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Small States, Big States, Weak States, Strong States: Bangladesh's Handling of India

Although one of the world's largest countries in terms of population, Bangladesh is much smaller in size and power in comparison to its neighbour, India. It is also 'India-locked', hemmed in geographically on three sides by its more powerful neighbour. It also owes its nascence as an independent sovereign state actor to India. Hence, it needs to be very nimble to be able to retain for itself sufficient space for manoeuvrability in policy formulation which is necessary to obtain its aspirations and objectives in foreign policy. This paper does not seek to provide any prescription for action. Rather, it tries to extrapolate a paradigm of behaviour in such a situation which could also be relevant to other smaller states in comparable milieu.

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The relationship between a smaller and a larger neighbourly state, as also between a weaker and stronger one, is often tricky – on both sides. However, oftentimes, it requires greater dexterity on the smaller protagonist to conduct this. This is because more 'power' tends to reside with the larger state which is also usually the stronger partner. The French Philosopher Raymond Aron has defined 'power' in international relations as the “capacity of a political

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unit to impose its will upon others”.² When one party enjoys such capability, it would be normal for the others to endeavour to erode it; or at least tame it in a way so as not to continuously have to play second fiddle to it.

There can be other complications. Neighbours are likely to have commonalities, as well as distinctiveness. The smaller state would prefer to stress the distinctiveness rather than commonalities as it strengthens the case for its separate sovereign existence. Again, there would likely to be irredentist disputes such as with regard to borders and territories, and sharing of resources, such as over water or subterranean energy. In such case, the more powerful state would want to bilateralise negotiations for their resolution because it can then act from a position of strength, whereas the weaker would turn to other actors, if possible, with shared views to get involved, to buttress itself.

With regard to options for the smaller state, political theorists have sought to delineate a pattern, to better understand, appreciate and predict it. Let us examine it at regional and global levels! Regionally, one is what the Scandinavian writer Erling Bjøl called the ‘pilot-fish behaviour’³. It implies tacking close to the shark to avoid being eaten. Finland’s relations with the Soviet Union to him were an example. A second option would be for the smaller power going outside the region to enmesh itself in a web of international linkages, drawing strength from beyond the region to redress the regional imbalance; just as Pakistan sought to do during the Cold War by building alliances with the west to counter India. Third, over half a century ago, the British political author Martin Wight stated that weaker states prefer greater international order as a protective measure – a fact that remains valid to this day. Finally, small and weak states have a penchant for joining multilateral bodies in order to seek security in greater numbers and to build a stake for others in their sovereignties.

These elements were factored into Bangladesh’s behaviour pattern in the regional and international matrix from its very inception as an independent country in December 1971. This was done wittingly and, at times, unwittingly. Quite often, foreign policies are not formulated by cool-headed rational thinking. More often, for smaller and weaker states, in particular, it becomes a series of tactical reactions to global situations rather than a strategic

² R Aaron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (Trans.), Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 71.

³ “The Small States in International Politics’ in August Schou and Arne Olav (eds.), *Small States in International Relations* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1971), p 13.

response as a product of careful calculations. In other words, it tends to be reactive rather than pro-active. The challenge is to balance both in a way that the international environment is rendered into a supportive backdrop to facilitate domestic good governance, development and prosperity.

Bangladesh's nascence came with some additional peculiarities. It was a rare case of secession, a recognised member of the United Nations breaking up into two. This was at variance with the existing global club rules. Secondly, Bangladesh was totally 'India-locked', just as some countries are 'land-locked', which made 'Indo-centrism' an inescapable feature of its policies. When Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned from Pakistani incarceration to lead his country in January 1972, his government had two aspirations which formed, ever since, the core of foreign policy. One was the strengthening of the young nation's security and sovereignty and the other was the quest for resources for development. The aspirations were co-terminus rather than mutually exclusive. Both cases demanded the building of extra-regional linkages. The foreign policy rested on four pillars: one, the (then) superpowers; two, the Islamic Middle East; three, China; and four, international organisations (the United Nations, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, later turned into the World Trading Organization [WTO]).⁴ Today, four and half decades down the line, with Sheikh Hasina, Sheikh Mujib's daughter at the helm, the broad parameters of Bangladesh's behaviour remain the same, but obviously with some variations to accommodate the changes in the ethos of both Bangladesh and India.

Bangladesh was born with massive support from India. That was nearly five decades ago. Both societies have changed enormously since then. Bangladesh is by no means the 'basket case' that American statesman Henry Kissinger had once the temerity to describe it as. It is about to graduate into the list of middle income countries and its social indices have surpassed in progress many of the Indian states around it. Still, its infrastructures remain weak, its institutions inadequately developed and its intellectual resources not optimally utilised. While the essence of national identity remains secular, external linkages have also fed tendencies that in some have led to the encouragement of fundamentalist thought-processes, though not alarmingly. India has, of course, progressed into a power to be

⁴ For a detailed examination of the initial thinking behind Bangladesh's foreign policy formulations, see Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, 'Foundations of Bangladesh Foreign Policy Interaction' in Bangladesh: Reflections on an Emergent Nation'(Singapore: Market Asia Books Ltd,2015), pp64-68.

reckoned with globally. Still, there are swathes of poverty in some parts that exceed that of Sub-Saharan Africa. However, one significant change has been the ascendancy of majoritarian sentiments, reflected in the concept of ‘Hindutva’, espoused by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), currently ruling the country. According to Shashi Tharoor, an Indian scholar-politician, it could alter the nature of Indian nationhood, eroding its secular, and even its constitutional character.⁵ This could have an impact on the mind-set of the Bangladeshis, who are overwhelmingly Muslims. We may like to believe that the largest country in the region should also have the largest heart. But then, we must also recognise realities of structural constraints and that policies are not necessarily a function of generosity.

All these render very complex the manner in which Bangladesh authorities should organise themselves to deal with India. First, India cannot be seen as a single entity. There is the New Delhi government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP, but, at times, for Dhaka, New Delhi is ‘*hanooz dur ast*’ (much too far). Modi is powerful but is also constrained by the domestic political compulsions. These limitations are often exacerbated by interests of Indian states that surround Bangladesh such as West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and the like. Also, there are pressure groups like the right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha, the champions of ‘Hindutva’, the intellectuals and culture-gurus, the regional parties, oftentimes, the shrill Indian media and so forth. Graham Allison, describing American foreign policy-making, has broadly extrapolated that policy outcomes are often the result of competition between pressure groups, which by logical definition, would make policies ‘irrational’. To an extent, it would also apply to complex systems as in India. As such, for Bangladeshi policy-makers, there is no ‘single India’. India should be seen as an amalgam of many elements, often with conflicting views. Bangladesh’s challenge is to identify them in a timely and appropriate fashion.⁶

Secondly, Bangladeshi policy-makers need to be aware that the existing global ‘order’, which the United States (US) had helped shape, is giving way to a new ‘disorder’, which ironically is also being replaced at the initiatives of the US, under President Donald Trump. The author

⁵ “Hindutva icon Upadhyay and Constitution can’t go together”, *Deccan Chronicle*, 28 January 2018. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/280118/hindutva-icon-upadhyay-and-constitution-cant-go-together-tharoor-to.html>. Accessed on 23 August 2018.

⁶ For an interesting study of such a view of India influencing a smaller country’s perceptions and policy formulation, see *Singapore and India: Towards a Shared Future* (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, 2015). The publication was undertaken to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations between India and Singapore.

has argued this elsewhere.⁷ It is undermining multilateral institutions like the United Nations (UN) and the WTO. Bangladesh can no longer look to the UN to provide us security and protect its sovereignty and to the WTO to create a level-playing field in trade with expanding market access for its manufactures on preferential terms. To be specific, Bangladesh cannot bring its multilateral linkages into determining its relations with India. The ‘decline’ of the US is being accompanied by the ‘rise’ of what Fareed Zakaria has called ‘the rest’.⁸ Changes in international norms, as, at times, in economics, are often cyclical. So, as before, we are seeing the burgeoning importance of individual nation-states like China, for instance. It would also be in consonance with the ideas of my intellectual mentor, Professor Hedley Bull, often seen as the father of Anglo-Saxon school of international relations, who had held that state-systems have come to stay.⁹ This would propel into play theories like the Balance of Power’ of the classical 19th century, whereby Bangladesh may need to create a set of bilateral linkages to enhance its negotiating capabilities in league with those with whom it shares commonalities of interests.

Finally, in circumstances such as those of Bangladesh, relations with neighbours like India can often become a matter of major electoral concern for the government. That is because the public, including the civil society, the press and, nowadays, the extremely important social media can have a strong interest and views on a subject of relations with a much larger and powerful neighbour. These sentiments could also be coloured by subjective factors. As such, policy-makers are engaged and charged with the responsibility of designing a policy that does not impact negatively upon the government’s electoral prospects.

It may seem like a tall order. However, Bangladesh is blessed with high diplomatic thought-leadership skills. This is a part of Bangladesh’s non-technological or intellectual resources. In the past, during the Bangabandhu-era, against many odds, Bangladesh was able to establish itself firmly in the comity of nations. At present, during his daughter’s stewardship, Bangladesh has a new genre of diplomats which has the requisite potential. Of course, there is a need to sharpen and hone such capabilities with a view to greater capacity building. For

⁷ ‘The New World Disorder: We must learn to Live with It’, *Daily Star*, Dhaka, 28 July 2018. <https://www.dailystar.net/opinion/perspective/the-new-world-disorder-we-must-learn-live-it-1612075>. Accessed on 23 August 2018.

⁸ F. Zakaria, *The Post American World: And the Rise of the Rest*, Penguin Books, 1 June 2009.

⁹ See, H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977). In this seminal work Bull powerfully argues that it is to the society of sovereign states that the essential nature of the prevalent world order in contemporary global politics is dependent.

instance, apart from key diplomatic agents appropriately located in the field abroad, there should be adequate ‘back-stopping’ in the line-ministry itself to adopt requisite pro-active initiatives and adequately respond to evolving situations in the neighbourhood. This should be resourced as necessary. Think-tanks and the vast available thought-capacity existing in the community must be adequately tapped, as one sees done in Singapore and elsewhere. As in the case with Singapore, how Bangladesh relates to the world is critical to its destiny, its consolidation as a strong nation-state, and its progress and prosperity.

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