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BANGLADESH AT 50:

THE RISE OF A BANGLADESH THAT CAN SAY NO

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Abstract: Bangladesh celebrated its 50 years of independence in 2021. Since October 2020, as Bangladesh's per capita income increased beyond that of India, it has gained international attention about its success and has become a center of analysis as to why. This article argues that the existing analyses misses the notion that Bangladesh's internal economic success is very much connected with its foreign policy choices. Gradually, within 50 years of its existence, Bangladesh has also acquired the power to be an agenda-setting nation, at least on regional issues and in terms of making its foreign policy choices. Bangladesh, thus, finds itself at the cusp of geopolitical attention by great powers, not as a country riddled by poverty and aid-dependency but rather as a country filled with possibilities. Therefore, this article argues that Bangladesh's progress has now allowed for it to prioritize its own national interest by saying 'no' where necessary and 'yes' where its particular goals and objectives converge.

Keywords: The Bay of Bengal; Bangladesh's Foreign Policy; Rise of Bangladesh

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The rise of Bangladesh is not a surprise but rather a historical continuum. In international media, the issue seems to be a matter worthy of a few columns in 2021. However, the same media highlighted only negative issues emerging from the country. Seldomly did they point out that the Cold War rivalry and reconfiguration of the relationship between the United States and China took place due to Pakistan's urgency to receive unwavering support from both sides against Bangladesh and its allies, India and former Soviet Union, when Bangladesh was fighting its War of Independence in 1971 (Shelley, 1979; Raghavan, 2013; Small, 2015). The media paid scant attention to the fact that Bangladesh started off with nil Foreign Reserve because the wealth earned exporting its own goods was spent on development projects and beautifications in West Pakistan when it was a part of the cartographical massacre done by colonial rulers (Jahan, 1972; Kabir, 1995). It has remained underexplored that a single country has not been able to achieve what Bangladesh has—in merely 50 years' time of its existence, from being a war-ravaged and aid-dependent country to emerging as a lender country (Basu, 2021; Alo, 2021; The Indian Express, 2021) and for some, as an “emerging middle power” (Brewster, 2021). This write-up adds one other dynamic missed by scholars and experts on Bangladesh, that the country's foreign policy trajectory shows how it has learned to say ‘no’ over the years and diplomatically assert its strategic autonomy.

First, I discuss the frenzy, both in academia and in media, to identify how Bangladesh has achieved its current economic success, then I shall move on to explain its diplomatic assertiveness. A country that was often seen as rife with political instability and violence, disaster-prone and unable to provide for its own citizens is now richer than Pakistan and the South Asian giant India (Zaman, 2020). In terms of per capita income, it has surpassed all the other countries in its own region, which has created a backlash in its own neighborhood, but has also caught the attention of extra-regional powers (Babones, 2020; Ganguly, 2020; Mohan, 2021; Pitman, 2021). In times of dire need, it has remembered its constitutional oath of helping anyone in need and thus, stepped forward to lend money to Sri Lanka through the use of a currency swap. Some explanations as to what led to Bangladesh's astonishing success are provided, but different publications generally identify four particular areas that were pivotal such as the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, Bangladesh's demographic dividend, its emerging online workforce and knowledge-based economy (Zaman, 2019; Palak, 2020; Yusuf, 2021). Some other writers, amidst Bangladesh's success, have put a rather negative dent to its reputation by arguing that Bangladesh has been enjoying the quota facilities from the US and Europe, which is behind its phenomenal success. Bangladesh, however, lost its quota advantages that was under the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA) back in 1994. So, what are the secrets?

Yes, the many analyses come close to providing a reasonable explanation to Bangladesh's rise where all of the four indicators will continue to expand for several specific reasons. Bangladesh specializes in different types of RMG products and also entered into the production and export of quality personal protective equipment during the pandemic, the needs of which will not diminish in the near future. Thus, from ‘Made in China’, Bangladesh is heading towards a ‘Made in Bangladesh’ era as a rising manufacturing power (Siu, 2019). The expansion of Bangladesh's pharmaceutical sector has been phenomenal as well (Ghosh, 2017). Bangladesh is now making vaccines for the Covid-19 virus at home and signed a contract to this effect with China. The demographic dividend, which Bangladesh is to enjoy until at least 2050 tells us that Bangladesh can provide low-skilled and semi-skilled labor in the globalized world. However, it overlooks how Bangladesh is also exploring to export its skilled manpower, specifically in the areas of medical professionals. The number of medical colleges that are established in Bangladesh have been able to create goodwill, which is demonstrated by a number of South Asian countries sending their students to study medicine in the country. For example, the current Bhutanese

Prime Minister Lotay Tshering is one such South Asian student who studied medicine in Bangladesh. The country has thus turned itself into a regional center for disseminating knowledge in the education sector broadly. Bangladesh is also looking to create itself as an IT hub of South Asia and is now the second-largest online labor force supplier in the world. Additionally, the rise of think tanks and their analyses have created the path of a knowledge-based economy for Bangladesh, which will provide long-term sustainability to its economy. In other words, as one Bangladeshi scholar has put it, Bangladesh has not followed a typical Western model of growth; rather borrowing the title of the famous song of Frank Sinatra, Bangladesh ‘has done it in its own way’(Mahmood, 2021).

Economic success is not only a result of its internal elements in the case of Bangladesh. I argue that observers writing on the issue are missing two very intriguing points that have led to Bangladesh’s particular trajectory thus far, its cogent calculations through ‘development diplomacy’ (Yasmin and Atique, 2019) and its ‘port diplomacy’ (Yasmin, 2016a). Bangladesh’s primary objective to further its national security is based on friendship with all and malice to none, which is a foundation laid out by its Founding Father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

In pursuing its development goals, Bangladesh did not pursue the typical path of economic diplomacy but rather pursued establishing a developmental relationship with whoever came forward with a fair deal that would suit Bangladesh’s national interests. Therefore, it has built development relationships not only with China and Japan but has also participated in talks with Persian Gulf countries to further create investment opportunities. Bangladesh has been able to project a unique path for others to learn how ‘growth without enmity’ is possible. It has earned the reputation of being identified as ‘the next Asian Tiger’ (The Daily Star, 2015) to a ‘true Asian tiger’ (The Daily Star, 2019) by scholars and policymakers alike. In terms of the development of its ports, Bangladesh has diversified its options so that it does not remain dependent on any one country in terms of the construction process and its operations. For instance, the way the Chittagong Bay Terminal has been divided into 19 components and that work contracts are given to different countries demonstrates this independence (Port Strategy, 2020; Barua, 2021). Soon, Bangladesh is going to have its first deep seaport at Matarbari, constructed with Japanese assistance (Dhaka Tribune, 2021b). Thus, Bangladesh is identified as a key littoral of the Bay of Bengal region and defines itself as a maritime country, where the access to the Bay has opened up Bangladesh’s choices to the level that it considers the Bay of Bengal as its third neighbor. Bangladesh is redefining the concept of a land-based neighborhood by highlighting the geopolitical significance of an adjacent maritime domain and, therefore, harnessing the geopolitical advantage of the bay (Alam, 2021). Bangladesh’s geopolitical location, once considered as land-locked, has now turned into a blessing (Zaman, 2017).

Bangladesh has learned not to put all its eggs in one basket, and all these examples are a testament to this. Bangladesh’s economic success is not a surprise, instead it has been in the making for decades through a continuation of pragmatic policies over the years. Bangladesh’s model of micro-credit, women’s empowerment, reducing maternal and pre-natal death, and promoting children’s education, especially girls’ education, are emulated worldwide. In these cases, both the public sector and private sectors worked hand in hand despite some arguing otherwise (Hossain, 2017; Tripathi, 2021; Mahmood, 2021). The immunization program of Bangladesh and its success are noted worldwide. Additionally, so are its innovations of creating domestic solutions for climate refugees and inventing local solutions to cultivation despite a rise in water salinity. Bangladesh, with its lynchpin location at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal has been able to draw attention in such a manner where India, China and other great powers prefer to be

its development partner (Yasmin, 2016b; Yasmin, 2019). A country with a market of 160 million people is *not* a small country but rather stands by its own right to be considered as an emerging middle power.

Bangladesh's diplomatic assertiveness in recent years can be seen originating with saying 'no' to the United Kingdom's request to recognize Ms. Shamima Begum, born and brought up in UK to Bangladeshi parents, as a Bangladeshi citizen. Bangladesh held its ground and watched the matter unfold but did not cave to the UK request. A number of other examples happened in 2021, *the Year of Fifty* for Bangladesh. The country declined to endorse a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution that condemned the military junta in Myanmar but did not include concerns for Rohingyas. Bangladesh's move is called as an "astute move" as well as a reflection of the country's success by hosting the Rohingyas on humanitarian ground that must be internationally recognized (Billah, 2021).

Bangladesh clearly showed its reservation to be formally a part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), when an offer was made to Bangladesh by the United States (US) Deputy Secretary of State Stephan Biegun (Palma, 2020; Dhaka Tribune, 2021a). Bangladesh is prepared to work with any countries of the world at the bilateral level and through multilateral forums, as long as it is not directed against any specific country and not a formal security alliance. To this end, Bangladesh joined two China-led initiatives such as the China-South Asian Countries Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Center and the China-South Asia Emergency Supply Reserve for ensuring its own national interest (Islam, 2021). When these initiatives were termed as anti-India forums, Bangladesh has rather offered India to join the forums to learn the true intentions of the initiatives, which is cooperative growth for the members. Similarly, Bangladesh is set to join Colombo Security Conclave in 2021, which is to work on non-traditional issues emerging in the Indian Ocean region (Rajagopalan, 2021).

These examples show that Bangladesh has achieved the maturity required to make cogent and informed calculations based on its national interest. This provides Bangladesh the assertiveness to say 'no' but also to understand and accommodate a 'yes' if that suits its interest and overall goals of emerging as a developed country by 2041. In other words, it may take some years for Bangladesh to emerge as a robust agenda-setter in international politics, but in the issues that affect its national interest, Bangladesh is increasingly showing its assertiveness and agenda-setting capacity in accordance with its national interest in the regional context. As the Bay of Bengal and, by extension, the Indo-Pacific region is at the center of geopolitical attention, Bangladesh has emerged as a country that no longer can be ignored in the policymaking of the great powers. While dealing with Bangladesh, the rest of the world should pay attention to the changes that are occurring in terms of Bangladesh rising and its ability to decide for itself. It is no longer at the receiving end of any deal, but rather can bargain and set its own terms and conditions.

There is, however, one fly in the ointment. Generally, it is mostly the foreign scholars and Bangladeshi scholars living abroad who write on the spectacular rise of Bangladesh. Very few scholars from within Bangladesh are writing about Bangladesh's economic miracle and diplomatic successes. Bangladeshi scholars have seen the country struggling in the 1970s, 1980s and in 1990s. The phenomenal transformation happening all around is yet to be widely recognized in the Bangladeshi scholarly circle

because of their practical experiences of treading through the murky water. Rather a very cautious step is being pursued like a 19th Century Bengali poetry goes—

*Aponare boro bole, boro shei noi;
lok e jare boro bole, boro shei hoi.*

The innate meaning of the poetry is modesty, that one should not beat his own drum, but let others speak of your success story. Self-assertiveness is seen as bombastic and compared to an empty shell making big noises. Therefore, we look forward to the admission of foreigners to recognize that Bangladesh is an emerging middle power. Time has come to talk about facts on the ground, and Bangladesh is taking a step forward to highlight its own success. Of course, there might be hiccups in the journey and black swan events such as the Covid-19 Pandemic, which we must be able to recognize and prepare accordingly, but mostly Bangladesh is set to be rising amidst such hiccups. A ‘Bangladesh Model’ has emerged (Mahmood, 2021; Ghosh, 2021) as quite an exception to the Western or the Eastern model. This is difficult for many to comprehend and has therefore created skepticism. Bangladesh’s story will not reflect a comprehensive view as long as it is written by others, just like the often-cited African saying, “Until the lion learns to write, stories will glorify the hunter.” In this case, the Bengal Tigers must come forward with their own stories.

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