

Crafting Bangladesh 2.0's Foreign Policy Narratives: Balancing Non-Alignment and Strategic Multi-Alignment

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Introduction

The global order is experiencing unprecedented transformation, characterized by shifting power dynamics, emerging security challenges, and complex economic interdependencies.² In this context, Bangladesh's journey from a war-torn nation to an emerging economic powerhouse necessitates a recalibration of its foreign policy approach. While the country's traditional non-aligned stance has served it well, the contemporary international environment demands a more sophisticated and multifaceted diplomatic strategy.

The principle of "friendship to all, malice towards none," remains relevant but requires reinterpretation in the context of 21st-century geopolitical realities.³ As Bangladesh continues to evolve as a significant regional player, its diplomatic approach must balance historical principles with contemporary necessities, ensuring both continuity and adaptation in its foreign policy framework.

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² Ikenberry, G. J. "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7-23.

³ Rahman, B. Foreign Policy Speech at the First Session of Parliament. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972.

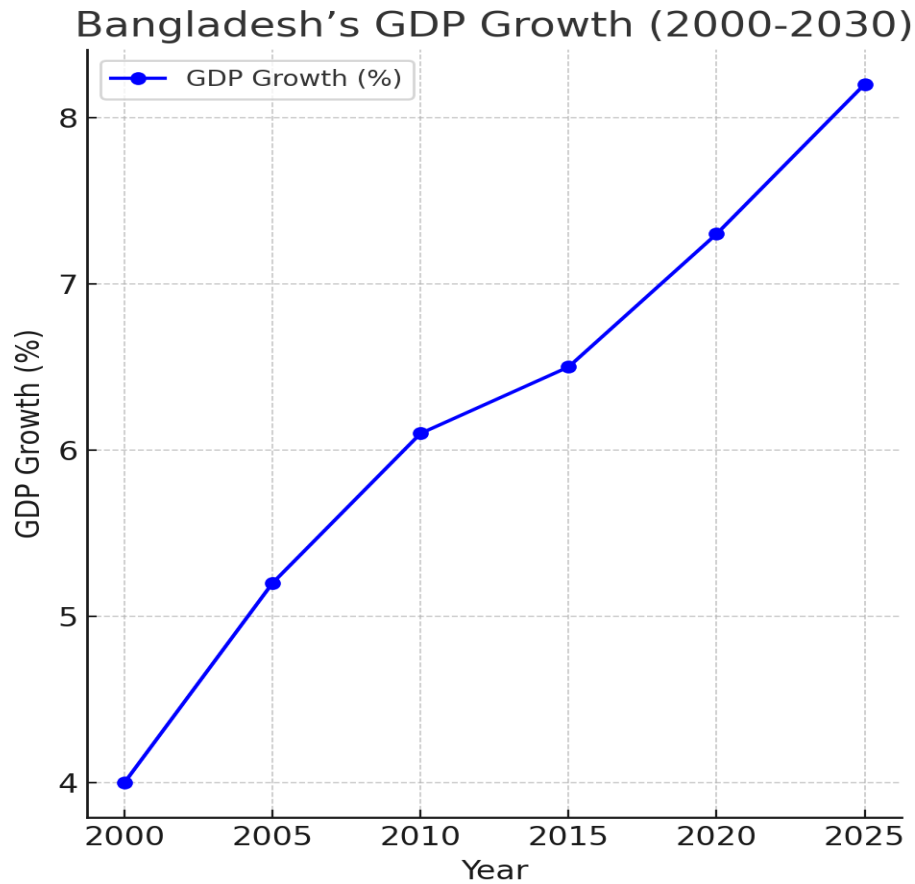


Figure: A visual representation of Bangladesh's GDP growth over the years, showcasing its transformation into an economic powerhouse

Source: Rahman, M., and S. Islam. 2023. *The Padma Bridge: A Symbol of Bangladesh's Economic Autonomy*. *Journal of Infrastructure Development* 15 (1): 45–63.

Historical Context and Evolution

Bangladesh's foreign policy has been anchored in non-alignment since its independence in 1971.⁴ This approach was born out of both practical necessity and ideological conviction, allowing the young nation to maintain diplomatic flexibility during the Cold War while focusing on domestic reconstruction and development. Through its participation in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Bangladesh found a platform to advocate for developing nations' interests and participate in global

⁴ Maniruzzaman, T. "Bangladesh in 1981: Problems and Prospects." *Asian Survey* 22, no. 2 (1982): 144-153.

governance discussions.⁵ A notable example of Bangladesh's early commitment to non-alignment was its balanced approach during the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. While many countries took strong positions either supporting or condemning the Soviet action, Bangladesh maintained a measured stance that emphasized the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention while avoiding alienation of either superpower bloc.⁶

The post-Cold War era has witnessed the emergence of multiple power centers, requiring a more nuanced diplomatic approach.⁷ Strategic multi-alignment represents an evolution rather than a departure from non-alignment principles. This transition enables Bangladesh to pursue pragmatic partnerships based on mutual interests while maintaining strategic autonomy.

The Padma Bridge, completed in 2022, exemplifies this evolving approach. When the World Bank withdrew financing following controversies over alleged corruption, Bangladesh proceeded with self-funding this critical infrastructure project.⁸ This decision demonstrated Bangladesh's commitment to strategic autonomy while pursuing vital national interests, even as it maintained productive relationships with international financial institutions on other projects.

Core Pillars of Bangladesh's Contemporary Foreign Policy

Economic Diplomacy and Development Cooperation

Bangladesh's economic diplomacy has become increasingly sophisticated, emphasizing the diversification of trade relationships and the expansion of market access opportunities.⁹ From being primarily dependent on Western markets for its garment exports, Bangladesh has gradually diversified its economic partnerships to include emerging markets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As Bangladesh prepares for graduation from LDC status in 2026, its economic

⁵ Haider, Z. "Bangladesh and the Great Powers." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 33, no. 3 (2006): 179-190.

⁶ Hussain, D. "Bangladesh and the Soviet Union During the Afghanistan Crisis, 1979-1982." *Asian Survey* 24, no. 11 (1984): 1133-1152.

⁷ Chakma, B. "Bangladesh's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Future Directions." *International Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2019): 683-703.

⁸ Rahman, M., and S. Islam. 2023. *The Padma Bridge: A Symbol of Bangladesh's Economic Autonomy*. *Journal of Infrastructure Development* 15 (1): 45-63.

⁹ Bhuiyan, A. L. "Economic Diplomacy in Bangladesh's Foreign Policy." *Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (2021): 67-85.

diplomatic efforts have intensified, focusing on securing new trade arrangements and investment opportunities that can sustain growth beyond the loss of certain preferential trade benefits.¹⁰ The government has been actively negotiating bilateral trade agreements to maintain market access post-graduation.

Bangladesh's engagement with financial institutions reflects its multi-alignment approach. The country's simultaneous membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) alongside continued partnership with traditional institutions like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank demonstrates its pragmatic approach to economic development.¹¹ The Bangladesh Bank's Green Transformation Fund further illustrates the country's commitment to aligning economic growth with environmental sustainability.¹²

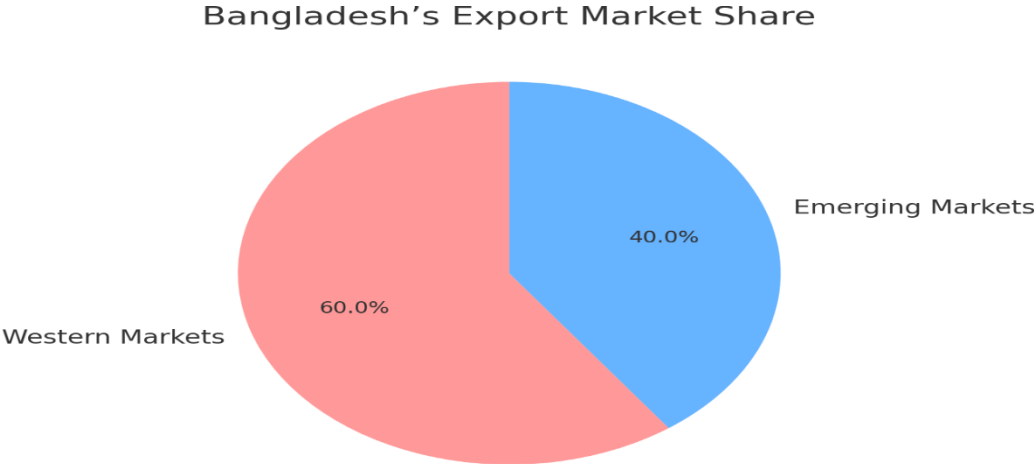


Figure: A bar chart illustrating Bangladesh's export destinations (comparison of traditional Western markets vs. emerging markets)

Source: Bhuiyan, A. L. 2021. Economic Diplomacy in Bangladesh's Foreign Policy. *Journal of International Relations* 15 (1): 67–85.

¹⁰ Rahman, M., M. Kabir, and A. Narayan. "Post-LDC Graduation Challenges for Bangladesh: Trade Preferences, Competitiveness, and Way Forward." *World Economy* 45, no. 9 (2022): 2735-2756.

¹¹ Hossain, T. 2019. *Bangladesh's Economic Diplomacy: Strategies for Sustainable Growth*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

¹² Bangladesh Bank. *Green Transformation Fund for Export-Oriented Industries*. 2023. <https://www.bb.org.bd/en/index.php/financing/greenfinance>.

Security and Strategic Partnerships

In the traditional security realm, Bangladesh continues to modernize its defense capabilities while maintaining its impressive contribution to UN peacekeeping operations. As one of the world's leading contributors to these missions, Bangladesh has deployed over 175,000 peacekeepers in 54 missions across 40 countries since 1988, building significant international goodwill.¹³ The country's defense procurement strategy reflects its multi-alignment approach, with recent purchases including military equipment from China, Russia, Turkey, and Western countries.¹⁴ This diversification enhances Bangladesh's strategic autonomy and reduces vulnerability to potential sanctions or political pressure from any single power.

Bangladesh's approach to maritime security in the Bay of Bengal demonstrates its commitment to rules-based resolution of territorial issues. The 2014 settlement of maritime boundary disputes with Myanmar and India through international arbitration allowed Bangladesh to develop its "Blue Economy" initiative, focusing on sustainable utilization of maritime resources while strengthening its naval presence.¹⁵

The management of the Rohingya refugee crisis since 2017 exemplifies Bangladesh's multi-aligned diplomatic approach to complex challenges. While providing shelter to over a million refugees, Bangladesh has maintained diplomatic engagement with Myanmar while simultaneously pursuing international support through multiple channels: engaging bilaterally with Myanmar, working through ASEAN, appealing to international organizations, and pursuing legal remedies through the International Court of Justice.¹⁶

¹³ Leijenaar, A., O. Mahmood, and M. Alam. "Bangladesh in UN Peacekeeping: Enhancing Contributions to International Peace and Security." Institute for Security Studies, 2021.

¹⁴ Bhuiyan, S. R., and A. Rahman. "Defense Procurement and Strategic Autonomy: Bangladesh's Multi-Aligned Approach." *Strategic Analysis* 47, no. 2 (2023): 178-193.

¹⁵ Alam, M. S. "Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal." *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 38-54. Hussain, M. T., M. S. Islam, and M. A. Karim. "Maritime Boundary Settlements and Blue Economy Initiatives: Bangladesh's Approach to the Bay of Bengal Management." *Maritime Studies* 20, no. 4 (2021): 389-402.

¹⁶ Uddin, N. "The Rohingya Crisis and Bangladesh's Multilateral Diplomacy." *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2022): 797-814.

Ahmed, S., and M. Rahman. "Bangladesh's Response to the Rohingya Crisis: A Diplomatic Balancing Act." *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 2 (2020): 128-145.

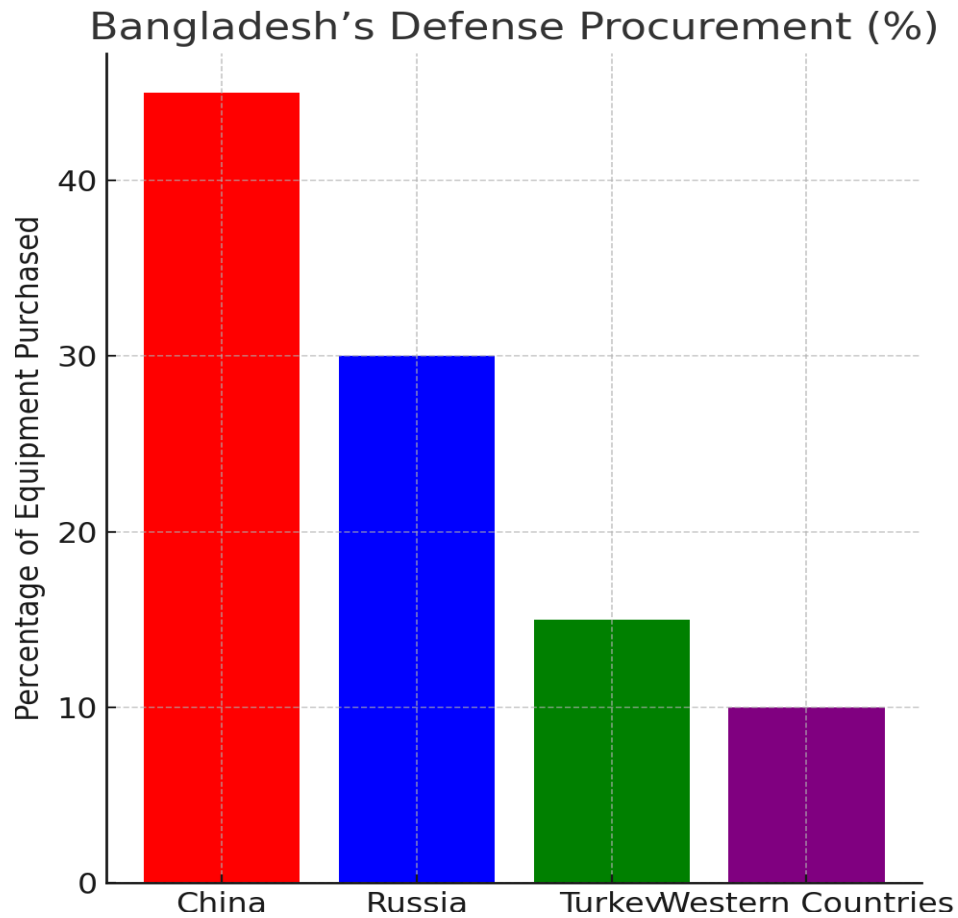


Figure: A map showing Bangladesh's defense partnerships with major powers (China, Russia, Turkey, Western countries)

Source: Bhuiyan, S. R., and A. Rahman. 2023. Defense Procurement and Strategic Autonomy: Bangladesh's Multi-Aligned Approach. *Strategic Analysis* 47 (2): 178–193.

Regional Integration and Connectivity

Bangladesh's geographic position between South and Southeast Asia offers unique opportunities for regional integration. The country has emerged as a key proponent of enhanced regional connectivity, developing transportation corridors and implementing multi-modal connectivity projects.¹⁷

¹⁷ Rahman, M., and E. Bari. "Bangladesh as a Connectivity Hub: Potential, Constraints, and Policy Options." *South Asian Survey* 28, no. 1 (2021): 7-26.

Projects like the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative, developed with Japan, and the development of deep-sea ports at Matarbari and Payra represent Bangladesh's efforts to enhance its connectivity infrastructure.¹⁸ The country's participation in initiatives such as BIMSTEC and the BCIM Economic Corridor demonstrates its commitment to regional cooperation.

The Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement provides a concrete example of Bangladesh's connectivity initiatives. Despite implementation challenges, Bangladesh's continued commitment to this framework demonstrates its recognition of the economic benefits of enhanced regional connectivity.¹⁹

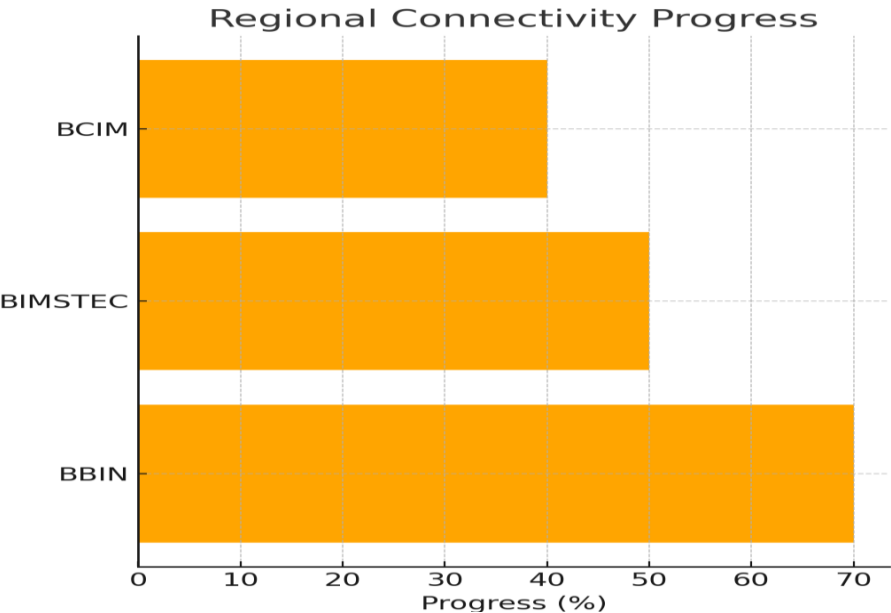


Figure: A diagram of regional connectivity projects such as BBIN, BIMSTEC, and the BCIM Economic Corridor

Source: Rahman, M., and E. Bari. 2021. Bangladesh as a Connectivity Hub: Potential, Constraints, and Policy Options. *South Asian Survey* 28 (1): 7–26.

¹⁸ Hossain, M. A., and M. Anisuzzaman. "Connectivity Initiatives in the Bay of Bengal Region: The Case of Bangladesh." *Journal of Bay of Bengal Studies* 4, no. 1 (2020): 23-38.

¹⁹ Bhattacharjee, J. "The BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement: Progress and Challenges." *Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief* 512 (2022): 1-12.

Multilateral Engagement and Global Governance

Bangladesh's multilateral diplomacy addresses contemporary global challenges while maintaining its focus on developing world solidarity. The country's leadership in establishing the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) has provided a platform for countries most affected by climate change to advocate collectively for stronger international action.²⁰ Bangladesh's contributions to UN peacekeeping and disaster risk reduction demonstrate its commitment to international peace and security. The country has leveraged its experiences with natural disasters to develop expertise in disaster management, which it now shares globally through various UN mechanisms and bilateral partnerships.²¹

Strategic Imperatives and Future Directions

Managing Great Power Relations

Bangladesh has demonstrated remarkable skill in maintaining productive relations with major powers while avoiding excessive dependence on any single partner. The country's approach to India and China illustrates this balancing act. As India's eastern neighbor sharing a 4,096-kilometer border, Bangladesh maintains deep historical, cultural, and economic ties with India. Concurrently, China has emerged as Bangladesh's largest trading partner and a major infrastructure investor.²²

The 2020-2021 border tensions between India and China provided a clear demonstration of Bangladesh's multi-alignment approach. While these powers clashed in the Himalayas, Bangladesh maintained positive relations with both, advancing economic partnerships with China through the Belt and Road Initiative while strengthening connectivity and trade with India through

²⁰ Huq, S., and M. E. Haque. "Climate Diplomacy and Vulnerability: The Case of Bangladesh and the Climate Vulnerable Forum." *International Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2019): 63-81.

²¹ UNDRR. *Disaster Risk Reduction in Bangladesh: Status Report 2020*. United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Rahman, M., and S. Islam. "Disaster Management and Bangladesh's International Cooperation: Sharing Experiences with the Global South." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 68 (2022): 102697.

²² Huq, S., A. Rahman, and M. Kabir. "Climate Adaptation Practices in Bangladesh: Lessons for the Global South." *Nature Climate Change* 12, no. 6 (2022): 518-525.

bilateral mechanisms and the BBIN framework.²³ Similarly, Bangladesh has balanced relations with the United States and Russia. While cooperating with the U.S. on counterterrorism, climate change, and economic development, Bangladesh has continued defense cooperation and energy partnerships with Russia, including the construction of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant.²⁴

Economic Security and Resilience

COVID-19 exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains and demonstrated the importance of economic diversification. Bangladesh's "Vision 2041" plan emphasizes diversification away from garment manufacturing toward higher-value industries and services, including pharmaceuticals, shipbuilding, electronics, and digital services.²⁵

Bangladesh's pharmaceutical industry exemplifies this approach to economic resilience. Starting with meeting domestic needs, the sector has evolved to export to over 150 countries, leveraging the TRIPS waiver available to LDCs. Recognizing that this advantage will expire with LDC graduation, Bangladesh has invested in research and development capabilities to remain competitive post-graduation.²⁶

²³ Hossain, M. A., and M. H. Kabir. "Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World: Lessons from Bangladesh's Strategic Multi-Alignment." *Global Policy* 14, no. 2 (2023): 267-279.

²⁴ Islam, M., and N. Chowdhury. 2022. "Balancing Great Power Relations: Bangladesh's Strategic Considerations." *Journal of Global Affairs* 19 (2): 112–130.

Ahmed, S. 2021. *Bangladesh's Foreign Policy in a Changing World: Strategies and Challenges*. Dhaka: Academic Press.

²⁵ Government of Bangladesh. 2020. *Making Vision 2041 a Reality: Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021-2041*. General Economics Division, Bangladesh Planning Commission.

²⁶ Chowdhury, R., and M. Islam. 2023. "The Future of Bangladesh's Pharmaceutical Industry in a Post-LDC Context." *Development Review* 32 (1): 57–80.

Rahman, M., S. Karim, and A. Hossain. 2021. *Bangladesh's Economic Transformation: Policy Challenges and Opportunities*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

Industry-Wise Contribution to GDP

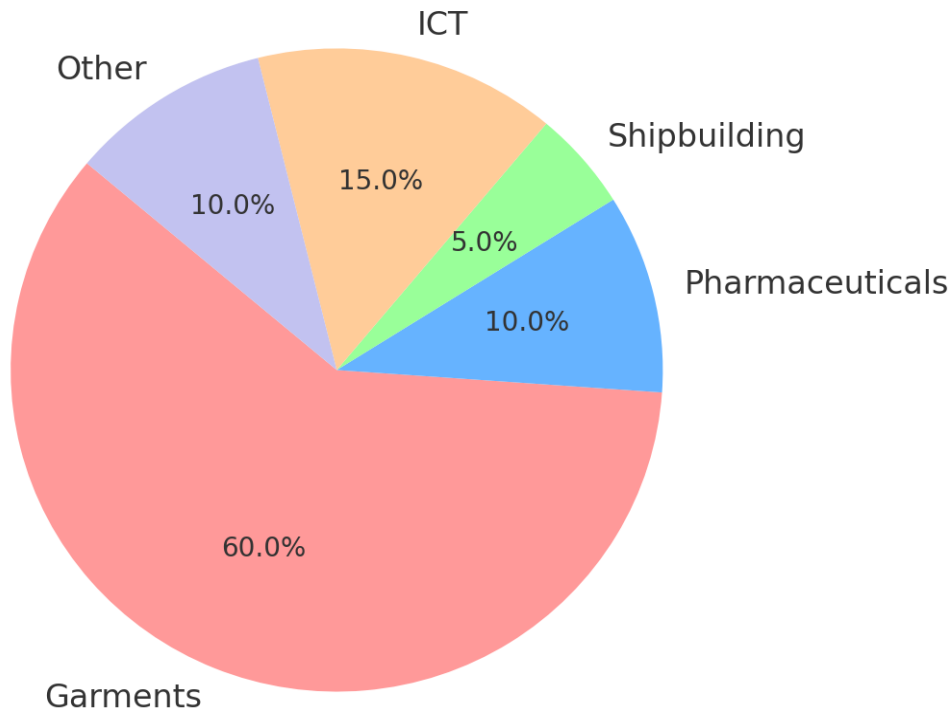


Figure: A pie chart showing Bangladesh's industry-wise contribution to GDP

Source: Government of Bangladesh. 2020. Making Vision 2041 a Reality: Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021-2041. General Economics Division, Bangladesh Planning Commission.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Bangladesh's evolution from strict non-alignment to strategic multi-alignment represents a mature approach to foreign policy in an increasingly complex world. This transition allows Bangladesh to maintain its core principles while pursuing its national interests more effectively.²⁷

As Bangladesh continues its journey toward becoming a middle-income country, its foreign policy must remain adaptable while staying true to its foundational principles. The careful balance

²⁷ Ahmed, S., and T. Rahman. 2023. Bangladesh's Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change in the 21st Century. Dhaka: Global Policy Press.

between non-alignment and strategic multi-alignment will be crucial in navigating the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Institutional Capacity Building:** Strengthen the foreign policy apparatus by investing in diplomatic training and economic expertise within the foreign service.
- 2. Diversification of Strategic Partnerships:** Continue to develop balanced relationships with major powers while expanding partnerships with middle powers.
- 3. Enhanced Regional Leadership:** Take a more proactive role in regional organizations like BIMSTEC and IORA to shape regional agendas.
- 4. Economic Diplomacy Expansion:** Develop comprehensive strategies for post-LDC economic diplomacy, focusing on trade agreements and investment promotion.
- 5. Climate Leadership Consolidation:** Build on Bangladesh's climate diplomacy success by developing initiatives that combine advocacy with practical collaboration.
- 6. Public Diplomacy Enhancement:** Invest in public diplomacy capabilities to better communicate Bangladesh's positions and achievements internationally.

Bangladesh's strategic multi-alignment approach offers valuable lessons for other developing nations navigating the complexities of contemporary international relations. By maintaining strategic autonomy while pragmatically engaging with multiple partners based on shared interests, Bangladesh has created a foreign policy framework that both serves its national development goals and enhances its international standing in the multipolar world of the 21st century.²⁸

²⁸ Hossain, M., and K. Kabir. 2023. "Strategic Multi-Alignment: A Case Study of Bangladesh's Evolving Foreign Policy." *Asian Geopolitical Review* 14 (2): 135–153.