**Geopolitical Importance of Bangladesh**

Since the concept of large scale troops movement became part of warfare, ‘strategy’ became inseparable from the conduct of warfare. Strategy since then has been a constant subject of study by the commanders who would direct armies in battle. As the battle grounds became bigger and bigger involving continents, more and more geography came into play in conceptualizing the future wars. It was in the Napoleonic era that geo-strategy became the province of the commanders as well of the sovereign. Two great wars gave the concept a boost, with additional emphasis laid on it by the geographers turned geo-strategists. Geo-strategy is not absolute but some of the ingredients or factors could be absolute and the value could change with changing characters of variables. Geo-strategy is transparent yet perceptive. Therefore, one needs to understand the prevalent geo-strategic reality in the global context in general and regional context in particular. We must be clear in our understanding as to how the global reality affects the region, such as ours, which is increasingly becoming an arena of middle power rivalry involving the lone superpower by one actor or another to counter balance the adversary.

In South Asian context, the region that we are directly concerned with, rapid geo-strategic changes have to be viewed in right perspective to understand the regional geo-strategic ambience, particularly by the policy makers of peripheral countries like ours. This is essential to make a comprehensive assessment of the regional dynamics. We are part of South Asia that continues to be one of the most volatile geo-strategic regions, with three neighbouring nuclear powers. South Asia’s balance of power since the Sino-Indian war of 1962 tilted completely towards India after the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. India became the dominant power in the region with the nuclear explosion in 1974. However, this situation was not without a challenge. Pakistan, which was still recuperating from the ignominious military defeat by India, decided to counter the regional giant with equal ferocity. India’s nuclear explosion pushed Pakistan into a collision course, having triggered an unholy nuclear race that continues unabated. The nuclear race culminated in 1998 in series of nuclear explosions, first by India and then by arch-rival Pakistan. The two regional antagonists became the sixth and the seventh nuclear powers. It is notable that three out of seven proven nuclear powers are Asian countries, sharing common and disputed boundaries.

Bangladesh could not remain out of the ambience of changes obtaining globally and regionally. With the changed South Asian geo-strategic scenario, Bangladesh’s geopolitical importance increased due at least to three factors. First, Bangladesh began to be referred to as the third largest Muslim country in the world and as the second in the region. The second factor is Bangladesh’s location within the ‘geo-strategic frontier’ of India, South Asia’s most powerful country. And the third is Bangladesh being in close proximity with China, Asia’s largest power, considered a strategic rival of both the US and India. The prevailing geo-strategic environment thus poses challenge to Bangladesh’s national security aspects, particularly economic development, energy security and military growth.

**Elements of Geo-Strategy**

The strategic importance of a country is dependent on some variable and non-variable factors. One needs to recognize and understand the ways how these factors tend to influence a country’s geo-strategic strength or its vulnerability. Let me briefly touch upon the elements I consider most important in determining the strength or vulnerability.

lements, India would find itself cut off from its strategic Northeast. The only alternative to offset the constraint is to have a strategic corridor through Bangladesh. The importance of such an alternative route first dawned on Indian strategists during the 1962 Sino-Indian war. China threatened to cut off India’s Line of Communication in the Seven Sisters, particularly in NEFA (North East Frontier Agency, now renamed Arunachal Pradesh). Thus, Indian strategists are well aware of the fact that China is capable of cutting off the vital communication line between the Northeastern Seven Sisters and rest of the Indian Union.

One must note the geographic disposition of the Indian state of Sikkim, a disputed territory between two Asian giants – India and China – since the former annexed the small Himalayan kingdom in 1975. Sikkim, however, provides easier access to India from Tibet (China) and the other way round. The most important access from India to China is through Nathu La and along Hatungla Ridge. Metal roads do exist connecting Kolkata port with the Nathu La Pass. The same route could also provide access for Bangladesh through Indian territory.

I have laid emphasis on the location of the Siliguri Corridor vis a vis Bangladesh’s position in the south to highlight the importance of the transit route through Bangladesh territory to nuclear India’s beleaguered Northeast, should China ever threaten India in conventional or unconventional conflict. The Bay of Bengal is fast turning into a hotbed of rivalry involving India, China and the all-powerful USA. Needless to say, this tends to enhance Bangladesh’s strategic salience due to sheer proximity factor.

**Changing Regional Geo-Strategic Scenario**

The changed geo-strategic dynamics, following the rise of the United States as the lone superpower and the subsequent events in Europe and the Middle East, and the rapid changes in global geo-politics actually accentuated the fear-psychosis of the existing and emerging middle powers. These powers, apprehensive of the perceived threats to their national interests from state and non-state actors, are either aligning with or moving away from the predominant global power. The emerging strategic partnerships between Russia and China and between the United States and India seem to be going in opposite directions. However, the ever increasing strength of the middle powers necessitated extension of their strategic frontiers. In our region we are witnessing the strategic rivalry between India and China. India, having defied US influence for five long decades since its independence, moved much closer to the USA and established nuclear and military cooperation with Washington, shunning the spirit of the principle of non-alignment. On the other hand, Russia and China, having moved closer to each other, are trying to counter the US influence in their respective backyards.

In the backdrop of the redefined strategic frontier of the emerging Asian military giant, India, Bangladesh needs to reassess its own geo-strategic dynamics, with the focus on its opportunities and challenges. Most of all, Bangladesh needs to bear in mind its geographic location, vital for Indian integration and expansion of strategic frontier, and its non-renewable cheap energy.

**Bangladesh in Indian Strategic Dynamics**

It is pertinent to note the following to understand the role that Bangladesh plays in India’s strategic dynamics.

Bangladesh’s location is a strategic wedge between mainland India and Northeastern seven states of the Indian Union. Each of these states is land-locked and has shorter route to the sea through Bangladesh. Currently, Kolkata port is used by these states for both domestic and imported cargo.

The navigable rivers in India’s Northeast that could connect West Bengal or Orissa ports pass through Bangladesh.

The only entry to and exit from the Northeastern region of India is through the Shiliguri Corridor that is close to the Chinese border and within striking distance of Bangladesh. The Shiliguri Corridor is the most sensitive ‘choke point’ for the Indian Union.  
Most of the Northeastern states of India are virtually under siege where decades-old insurgencies are raging unabated, particularly in Assam, Tripura, and Nagaland. These states are yet to be fully integrated with the Indian Union.

Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA), still disputed between China and India, is within close proximity of Bangladesh. Bangladesh provides easy land access to Southeast Asian countries that are important for India’s Look East Policy.

**Sino-Bangla Relations in South Asia’s Changing Strategic Dynamics**

China has been a constantly important factor in Bangladesh’s foreign policy since the establishment of diplomatic, military and economic ties in 1976. Since then the Governments of Bangladesh of all political complexions have pursued similar China policy. In this context, the growing linkage, connectivity and possible land connection enhances Bangladesh’s regional geo-strategic status particularly for the following reasons:

**China enjoys access to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar.**

**Conclusion**

What I re-emphasise is that Bangladesh’s geo-strategic location is a prime concern for India as a growing world power, as Dr. Shubash Kapila puts it in one of his strategic concept papers. He contends the following:

Bangladesh lies contiguous to India’s sensitive Northeast, which has been the focus of de-stabilisation through anti-Indian insurgencies by China, Pakistan and now Bangladesh, singly and jointly with Pakistan.

India’s national security interests dictate that Bangladesh is not allowed to operate as a “springboard” for anti-Indian activities in any form or variety.

India’s national security interests dictate that Bangladesh is not permitted to be “Talibanised”. A “Talibanised” Bangladesh is not only a security threat to India but also to Southeast Asia and the United States global security interests.”

Dr. Kapila’s strategic concerns for India are not unique; he rather represents the mainstream geo-strategic thinkers of Delhi. It was in thus-defined geo-strategic ambit that New Delhi’s reaction to the bomb blasts on 17 August 2005 is to be viewed. For long, Delhi has been accusing Bangladesh of connivance with religious extremists for expanding towards Northeast India’s Muslim majority districts of Assam. India’s increasing demand on Bangladesh for strategic concessions needs to be viewed in the context that most Indian strategists agree that Bangladesh is a crucially important country for India to secure its strategic frontier which goes beyond India’s geographical boundary, from Hormuz to Malacca and from Pars, Iran, to Hanoi, Vietnam. To India’s strategic decision makers, Bangladesh is well within its internal security parameter. That perception makes India more tremulous while dealing with Bangladesh.

What we must not lose sight of is that the increasing geo-strategic stature of Bangladesh may become its burden if we do not pay attention to our internal security as much as we should.

Being located in between Indian mainland and its revelling seven sister states Bangladesh's strategic importance for Indian has been very crucial to communicate by less spending. Besides being almost inside India having a small mouth to Bay of Bengal it has also become an attraction for USA and China sometime to deter India to maintain regional strategy.

The geographical location of Bangla­desh is a preponderant fact that influ­ence the decision makers in making foreign policy. Because of the various elements in the formulation of foreign of a country, geographic location oc­cupies a significant position.(1) Geo­politics examines the political and strategic significance of geography in this context geography is defined in terms of the location, size and resour­ces of the places. Geopolitical loca­tion of Bangladesh gives it both strength and weakness from different perspectives. As it is by location landlocked by India it keeps Bangladesh in a dis advantage but a little land boundary with Myanmar and its en­trance in sea give an advantage to its external orientation. India's need of corridor through Bangladesh and en­hancing global importance of the south Asian region comes as a hope to Bangladesh to keeps its foreign policy in a advantageous position.

**Location of Bangladesh:**

With an area of about 144,000 sq km, Bangladesh is situated between latitudes 20-34' and 2638' north and latitudes 8801' and 9241' east. The country is bordered by India on the east, west and north and by the Bay of Bengal on the south. There is also a small strip of frontier with Burma on the south eastern edge. The land is a deltaic plain with a network of numerous rivers and canals. Through Myanmar( Burma )Bangladesh is linked to the entire Southeast Asian region.. China is not very far off. Geographically The Peo­ple's Republic of china is a very close neighbor of Bangladesh with only 100 km of Indi­an territory between their borders.(2)Though Bangladesh does not have a common border with Nepal and Bhutan Both are very close neighbors separated from the northern border of Bangladesh by 13.7 miles and 18.67 miles of Indian territory respective­ly.(3)Bangladesh shares 54 international rivers with India and Myanmar. Though in the south she has her own out let to sea but the funnel like shape of the Bay of Bengal puts her in conflict with both India and Myanmar in determining the sea border.

**Neighbors of Bangladesh:**

India and Myanmar are the immediate neighbors of Bangladesh with common borders. The land border with Myanmar is about 243 kilometers while that India extended over 4,025 kilometers. Thus, in terms of peace along the extensive border and over all national security, the quality of relations with India is of crucial importance to Bangladesh. Among the near neighbors of Bangladesh though with out common borders, The nearest are Nepal (distance 13.7 miles/22km), Bhutan (distance 13.7 miles /22km).and china(dis­tance 60 miles or 100km). Among the neighbors of Bangladesh there are three countries with nuclear power.

**Geo political Weakness and its impacts of Foreign policy:**

Truly Bangladesh is clearly locked by India both in land and water except a little border with Myanmar. Geopolitics may be a disadvantage when a country is landlocked b or shares common border mostly with one country. While sharing common border if she is in dispute relationship with her neighbour, her foreign policy will largely conditioned by fear psyche.(4). Also the security consideration of a country is greatly dictated by geo­graphical location. Bangladesh nearness of border with India may appear as a weakness in her defence against any future military conflict with India. Common sharing of Rivers also appears as a weakness for Bangladesh because the flow of water which depends of the source of the rivers. Due to its almost flat topography Bangladesh also doest have the natural strategic defence that can be a barrier for the external attackers. The flow of 54 common rivers from India into Bangladesh territory creates yet another weakness to Bangladesh. Construction of Farakka barrage and possibility of constructing more other barrages also appeared as a weakness given by the nature to Bangladesh which we are considering as a geopolitical disadvantage to Bangladesh. Shiligori corridor between Bangladesh and both Nepal, Bhutan which also appears as a weakness to Bangladesh, as it could has brought more advantageous position if it were Bangladesh part. This small land separate Bangladesh from linking Nepal and Bhutan. If Bangladesh had linkage with Nepal or Bhutan it could have made easier linkage to china which could have been strengths in bargain to formulate Bangladesh's foreign policy. This peculiar location in the region has forced to consider India as the significant factor ih the formulation of countries foreign policy. Though there we have only but small option to go out avoiding India but the political realities of that country still can't make any positive chance for Ban­gladesh. Bangladesh's geopolitical location on the very besides of giant nuclear powerful India and its smallness and not deserving of abandoned natural resources dictates its pol­icy maker not to take such policy which avoids India. Very practically we see now and then Indian BSF solders kills many Bangladeshis but we can not take those killings in consider to talk to them avoiding the geo political reality. In our foreign policy with India we see that until the mid august, 1975 Bangladesh had cordial relations with India. It seems that the policy makers at that time realized the significance of geopolitical reality. Geopolitics dictates Bangladeshis closer relation with India It is realized through the signing of the friendship treaty which demonstrating to integrate Bangladeshis security

with India. Bangladesh due to her political and security dependence on India did not strengthen relations with countries having odds with India. (5) there is not the same risk of the Chinese cutting off Assam as there was in 1962, since in the course of hostilities, the northern Bangladesh is likely to be overrun by the Indian forces, and he communica­tion lines with Assam will be broadened rather that narrowed down or closed"(7) just af­ter the Bangladesh's emergence Subramanian was confident to say that "This country need no longer to be afraid that in case of military pressure from china, Assam will be cut off from the rest of the India"

Since independence Bangladesh is being used as transit route by rail and inland water ways between India's two part. It gives India benefits in terms of quick movement s of goods and less freight cost. For what we see India's great interest to take corridor facility-

ties through land roads and using Chittagong port. For the foreign policy decision makers of Bangladesh this transit facilities more correctly corridor as India proposed has been an important factor to bargain and to mitigate other problems like water dispute, border dis­pute , sea border dispute with India.

**Geo political Strength and its impact upon foreign policy:**

Though Bangladesh is a small country and almost locked by India its geopolitical loca­tion gives it some strength in this interdependent world which is prone to be multi polar. Bangladesh is being significant geopolitically where we can categorizes some of the im­portant causes

**Increasing importance of South Asia in International Politics:**

Bangladesh being situated in South Asia its importance because of its geopolitical loca­tion is increasing day by day with the increasing importance of South Asia and broadly Asia in International Politics. 'South Asia comprises of and where it is situated in the world, it becomes a vital position in the world at the end of the 20th century. The eight countries - Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives- that constitute South Asia are a zone of fire. China is situated in the north of this zone, Russia is on the North and West, the Middle East, Balkans and Europe are on the West, and the Indian Ocean on the South. The Indian Ocean connects the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans.'(6) If the 19th century was the century of the Atlantic and the 20th century of the century of the Pacific, then, as the calculations of India and some other countries go, the 21 st century will be the century of the Indian Ocean.(7)

**Asian Highway:**

For the fulfilment of Asian high way Bangladesh is significant part it links India with south eastern countries through easier low cost way. Though Bangladesh yet hasn't linked with the Asian high way because of disagreement with India one another's proposal still Bangladesh remains as not to be avoided.

**Transit Way:**

First of all geopolitical location of Bangladesh appeared for itself in some cases has been disadvantages as so its been very disadvantageous to India also. To communicate with the north western part India has the only and small corridor which is shill gory between Bangladesh and India. In case of any dispute or war with china India's northwestern part becomes very much vulnerable to be separated. What we observed in Sino-India war of 1962 on border dispute. We understands Bangladesh's geopolitical importance from a re­nowned Indian Strategic analyst K.SUBRAHMANYAM where he wrote in July ,1971, "there is not the same risk of the Chinese cutting off Assam as there was iin 1962, since in the course of hostilities, the northern Bangladesh is likely to be overrun by the Indian forces, and he communication lines with Assam will be broadened rather that narrowed down or closed"(7) just after the Bangladesh's emergence Subramanian was confident to say that "This country need no longer to be afraid that in case of military pressure from china. Assam will be cut off from the rest of the India"

Since independence Bangladesh is being used as transit route by rail and inland water ways between India's two part. It gives India benefits in terms of quick movement s of goods and less freight cost. For what we see India's great interest to take corridor facili­ties through land roads and using Chittagong port. For the foreign policy decision makers of Bangladesh this transit facilities more correctly corridor as India proposed has been an important factor to bargain and to mitigate other problems like water dispute, border dis­pute , sea border dispute with India.

**Geo political importance of Bangladesh for other countries:**

Not only India has interest over the geopolitical location of Bangladesh. But also courti­ers like Nepal, Bhutan, China, and USA and even courtiers like Japan and Australia are showing their interest considering the geo political importance of Bangladesh. Nepal and Bhutan being land locked and not having sea access very much interested to use Bangla­deshis sea ports to foster their trade. As china has competing relationship with India al­ways seeks opportunities to contain India geostratagically where Bangladesh becomes

one of the perfect positions to her intention. Though USA has its biggest naval base in Andaman Nicober islands its intend to use Chittagong Sea ports to strengthen its strategic position in the south Asia considering the importance of the region in World politics. More clearly in terms of any dispute with India and china Chittagong port is the better place to contain two nuclear power and which are growing as a super power in interna­tional system. Japan and Australia also for their national interest maintain good relations with Bangladesh and where Australia has different project and aid in great deal in Chitta­gong hill Tracks. No state regulates its foreign policy without being motivated by its na­tional interest.

**Conclusion:**

The above analysis over the geopolitical reality and its impacts on foreign policy formu­lation gives us the understanding that the Bangladesh hardly can avoid India as a factor to its foreign policy also in this changing world its being vice versa. Geopolitical reali­ties dictation over foreign policy provides both disadvantages and disadvantages which also makes the countries interdependent in this world system.

#### Strategic importance of Bangladesh in Indo-China rivalry

India aims to be a key player in the contemporary global affairs of the emerging multi-polar world order. The emergence of India as a major player depends much on its capacity to manage the affairs of its own backyard, South Asia. Though India has historically considered South Asia as its natural zone of influence, today it has to compete with China for strategic influence in this region. In this strategic game the importance of Bangladesh needs to be recognized taking into account both geo-political and maritime security considerations.

**Geo-political dimension of Indo-Bangladesh relations**

The geo-political dimension of the Indo-Bangladesh relations closely tied to the geographic location of Bangladesh. The physical connectivity of India’s politically volatile North-east region with India’s mainland is limited. The North-eastern states are separated from its mainland by a 20 km. wide stretch of Indian Territory called chicken neck or Siliguri Corridor. But India’s North-eastern states can easily be accessed from West Bengal through Bangladesh. This region is a security nightmare for India since it lies on the China border and is a hotbed of insurgency. Under such circumstances, Indian strategic interests dictate that the proposed transit corridor connecting mainland India with India’s North-Eastern states through Bangladesh must remain available for Indian military access in situation of military conflict between India and China. Moreover, from Indian point of view military access to this corridor is also essential for any sustained military campaign against insurgent groups in the Northeastern states. But it is obvious that Bangladesh would detest the idea of any military movement in this corridor out of the fear of being drawn into a military conflict. It would not like to share the same fate which was faced by Spain in the hands of Napoleon when the Napoleonic army en-route to Portugal through Spain occupied Madrid. However, Bangladesh seems to be keen in allowing transit facilities through West Bengal for economic purposes if land boundary agreement and Teesta River treaty are concluded. Under such circumstances Indian efforts should be directed at making the provisions of the proposed transit treaty as vague as possible so as to keep open the option of military mobilization through the proposed transit corridor if the situation demands so. This would act as a meaningful deterrent against Chinese aggression and also put significant pressure on insurgent activities in the Northeastern states.

In this context, the importance of Bangladesh in India’s maritime security also needs to be highlighted. In the Indian Ocean region the strategic footprints of China are increasingly becoming prominent. Chinese bases along the sea lanes from West Asia to the South China Sea have created a strategic nexus popularly called ‘string of pearls’. Naval base in Gawdar, Pakistan, container port in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, deep water port in Sittwe, Myanmar, a canal across Thailand’s Kra Isthmus, submarine base near Sanya in the southern tip of Hainan Island and an upgraded airstrip on Woody Island located in the Paracel archipelago 300 nautical miles east of Vietnam are pearls of the emerging Chinese geo-political network in the Indian Ocean region. Under such a scenario, an India friendly Bangladesh can help India to counter the Chinese strategic incursion in this region. Bangladesh is gifted with physical proximity to South-East Asia in a manner that it can work as an economic and strategic bridge between India and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries. Therefore, Bangladesh has enormous potential to foster economic and politico-security co-operation in the Indian Ocean region. When the proposed Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway projects are implemented, Bangladesh will be the potential transit point for the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and ASEAN region. Its well-developed sea ports offer both economic and military opportunities which China is eyeing to counter India’s strategic depth in the Bay of Bengal. Chinese plan to develop Sonodia islands as a deep sea port and to upgrade container shipping facilities in the Chittagong port have raised alarm bells in India. India must use its leverage over the Sheikh Hasina government to gain some access to Bangladeshi port facilities to increase trade with South and South East Asian countries and to challenge Chinese game plan in the Indian Ocean region.

**Bangladesh - a strategic opportunity for India**

In India’s strategic world-view Bangladesh has not been given adequate importance. It has been seen as a strategic menace rather than a strategic opportunity. Time has come to unlock the strategic potential of Bangladesh to achieve India’s foreign policy objectives. In this pursuit India must recognize the strength and weakness with which Bangladesh is naturally endowed by virtue of its geo-political location. While the physical proximity of Bangladesh to Southeast Asia and India’s Northeast gives it some leverage over India it faces significant geographic handicap since it is land-locked by India from three sides. Therefore, the dependence of Bangladesh on India is a fact that is irreversible to a large extent. The success of Indian diplomacy in checking the growing Chinese influence over Bangladesh depends to a large extent on the intelligent use of Bangladeshi dependence on India without provoking the fear of Indian hegemony.