Saleh Al Jasher visited Bangladesh. They signed an agreement to establish a Special Economic Zone (Special et al.) 'Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Industrial Zone in Bangladesh for Saudi investors. For this purpose, Bangladesh allocated land in Chittagong. If this special industrial zone is established, many Bangladeshis will be employed, and Bangladesh will benefit financially by exporting the products produced here. About 2.8 million expatriates of Bangladesh are engaged in various professions in Saudi Arabia. The foreign exchange they send is vital to the country's development. The highest volume of expatriate remittances comes from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabian immigration of pilgrims is being completed in Dhaka. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative to build large new economic zones and unique cities, where there is great potential for employment of many more Bangladeshis in the future (Taslim, 2024).

Saudi authorities have published a list of 80 Saudi companies interested in investing in Bangladesh's various sectors. The country's Public Investment Fund is interested in participating in Bangladesh's development journey. Saudi Arabia is interested in collaborating with Bangladesh on energy. Bangladesh's delayed payment method will create an opportunity to buy crude oil. A joint venture between Bangladesh

and Saudi Arabia has studied the feasibility of a urea fertiliser factory.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

As Bangladesh approach a time of significant global transformation, it has the opportunity to address diverse challenges and opportunities in shaping its foreign policy. In this pivotal moment of global transformation, with geopolitical dynamics rapidly evolving and great power rivalries re-emerging, Bangladesh finds itself uniquely positioned amidst pressing issues such as climate change and the far-reaching impact of technological advancements. These changes in the international political system demand Bangladesh's strategic and proactive approach. The study has underscored the imperative for Bangladesh to navigate these shifts with strategic foresight, leveraging its geostrategic position, demographic dividend, and economic potential. By embracing a multifaceted foreign policy framework that prioritises economic diplomacy, climate diplomacy, and digital diplomacy, championing sustainable development, and investing in digital infrastructure, Bangladesh can not only mitigate the risks but also capitalise on the opportunities presented by the changing global landscape by effectively navigating the complexities of the emerging international order.

Furthermore, strengthening regional collaborations, particularly within South Asia and the Bay of Bengal Initiative, will enhance collective resilience and foster sustainable development. As Bangladesh anticipates and adapts to these future shifts, its journey will shape its destiny and contribute significantly to the broader narrative of global engagements in the 21st century. Emphasising the importance of adaptive, proactive, and inclusive foreign policy strategies, the paper encourages Bangladesh to re-envision its role on the world stage. The journey ahead is fraught with uncertainties, yet it holds the promise of transformational change if navigated with wisdom, foresight, and an unwavering commitment to the principles of peace, progress, and prosperity.

Bangladesh's strategic location between South and Southeast Asia offers unique geopolitical and economic leverage. Develop the Port of Chittagong into a regional hub for maritime trade. Invest in infrastructure to enhance connectivity and access to the Bay of Bengal, making it an economic gateway for landlocked neighbours. Bangladesh should seek to balance its relations with major powers. This involves maintaining good relations with India and China, two of the most influential countries in the region. Both the China and India factors in Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions will be continuously evolving and contributing factors that would perhaps influence Bangladesh's policies with other countries as well as strengthen defence and security, enhance military capabilities and engage in strategic partnerships to maintain sovereignty and protect national interests in the face of shifting alliances (Lyer, 2024; Brewster, 2024). Bangladesh can strengthen its cooperative relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Economic motivations are frequently the driving force behind regionalization. Bangladesh and ASEAN nations have economic and security interests in trade and investments, connectivity, agriculture, tourism, communications, and technology transfer (Chakrovorty, 2024). The department has strengthened alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region by deepening interoperability, expanding deterrent networks, and executing maritime security and awareness operations (Biswas, 2024).

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