

## Military Hardware and the Development of Deterrence Capabilities for Bangladesh

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*Bangladesh Airforce Mig-29.*

### Introduction

The nature of warfare is centred on adaptation and innovation. Both on the battlefield and during peacetime. Small and middle power states in the global South face a plethora of challenges to navigate in an international system that is suspended in the fear of conflict. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought traditional security concerns back to the top of the agenda with many nations concerned about the precedent that the war may set of violent and norm breaking solutions to regional disputes.

The mantra of the Bangladeshi state is “friendship to all, malice to none”<sup>1</sup> however, Bangladesh is wedged in a complex geo-political landscape and must expand its military deterrence capabilities to ensure its own interests. This mantra has become a leading idea in the recent foreign policy of Bangladesh which aims to balance contradicting spheres of influence between the rising powers of India and China.<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh is enveloped by India and Myanmar on three sides. Frequent tensions

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020). *Bangabandhu: the people’s hero*. Dhaka: External Publicity Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Anwar, A. (2021). *Bangladesh at 50: Navigating Strategic Survival*. [online] War on the Rocks.

simmer with India over water disputes and the killing of Bangladeshi citizens at the border. Furthermore, India's current government has allowed rampant Islamophobia and violence to fester in its Hindu nationalist support base.<sup>3</sup> Controversial citizenship laws are targeting Muslims particularly in the state of Assam, as the Indian government claim up to 2 million Bangladeshi's live illegally in India.<sup>4</sup>

Myanmar represents an unpredictable challenge. Myanmar is an increasingly isolated and dangerous nation in the region pursuing rapid military development. Myanmar's genocide of the Rohingya has had a destabilising impact on Bangladesh, which hosts over a million Rohingya. Myanmar Frequently violates the maritime borders of Bangladesh. In 2009, Bangladesh introduced "Forces Goal 2030," calling for a massive expansion and modernisation of the Bangladesh Army, Navy, and Air Force. <sup>5</sup> This policy came after the 2008 Myanmar-Bangladesh naval standoff as tensions rose over disputed maritime boundaries.<sup>6</sup> This first modernisation plan for the Bangladesh armed forces was revised in 2017 with the long-term goal to build a three-dimensional force capable of conducting multi-platform warfare.<sup>7</sup>

### **Security Landscape**

Bangladesh faces three critical security threats that inform the development of its military capabilities. These are largely centered on geographic disputes and political flashpoints with its neighbours:

- Border killings of Bangladeshi citizens by India and the claims of illegal migration to Bihar and Assam, India is imposing disenfranchising citizenship laws against its own Muslim population.
- Rohingya and border disputes with Myanmar. Frequent air and maritime space violations by Myanmar as well as ethnic cleansing of Rohingya forcing migration to Bangladesh.
- Climate change will force displacement and migration which will likely spark further conflict in the region.

Bangladesh's most immediate threat comes from its least stable neighbour, Myanmar. The nation has pursued Islamophobic rhetoric and genocide of the Rohingya people, which Myanmar paints as invaders from Bangladesh rather than indigenous to Rakhine State.<sup>8</sup> There remains a persistent risk of conflict with Myanmar due to border disputes, with the 2008 maritime standoff and resulting 2012 Hamburg-based Law of the Sea Tribunal (ITLOS) defining the maritime

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<sup>3</sup> Werleman, C.J. (2021). Rising Violence Against Muslims in India Under Modi and BJP Rule. *Resurgence of Anti Islam in the World*.

<sup>4</sup> www.aljazeera.com. (2020). *Bangladeshis in India fear deportation, spike in border smuggling*. [online].

<sup>5</sup> Bin Mushtaq, S. (2018). *Bangladesh's Ambitious Military Modernization Drive*. [online] thediplomat.com.

<sup>6</sup> Balaram, R.A. (2012). Case Study: The Myanmar and Bangladesh Maritime Boundary Dispute in the Bay of Bengal and Its Implications for South China Sea Claims. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31(3), pp.85–104.

<sup>7</sup> Bin Mushtaq, S. (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Albert, E. and Maizland, L. (2020). *What Forces Are Fuelling Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis?* [online] Council on Foreign Relations.

boundary in Bangladesh's favour.<sup>9</sup> Despite this legal victory, maritime disputes remain a threat. Currently Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, is overstretched and facing insurgency from over 250 militant groups.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Myanmar represents a long-term threat which Bangladesh must seek to deter.

In 2017, tensions with Myanmar threatened to escalate as a Tatmadaw offensive in Rakhine state was accompanied by repeated violations of Bangladesh's borders and airspace, as well as an influx of more than 300,000 Rohingya refugees.<sup>11</sup> The rising tension mobilised concern in Dhaka and the Bangladesh armed forces began to consider 'Unwarranted Consequences'.<sup>12</sup> Bangladesh was not prepared for an escalation of the conflict or the contemplation of war with Myanmar, who's military was placed 31<sup>st</sup> in global power rankings compared to Bangladesh's 57<sup>th</sup>. Myanmar has consistently held a larger material capability with more aircraft, tanks, and artillery as well as around 400,000 active personnel compared to Bangladesh's 165,000.<sup>13</sup> Although the tension de-escalated as Bangladesh focused on the resulting humanitarian crisis, 2017 served as a warning for Bangladesh which was in the process of revisiting its Forces Goal 2030 plans for military modernisation.<sup>14</sup>

The risk of future conflict has been ramped up recently by the growing strength and presence of the Arakan Army across bordering Rakhine and Chin state in Myanmar. An escalation of violence between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw is likely with potentially grave consequences for Bangladesh. The border areas between Myanmar and Bangladesh are porous and in the event of a renewed Tatmadaw offensive Arakan Army and other insurgent groups may cross the border increasing the chance of violence within Bangladesh which Dhaka would have to respond to.

### **Military Hardware**

Bangladesh relies on foreign powers to produce and sustain its military hardware. China has been the largest source of military hardware for Bangladesh over the past decade. \$2.59 billion was reportedly spent by Bangladesh on acquiring Chinese military equipment. Yet, there are significant doubts over the quality of this military equipment. Further, China also supplies Myanmar with arms and has supported the development of the Tatmadaw which has outgrown the capabilities of Bangladesh.

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<sup>9</sup> Ahamed, A., Chowdhury, M.A. and Rahman, S. (2020). Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Relations: A Study of Some Geopolitical and Economic Issues. *European Scientific Journal ESJ*, 16(22).

<sup>10</sup> Heiduk, F. (2021). *Civil War in Myanmar*. [online] Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP).

<sup>11</sup> Ahamed, A., Chowdhury, M.A. and Rahman, S. (2020). Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Relations: A Study of Some Geopolitical and Economic Issues. *European Scientific Journal ESJ*, 16(22).

<sup>12</sup> DW (2017). *Tensions heat up between Bangladesh, Myanmar over Rohingya* | DW | 16.09.2017. [online] DW.COM.

<sup>13</sup> www.globalfirepower.com. (2022). *Comparison of Bangladesh and Myanmar Military Strengths (2022)*. [online].

<sup>14</sup> Bin Mushtaq, S. (2018). *Bangladesh's Ambitious Military Modernization Drive*. [online] thediplomat.com.

India also provides much of Bangladesh's military equipment, yet 50% of India's arms exports go to Myanmar.<sup>15</sup> In order to compete with Myanmar, Bangladesh must improve on its available military hardware. Its central partners of China and India have tight relationships with Myanmar and as such Bangladesh is gazing further afield. Russia has become a key partner and Bangladesh's primary partner source of aircraft with a focus on combat aircraft such as the Mig-29 and SU-30. While light aircraft such as the K8W have been bought from China.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has strained relations despite Bangladeshi neutrality and the following sanctions have an impact on Bangladesh's procurement of military hardware. Russia and Belarus facilitate spare parts and repair for the Mig-29's that constitute the base of the Bangladesh Air Force (BAF). Bangladesh had been sending Mig-29s for Mid-Life upgrade in Belarus, however since the Russian invasion of Ukraine it is unclear what has happened to these aircraft.<sup>16</sup> With Russia and Belarus increasingly isolated internationally, it may be time to move away from the reliance on Russia for aircraft. Bangladesh has long been looking to diversify where it buys its aircraft from, with a budget set to buy 16 multirole combat aircraft from the west.<sup>17</sup>

Bangladesh and the UK are looking to collaborate further on Naval hardware with the building of three ships at Ferguson Marine in Scotland mooted.<sup>18</sup> Further patrol vessels for the coastguard will be built through a technology transfer agreement with Turkey. Bangladesh is diversifying its procurement of military hardware, balancing its relationships with an increasing number of international partners. With Turkey, Russia, and Western nations such as the UK, U.S and France growing in importance Bangladesh is attempting to move away from its sole reliance on regional powers who have a large stake in potential rivals. Long-term there should be a move towards diversifying international partners alongside building indigenous R&D and draw on local materials to build a sustainable and independent capability.

## **Deterrence**

To protect sovereignty there is a need to develop Bangladesh's deterrence capability alongside the procurement of better military hardware. Bangladesh needs a military that can enforce its sovereignty particularly as border disputes, maritime infractions, and regional political shifts may grow in the coming years. Alongside the objectives of forces goal 2030 there is a need for a strong border guard to deter incursions and build mechanisms for de-escalation of border incidents.

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<sup>15</sup> Bikhchandani, R. (2022). *India 3rd largest military spender, 50% defence exports go to Myanmar, shows data from SIPRI*. [online] ThePrint.

<sup>16</sup> Shahi, A. (2021). *Bangladesh Air Force MiG-29 upgrade program*. [online] The Bangladesh Defence Analyst.

<sup>17</sup> Lake, J. (2022). *Bangladesh Sizes Up Typhoons for Fighter Requirement*. [online] Aviation International News.

<sup>18</sup> Allison, G. (2022). *Scottish ferry yard bidding for Bangladesh warship work*. [online] Available at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/scottish-ferry-yard-bidding-for-bangladesh-warship-work/> [Accessed 7 May 2022].

Building the capabilities of the Air force with forward air bases in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar as well as maritime air force capabilities and a more modern fleet of aircraft would provide a significant and needed deterrent. The success of Forces goal 2030 rests on more than the material capabilities of the forces and there is a need to improve interoperability between the three forces and emphasise the role of adaption in military doctrine. The Airforce, Navy and Army have conducted very few joint training operations across the last 10 years. Such exercises must become a regular occurrence to improve the coherence of the military capabilities of Bangladesh. Further, regular wargaming of various possible conflicts would allow Bangladesh to develop its doctrine and ability to flexibly respond to threats.

Apart from Myanmar its immediate regional neighbours are richer and military superior nations that also hold nuclear power, Bangladesh sits within the Nuclear strike zones of China, India, and Pakistan. This is a concern as we have seen Russia use its nuclear threat as a shield under which it has pursued conventional war in Ukraine. It is key that Bangladesh focuses on flexibility and adaptation within its military doctrine to take advantage of asymmetric opportunities in potential conflict. Bangladesh has options to pursue a more defensive structure for its armed forces with broader capabilities that would deter regional aggression.

Lessons have been learned from recent conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine that point to the incorporation of drones and integrated intelligence gathering as critical to success. As well as the use of manoeuvre defence and agency and initiative amongst NCO and junior leadership. Further, we have seen militaries such as Russia fail to perform despite large investment and modernisation. It is key that Bangladesh does not rest on its laurels when acquiring better military hardware and developing its forces doctrine. The integration, training and continued horizon scanning for future threats alongside a commitment to constant review of the armed forces is key. These steps must convince neighbours that the cost of engaging with a modernised and tactically capable Bangladesh would be too great.

### **Alignment and security partnerships**

Dhaka is likely to continue to navigate its balance between a variety of powers and bi-lateral relationships. However, the building of further bi-lateral ties will impact its regional security posture. It has recently engaged in widening talks with the U.S over defence cooperation. The two nations are negotiating the agreement of a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), allowing comprehensive intelligence sharing between the two nations.<sup>19</sup> The U.S wants Bangladesh to sign a further defence commitment the Acquisition Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) which would facilitate the U.S. DoD to provide logistic support, supplies, and services to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is hesitant to agree to these proposed bi-lateral agreements. U.S sanctions on its Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) for extrajudicial killings and human

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<sup>19</sup> Rahman, A. (2022). *Bangladesh, US approve draft pact on defence cooperation*. [online] ThePrint.

rights violations is a key stumbling block. Foreign Secretary Momen claims that accountability is in place and that the sanctions are curbing the nation's most effective force's ability to combat terrorism.<sup>20</sup> This move towards the U.S would be a significant step both in terms of Forces Goal 2030 and engaging more overtly with the U.S led Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Japan has offered to export military hardware to Bangladesh as a partner of the U.S aligned IPS.<sup>21</sup> Embracing these steps to enhance its capability would represent a shift in the regional posture of Bangladesh towards closer ties to India and the US rather than Russia and China.

Bangladesh is unlikely to overtly position itself in this way as it seeks to strike pragmatic relationships with its competing neighbours. However, building more bi-lateral agreements and regional security partnerships would improve its position in the region if taken with careful consideration for the consequences.

Bangladesh is in a vulnerable position wedged between great powers and with an unstable neighbour. The development of its deterrence capability is beset by poor security sector governance, a reliance on regional powers with competing interests, and a lack of clarity in the direction of Forces Goal 2030. Bangladesh has the potential to address its security concerns through the development of deterrence capability, yet it will have to take significant steps to achieve its aims by 2030. Bangladesh will continue to navigate the complex situation diversifying its security partnerships, yet its geo-political position and current capabilities face an uphill climb amid the shaking of global norms.

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<sup>20</sup> Dhaka tribune (2022). *Momen: Delhi's support sought after US sanctions on RAB*. [online].

<sup>21</sup> Alam, I. (2022). *Japan seeks to export military hardware to Bangladesh*. [online] The Bangladesh Defence Analyst.

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