

Bangladesh's Evolving Indo-Pacific Posture: Strategic Recalibration amid Political Transition

Arafat Hossain Saykot¹

Bangladesh is now navigating a complex and rapidly shifting strategic terrain, realigning its foreign relations while struggling with the political schism and ideological baptism, unveiling a Shakespearean tragedy ahead of the electoral theatrics. If the Bay of Bengal is a boon to Bangladesh's geopolitical endeavor, then the wind it brings would be the gusty force that, at intervals, reminds us what the country lacks —a shared and unified vision as a state. A land filled with enriched social and political movements deliberately failed to grasp the essence of the entrenched fervor of its grassroots and diverse beliefs. Holding the sovereign entity in a pendulum of resentments, political forces concerted over the casket of history, and over time, each wrote a struggle for power against its subjects.



Source: K M Asad/AFP/Getty Images

The Monsoon Revolution is indifferent to its consequences, whether it is the hope of reformation, a fair and free democratic transition, or the assurance of moral integrity and dignity against external eclipse; all are evanescent into the orchestra of polarized control of institutions and sentiments. If ensuring a democratic

¹Arafat Hossain Saykot completed his BSS and MSS in International Relations from the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

transition can be pivoted to maintain internal stability, then its external orientation will undoubtedly be its North Star for navigating through the uncertainties. Fighting against a despotic regime requires courage; however, surviving the cronies of a repressor needs dialogue, vision, and, of course, politics. In this context, embracing the philosophy of a free and open Indo-Pacific could enable the country to regain Dhaka's diplomatic autonomy in regional and global politics. The given context underscores the utmost urgency for new political actors to reinterpret the Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) to convey a "clear and loud" message, standing proud on the key pillars of freedom, democracy, and peace.

The Post-Movement Dilemma: What after the Rain?

For years, Bangladesh's foreign policy was used as a tool to gain internal political traction, distorting the democratic aspirations of its subjects. External relations were maintained less to advance national interests and more to secure a foothold for a despotic regime, resulting in growing resentment among citizens, alienating them from the country's long-maintained tenet of non-alignment, and prompting scepticism in their expression toward its immediate neighbor. The Political milieu is more driven by contempt and mistrust ingrained in the realist school, not to gain a strategic upper hand, but to uphold its integrity in regional and global politics. The new political phase, however, introduces a moment of reckoning. At the heart of this transition lies a growing domestic consensus on democratic accountability, economic reform, good governance, the protection of human rights, and the restoration of the rule of law. The IPO, as the country's first formal articulation of its Indo-Pacific vision², projected these values while outlining national interests across development, connectivity, maritime security, and climate action. The IPO articulated by the AL regime may be strategically aligned with the regime's interests; however, its overarching yet vague comprehensiveness also gave the new actors a tactical upper hand in reinterpreting the country's stance in a more transparent and solidified manner.

The interim government's efforts to reset relations with major powers, including India, the United States, and China, mark a transition from its isocles balance to a more trapezoid structure by including Pakistan in its strategic framing. The aim is to position the country within the larger Indo-Pacific conversation, not merely as a participant, but as a principled actor with a coherent national vision. The realignment illustrates an intention to enhance strategic autonomy, secure interests with multiple partners, and align international support with domestic reform efforts. However, the IPO now exists in a complex political climate, where

² BD Declares 15-Point Indo-Pacific Agenda," *The Financial Express* (Bangladesh), April 25, 2023,

<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/bd-declares-15-point-indo-pacific-agenda>

the influence landscape is open to all parties. Following the elections, each stakeholder is realigning their strategic allegiances to gain an edge and secure political leverage. *The question is whether Bangladesh will be able to solidify its foreign policy as a dictate of the citizen, or whether parties will again use external relations to subdue the masses.* The IPO is likely to evolve under the new leadership, and its static language and the state's volatile realities will shape how the monsoon revolution will be written in the history of Bangladesh.

An Alienation from Foundational Non-Alignment for Strategic Autonomy: Public Moral & Geopolitics at Crossroads!

Bangladesh's foreign policy remains anchored in the post-independence ethos of non-alignment, articulated in the constitutional principle of "friendship to all, malice toward none"³. Since independence, the urge for sovereign equality, strategic neutrality, and peaceful coexistence served as both a moral compass and a survival imperative. However, as the regional and global order fragmented into multipolar rivalries accompanied by the post-movement struggle, Dhaka found itself compelled to shift from doctrinal neutrality to a more interest-driven foreign policy. Though the previous regime practiced a "hedging" strategy⁴ and embraced a questionable "strategic flexibility" over passive non-alignment, it amounted to little more than wonder: *Is Dhaka navigating independently and with dignity?* Considering its recurring tension in India-Bangladesh relations, opaque infrastructure arrangements with China, and inconsistent Western advocacy for democracy and rights, this presumption explains how the previous regime leveraged foreign policy to sustain its authoritarian hold, thereby recalibrating the philosophical and strategic basis of Dhaka's foreign policy. This reorientation does not entirely nullify the idea of non-alignment; however, it adds a new trajectory, in which Bangladesh must carefully craft its image more as a partner and less as a rival, ingrained in normative, value-driven, and agency-rich diplomacy that seeks to navigate multipolar rivalries without being subsumed by them.

The act of balancing will be nugatory if Bangladesh fails to capture the public sentiment as a means of bargaining to re-establish equitable relations with India; the scope of its national security, economic mobility, and diplomatic leverage will be in jeopardy. Besides, a split in the middle bay will prevent both Bangladesh and India from leveraging their unequivocal geostrategic advantage in navigating the Pacific's political currents, and an invisible national threat will subsume both. Here are two probable scenarios: the

³ The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Act No. 367. Enacted in 1972.
<http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-details-367.html>.

⁴ Maimuna, Fariha. "Great Power Rivalry and Bangladesh's Strategy of Hedging." *The Business Standard*, September 5, 2022. <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/great-power-rivalry-and-bangladeshs-strategy-hedging-490542>

gradual improvement in the India-China relationship⁵ will push Bangladesh to become a strategic vessel for the USA, whereas, in the other scenario, India aligning with the USA will incentivize Bangladesh to choose China as its core beneficiary all along. Getting subsumed within the sphere of dominion of the three major powers will give Bangladesh less freedom to navigate in the Indo-Pacific. In the worst-case scenario, an instability in the Bay of Bengal may heighten US-China rivalry. No matter how Bangladesh seeks or aligns its strategic partners, even its exposure to Pakistan may provide it with a temporary umbrella, yet the country cannot avoid the grey storming great-power concerts.

Whether Bangladesh can sustain this balancing act without provoking coercion or isolation remains uncertain. However, what is clear is that Dhaka's concern is not constrained to regional configurations; it has greater obligation to reflect its people's will and the country needs to unify both political parties and citizens to come to shared point where it can accept its collective memory to redeem a national identity and articulate an IPO as a state, maneuvering its politics for its people's interests.

Strains on the IPO Framework: Emerging Compromises and Contradictions

Through the unveiling of Indo-Pacific Outlook, Bangladesh elucidated itself as a rules-based, non-aligned, and development-oriented actor in the increasingly contested Indo-Pacific region⁶. However, in the post-July movement, a conscious change has been evident in its foreign policy, driven by shifts in its domestic context. Though rhetorically still grounded in the language of neutrality and multilateralism, the contemporary practices exhibit signs of strategic reinterpretation. This recalibration reflects a move toward "strategic autonomy," departing from the IPO's soft balancing toward a more interest-driven realignment and security-centered orientation. Nonetheless, without integrating a guiding, inclusive vision in the IPO, Bangladesh may deviate from its core national interests and push the country into a protracted struggle.

The interim government has so far maintained its diplomatic preferences well, particularly with the U.S. and China. The indisputable fact that, as an independent state, Bangladesh will navigate through its own lens, and the recent developments clearly show the country's firm stance on Dhaka's integrity. The question is, how far can Bangladesh maintain such robustness? Any strains that may undermine Bangladesh's image of neutrality will push it toward entanglement in bloc politics, and recent developments suggest that shifting alignments may pose threats if not strategically rebalanced.

⁵ Global Times. "China-India Ties Improve a Lot over Last Year, Says Indian Army Chief: Media Reports." Global Times, November 18, 2025. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202511/1348463.shtml>

⁶ Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. "Bangladesh's First Indo-Pacific Outlook Aims for 'Friendship towards All'." Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, May 5, 2023. <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/bangladeshs-first-indo-pacific-outlook-aims-friendship>.



- Bangladesh's tilting towards China and enjoying a warm relationship may give it both a sense of security and growth, but a prolonged tilt may lead to a permanent rupture with India and distort Bangladesh's image of neutrality.
- While Bangladesh is increasingly depending on China for its strategic and security interests, it is in a quandary: it relies heavily on the Western bloc for its economic growth. Sooner or later, it will diminish credibility.
- Dhaka's joint military exercises and defense dialogue with the US underscore that the US considers Bangladesh a key security partner. However, if there is growing resentment between India and Bangladesh, it will prompt the USA to take a side. In its recently published National Security Strategy 2025⁷, the US clearly expresses its willingness to maintain closer relations with India. Bangladesh was not mentioned.
- The improving relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan, fueled by India's ongoing antagonism, are also driving an ideological shift and fostering populist fervor, which may further split Dhaka on historical and ideological grounds.
- The IPO's goals of non-traditional security, climate resilience, ocean conservation, and inclusive development are increasingly eclipsed by security considerations and great-power politics.

⁷ The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: The White House, November 2025),

- The IPO, introduced under a previous autocratic regime, now faces a legitimacy crisis. While the interim government promises reform, public skepticism remains high about whether foreign policy shifts are democratically mandated or elite-driven.

Navigating the Future: What Must Be Done

To safeguard the foundation of the IPO, Bangladesh must align its people's expectations with its commitments. Firstly, the country must draw a clear line between public sentiment and state strategy, as emotional narratives often lead to reactive diplomacy that will jeopardize the country's strategic flexibility. The country must focus on pursuing a development-centred, non-aligned foreign policy and seek cooperative relations with all major powers, reject bloc politics and militarisation, and prioritise economic growth, climate resilience, and regional stability. What Bangladesh must emphasize is that its partnerships are based on transparency, inclusivity, and a civilian nature, demonstrating its commitment to sovereignty, international law, and peaceful coexistence. Apart from these, issues that need to be addressed:

- To the USA, Bangladesh has strategic importance but not as an indispensable partner; moreover, losing ground in the contrary is of great concern to the USA. In such circumstances, Bangladesh must not seek any security alliance or military cooperation that may pose a threat to the Western bloc.
- Garner reaffirmation by integrating all political parties and by showing Bangladesh's unequivocal stance on international law, regional inclusivity, and climate action, to restore continuity and trust among partners.
- All key foreign policy decisions, such as participation in multilateral platforms or the ratification of strategic treaties, should be discussed through public forums to ensure transparency and legitimacy.
- Bangladesh must seek strategic autonomy through democratic accountability, as without internal reforms, Bangladesh's foreign policy lacks credibility and coherence.
- Dhaka must refocus on issue-based cooperation, including Bangladesh's engagement with IORA, BIMSTEC, and UN mechanisms, rather than falling into great-power binaries.

Besides, the EU is the most aligned strategic partner for Bangladesh in its effort to navigate the Indo-Pacific as a neutral actor. Bangladesh can pursue the EU as its normative partner, which would add a strategic shield against adversity while creating a safer terrain to navigate more freely without getting sandwiched between the great powers. It will also allow the country to expedite its reformation process and solidify democratic values and economic growth.

The Imperative and Expectations from the Indo-Pacific Community:

- All Pacific partners must assist Bangladesh in upholding democratic values that reflect the foundation of the IPO.
- Actors should avoid coercive diplomacy that seeks to force alignment. Bangladesh's aspiration to remain cooperative, development-focused, and neutral must be supported.
- Increase investments in climate adaptation, digital connectivity, public health, and maritime safety should align with people-centered development goals.
- A sovereignty-respecting, multilateral approach that focuses on shared interests will better foster regional stability and local legitimacy.
- External actors must reinforce their stance to foster people-centered relations and take the necessary steps to rebuild public trust.

Conclusion: Strategic Neutrality or Indo-Pacific Stewardship?

The changes in Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook will determine how the country adapts to evolving geopolitics, and the transition will bring both opportunities and uncertainties, placing the IPO at a crossroads between rhetorical commitment and actionable strategy. To solidify its position, Bangladesh must:

- Institutionalize democratic reforms and legitimize strategic engagement.
- Operationalize IPO principles across governance, security, and development spheres.
- Balance power asymmetries while maintaining diplomatic agility.
- Historical and ideological schisms must find common ground.
- Policy-making must reflect people's vision, specifically the youths'.

Bangladesh, with its legacy of non-alignment and its strategic geography, is uniquely positioned to shape a free, rules-based, people-centric Indo-Pacific order. If it can resolve the Rohingya repatriation issue, advocate for climate resilience, secure minority rights and safety, and build inclusive partnerships, it may serve as a pivotal force in ensuring stability in the Indo-Pacific. Conversely, failure to consolidate internal governance or overdependence on a specific side could erode Dhaka's strategic autonomy, reduce its regional influence, and compromise its developmental goals. The IPO's value lies in its versatility, capable of enabling Bangladesh to resist binary alignments while anchoring itself in regional responsibility. Whether it becomes a durable foreign policy doctrine or a sidelined artifact will depend on Bangladesh's ability to transform declarative posture into credible, consensus-driven statecraft.