

# Challenges and prospects: bangladeshi foreign policy



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Globalization has at present become a pervasive phenomenon of international relations, and in the process, is compelling developing countries like Bangladesh to assess its impact on its security and foreign policy. The traditional way of dealing with the security (which is basically state-centric and emphasizes military security), appears to have become inadequate for the task of formulating a policy that would be capable of effectively tackling the prospects and challenges of the dynamic and technology-dominated milieu. The question is how much of traditional security concerns remains relevant to policy-making, how and what to discard from the past to enable foreign policy successfully meet the opportunities and challenges of globalization.

While globalization has, to some extent, eroded the power of the nation-state, the latter has not been rendered absolutely impotent. Bangladesh's security concerns will need to be addressed through correct policies, taking into account the fact that it is multifaceted and comprehensive. In general, Bangladesh could expect to face problems in the following areas: military, political, economic, environmental and societal. Before embarking on the actual analysis of Bangladesh's security and foreign policy, a brief review of the concept and process of globalization and security will be provided. Its impact on Bangladesh will be studied, focusing on both positive and negative aspects. Finally implications for policy will be discussed.

## Globalization

The term globalization has become a buzzword in the present-day world. Although the term has attained extraordinary popularity in recent years, it

was in evidence even a hundred years ago. In the last 25 years or so, the concept of “ global” has transformed itself from a mere reference to mean “ total” to an emphasis on the “ globe as a unit of analysis in its own right.” Without claiming the world to have become a single society or that it is bound to become one, globalization refers to a process or trend.”[1]Simply, the term “ globalization” describes “ the increased mobility of goods, services, labor, technology and capital throughout the world.”

(<http://canadianeconomy.gc.ca/english/economy/globalization.html>). Or it can be described as, “ identity related to globalization processes seem unrelated to traditional boundaries of social groups, transcending territorial, religious and other boundaries.”[2]

It was actually in the 1980s and 1990s that the world witnessed the revolutionary impact of the process of globalization. It was primarily due to unprecedented technological innovation in the fields of communication and transportation that international relations became radically transformed, especially in the realm of trade and investment, and diffusion of information.

Despite fact that there is a growing concern about dealing with the complexities and changes generated by the phenomenon of globalization, the term itself is still imprecise, and means different things to different people. To simplify matters, “ globalization essentially refers to the process of worldwide spread of six kinds of objects and activities: i) goods and services; ii) people; iii) ideas and information; iv) money; v) normative orientation; and vi) behavioral patterns and practices.”[3]Of these, the flow of goods and services has had the most tangible impact: it has been

instrumental in raising the level of material prosperity unprecedented in human history. Besides, the free flow of information and ideas is making it possible for the full flowering of human potentials. Proponents of globalization are optimistic that increase in global prosperity would usher in a stable and peaceful world.

Critics of globalization however, are not so convinced that it is an unmixed blessing. They dispute the argument that as a result of the process of globalization, the nation-state is losing its significance due to the erosion of its functions which are increasingly being performed

by non-state actors like multinational corporations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). And it is the poor countries who face the challenges of globalization more as, “globalisation is not seen as transcending the role of the state, but rather as a consequence of the powerful role of rich countries – poor countries find it difficult to devise policies to deal with the crisis, especially since none of them boasts strong multinational companies that may function as influential global players”.[4]The focus of their criticism is that the process of globalization seeks to promote the economic at the cost of the social and political. They are concerned about the deleterious effect of unbridled market operations, which could destroy communal and social unity. Although globalization is very much a fact of life, it cannot be denied that the territorially organized nation-state continues to remain significant and capable of providing the necessary (perhaps not all) services to its citizens.

Again the resistance of globalization may assume the form of ultra-nationalism and racism. It is asserted that ethnic nationalism is much more deep-rooted and less time-bound (than modernists prefer to believe), therefore, better equipped to overcome the challenge of both globalization as well as regionalization.[5] Critics however, point out that, globalization contains the threat of a new form of hegemony, which “ would thus create social conditions conducive to new doctrines of civilizational superiority.”[6] Thus, globalization tends to strengthen nation-states in some respects and weaken in others.

Security- from individual to diverse and comprehensive approach

Security itself is now regarded to have become comprehensive as far as its meaning and definitions are concerned, as a result of which there is a tendency to over expand and widen the security agenda. Traditionally, a public issue is deemed to have been securitized when it is “ presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure.”[7] But the non-traditional approach to security tends to make it all inclusive and comprehensive, thereby, making it analytically unwieldy. Park defines ‘ comprehensive security’ in terms of “ policies designed to protecting the people’s life not only from traditional forms for military threat, but also from various other forms of threats such as hunger, poverty, environmental disaster, scarcity of energy, etc.”[8] Or it can be viewed as “ Security measures that starts from the assumption that dialogues at the level of the state and elsewhere contribute to the formulation of mutually acceptable definitions of common threats. The threats do not necessarily emanate from rival states, but also

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comprise threats to internal stability in the area of economics, social unrest, ethnic divisions, or serious environmental damage.”[9]

Transnational economic and financial forces at work possesses the capacity to wreak havoc with national economies- something that cannot be tackled by military means, but only with appropriate policies adopted primarily at the national level, but would also include international and regional cooperation. Hansen viewed it “ Now approaches towards security can only succeed with the cooperation of the main actors on the global stage which includes not only governments, but companies, banks and, at the political level, national political parties as well.”[10]So, in this era of globalization, to deal security measures, the most pressing need for any country like Bangladesh is to take cognizance of the magnitude and complexity of the changes now sweeping the world. Bowman describes, “ New technologies are making the world much more interdependent. These technologies are accelerating the movements of goods, services, ideas, and capital across national boundaries. They are displacing traditional security threats with nontraditional worries like international terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, and environmental degradation while strengthening the capacities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to influence policy.”[11]

### Foreign Policy of Bangladesh

The basic objectives of Bangladesh’s foreign policy are to “ promote its security, protect its territorial integrity, achieve socio-economic development, uphold its ideology and maintain its cultural identity and

national dignity” ([http://www.bssnews.net/about\\_foreign\\_policy.php](http://www.bssnews.net/about_foreign_policy.php)) -goals that are challenged in various forms by the process of globalization. The security interests of Bangladesh are said to lie in the consolidation of its hard-earned independence by accelerating the process of economic development and modernization. It is argued that the basic goal of its foreign policy should be the ensuring of diplomatic and economic cooperation and assistance from external sources. Bangladesh’s foreign policy has been deeply informed by the dire need to achieve socio-economic progress through the optimum use of its abundant human and other resources, which, in turn, could be instrumental in maintaining national cohesion, as well as international prestige and influence.[12]

Again the main constraints of Bangladesh’s foreign policy are its geographical location, underdevelopment and overpopulation. In the era of globalization, Bangladesh, like other developing countries, is confronted with threats emanating from both external and internal sources: terrorism, drug trafficking, circulation of light weapons, poverty, political instability, environmental degradation, etc.

### The Security Agenda of Bangladesh

#### External

The geographical location of Bangladesh makes it obvious that India and Myanmar are the two immediate neighbors who are the potential threats to its territorial security. However, chances are that India (aware of political costs involved in such a move) would prefer not to threaten Bangladesh militarily, if its major strategic and economic interests are served without <https://assignbuster.com/challenges-and-prospects-bangladeshi-foreign-policy/>

such efforts. Myanmar, too could pose such a threat to Bangladesh, but so far it has been limited to the influx of Rohingya refugees[13]in the 1990s in the South-Eastern part of Bangladesh, Cox's bazar, that caused considerable security problem and socio-economic burden for the country.

Although these two neighbors are potential threats to the territorial security of Bangladesh, the problematic question is how could minimize its vulnerabilities in this regard. Some analysts make suggestions, that “ Bangladesh does indeed possess strategic value, which it can and should exploit”[14]but reality does not seem to support such an assessment. In this era of globalization, it appears unlikely that either or both China and the United States would seriously court Bangladesh as ally against India, since both are now more interested in improving relations with India rather than antagonizing it. So, Bangladesh does have a big concern as far as the external sources of threats to its security are concerned, but they can be best dealt with and neutralized through astute diplomacy rather than the use of force, for which it is ill equipped. Bangladesh may resent the predominance of India, but there seems to be very limited options available to it deal with it in a truly effective manner. No matter how disadvantaged Bangladesh may be vis-à-vis its immediate neighbors, it must nonetheless be in a position to oppose policies on their part that could increase tension, create instability, or otherwise run against broad interests of Bangladesh.

Prospects for the proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in South Asia are another security concern of Bangladesh. With the testing of nuclear devices by India and Pakistan in 1998, possibilities of nuclear war occurring in the region has become a possibility. So, Bangladesh's security

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has been adversely affected by the development of nuclear devices and their delivery systems in South Asia. Bangladesh should, therefore, strive to play an active role in regional forums since the development of WMD transcends the barrier of distance and could affect Bangladesh too.

## Internal

### Military

Military force, although being marginalized in the era of economic globalization, has not been rendered obsolete. “ Military forces continue to retain their coercive and deterrent power, functions that economic instruments are still unable to perform with as much as effectiveness”[15]. Military power, it must be born in mind, is fungible, that is, can be used for purposes other than dealing with only internal and external threats. In the Bangladesh context, apart from deterring external military aggression and tackling internal political threats, Bangladesh armed forces are of considerable help for reconstruction and rehabilitation in the aftermath of natural disasters which the country faces frequently.

### Economic

Economic security is a term that is fraught with controversy, since in an interdependent global economic system it is difficult to achieve absolute security. In this era of globalization “ economic security is an inseparable element of comprehensive security, and the impact of both private sector economic activities and governmental economic diplomacy are treated as two sides of the same coin”.[16]As a least developed country (LDC)

Bangladesh has certain in-built problems, (the most glaring being widespread poverty), that severely constrain the effective and independent conduct of its foreign policy. At present, the country is further disadvantaged by the stiff competition that it has to face in the outside world especially with India. As has just been discussed, the globalization process offers both opportunities and poses challenges for the world, particularly for the developing countries. But Bangladesh, although poor in most respects, is not entirely without resources: it has manpower (cheap labor), water resources, and mineral resources (coal, oil and gas). If mobilized effectively, its vast but homogeneous and resilient population could take advantage of the information technology. The liberal international trade has led to an increase in the level of employment creating about 1.5 million jobs in the export sector. Therefore, there is an urgent need for Bangladesh to conduct its economic diplomacy, with vigor and vision.

Among the challenges being faced by Bangladesh are how to promote its economic prosperity in the dynamic, complex and highly competitive world, and domestically to provide the foundation for the satisfactory performance of its economy. And how to attain this goal in an environment where major decisions affecting national life are often determined by the international market. For instance, interest rates are determined more by global trends than by national ones.

Another salient feature of the globalization phenomenon involves migration. So, it becomes imperative that Bangladesh make diplomatic efforts to make it possible for Bangladeshi people to work in other countries where there are better opportunities. In this era of competition, Bangladesh will not

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necessarily get what it deserves, but only what it can negotiate. Bangladesh needs to take the advantage of the opportunities that globalization offers through the free flow of information and the use of English as an international language. This would help produce a better trained workforce capable of competing at the international level.

It also has to negotiate preferential access to the markets of the Western countries, as well as those of India and China. In the case of India, asymmetry in the bilateral trade relations has to be redressed. It would, to some extent, depend on the negotiating skills of Bangladesh officials, as, to what extent they can ensure market access.

#### (c)Environment

In the environment sector Bangladesh faces a number of challenges concerning the control of the flow of the Ganges waters by India, desertification, deforestation, global warming, etc. Most of these problems originate or are caused by factors that are external to Bangladesh. Global warming, for instance, is a truly globalized phenomenon. It is estimated that a sea-level rise of 1 meter could lead to the submergence of as much as one-third of the coastal areas of Bangladesh, and in the process, may give rise to what is called the problem of environmental refugees, and threaten the territorial integrity of Bangladesh.

Although the above-mentioned problems do not appear to pose any immediate threat to security of Bangladesh, these may do in the long run. After all, it must be borne in mind that, “ The environment, modified by

human interference, sets the conditions for socio-political-economic life: when these conditions are poor, life is poor.”[17]

#### (d) Socio-Political

A major focus of the new thinking in security studies is the socio-political conditions of the nation. Societal security is basically about identity of a group or community, and the political security is more about institutions and organizational security of the state. There can be a number of ways in which societal security could be threatened, for example, through “ migration and horizontal competition”.[18]In the case of Bangladesh, its cultural identity could be diluted through the powerful cultural influence from foreign sources, especially from closest neighbor India. Bangladesh faces a dilemma in this regard, since modernization involves adopting ideas and practices from more developed societies, while at the same time protecting its own cultural values and identity.

Political threats like terrorism, which is becoming increasingly lethal, for instance, could pose a serious challenge to the viability of a nascent democracy like Bangladesh, which is already assailed by a host of other problems.[19]This is a particularly negative aspect of globalization that is having a damaging impact on the security of Bangladesh, which may be subjected to what is termed as “ cultural militarization”-

“ that is, to the transformation of culture in ways that rather render violent responses to social problems normal and unexceptional. Cultural militarization marginalizes non-violent strategies for conflict resolution,

ultimately leading to the brutalization of society and the weakening of human security institutions.”[20]

Bangladesh is also moving in that direction. Terrorism and the proliferation of light weapons are a dangerous combination, the incidence of which is increasing in Bangladesh due to the free flow of goods and porous borders.

Poverty is another source of insecurity for Bangladesh. But whether globalization as such would alleviate poverty is debatable. In the final analysis, it depends on the capacity of the government to mobilize resources in an optimum way. That is something that can be achieved if there is political stability inside the country. Inability to achieve political stability would not only result in Bangladesh failure to take advantage of the positive aspects of globalization, but its foreign and economic policy agenda would be set outside the country.

Discussion: Globalization- Prospects and Challenges?

It is amply clear that Bangladesh has vulnerabilities in practically all areas: territorial, economic, environmental, and socio-Political. Bangladesh appears to be constrained as far dealing with its immediate neighbors are concerned, which means that it will need to cooperate with them despite the fact that its internal security and stability could be adversely affected by them. However this is not to deny the value of military power, which can always act as a deterrent. No matter how remote the possibility of aggression from the outside, Bangladesh should formulate a sound defense policy. While there are both external and internal sources of threats, on balance the latter are perceived to be posing more serious challenges for the security, stability and

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prosperity of the country. The main objectives of Bangladesh's foreign policy, viz., upholding its sovereignty, cultural identity, ideology are challenged by the forces of globalization. At the same time, while these factors do pose threats, it is difficult to determine exactly when and how they will evolve into threats to national security.

The most pressing task before Bangladesh is to achieve political stability; otherwise, it will not be possible for its diplomats to project a positive image of the country. Foreign policy is, after all, is an extension of its domestic policy; therefore, as long as Bangladesh is domestically not in order, it would not be realistic to expect it to have a credible and effective foreign policy.

Despite the challenges confronting the security and foreign policy of Bangladesh, it is yet possible to hope for a prosperous future. The tragedy would be that, if it cannot compete and negotiate with the outside world from a position of strength, if cannot take advantage of the positive aspects of globalization, and if it fail to peacefully resolve its own domestic social and political problems, the process of development would be retard- taking perhaps several more costly decades, instead of one.

Bangladesh needs to deal with challenges like transnational economic and financial forces, cross-border terrorism, arms and drug trafficking, climate change and environmental degradation through cooperation and coordinated efforts at both regional and international levels. The main purpose of Bangladesh's foreign policy in the present era should be minimizing the degree of vulnerabilities and reducing threats to its security, as well as possessing the ability to shape its security environment through an effective

and realistic assessment of its national interests, and the production thereof through pragmatic and active diplomacy.

## Conclusion

It can therefore be argued that despite globalization, the real sources of Bangladesh's insecurity would continue to remain mainly domestic (which could be exacerbated and exploited by external sources), that demand attention from within the state. The basic challenge facing Bangladesh is to comprehend the nature of changes taking place in the international economy and to deal with them through creating conditions and institutions necessary for coping with a dynamic environment. Only the constructive efforts of a dynamic and modern state could achieve success in eliminating the main sources of insecurity. Otherwise, chances are that, widespread and endemic social and political conflict would reduce it to the status of a "failed state," with people becoming more concerned with personal security than with national security.

## MAP OF BANGLADESH