

Redefining Security: Why Bangladesh Needs a National Non-Traditional Security Strategy

Saraf Wasima¹

Introduction

Security cannot be defined in the twenty-first century only by military or territorial defence. Bangladesh, a nation with high population density, climatic sensitivity, and critical geographic location, faces most urgent dangers from increasingly non-traditional sources. Now seriously jeopardising national stability are rising sea levels, cyclones, cyberattacks, pandemics, forced migration, and misinformation.

These non-traditional security (NTS) threats are complex and interconnected. Climate change causes displacement and economic loss; cyber events compromise financial and political institutions; false information erodes public confidence and democratic resilience. Unlike traditional dangers, these ones are sometimes internal, cross-sectoral, and not solvable with military means.

Although Bangladesh has improved in digital governance and catastrophe response, current security policies still mostly concentrate on conventional hazards. Turning towards a proactive, coordinated strategy to national security is desperately needed.

This Commentary advocates the immediate construction of a National Non-Traditional Security Strategy (NNTSS) a framework redefining security to encompass environmental, digital, health, and human components to preserve Bangladesh's future.

¹ Saraf Wasima is a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS & MSS in International Relations from the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

The Limits of Traditional Security Frameworks in Bangladesh

Overemphasis on Military Preparedness in an Era of Ecological and Digital Threats

Territorial integrity, counter-insurgency, and border security have always dominated Bangladesh's national security apparatus. These are still crucial, but they no longer fully represent the range of dangers the country faces. The nation's sensitivity to pandemics, cyberattacks, and rising sea levels exposes the mismatch between conventional defense-oriented approaches and new threats. For example, the nation was unprepared for the COVID-19 epidemic and continues to be vulnerable to recurrent climate-induced calamities including storms and riverbank erosion threats that cannot be offset with traditional military instruments notwithstanding large defence budgets.²

Institutional Gaps in Responding to NTS Issues Such as Pandemics and Data Breaches

The COVID-19 epidemic exposed the lack of systems for interagency collaboration among intelligence services, emergency management organisations, and the health sector. Comparably, cyber incidents involving government databases and financial organisations expose the absence of a consistent cyber defence system. Although military institutions may help during natural catastrophes, Bangladesh lacks a formal structure for multi sectoral threat analysis, strategic foresight, and early warning systems linked to non-traditional hazards.³

Reactive Rather Than Preventive Approaches in Disaster and Conflict Management

With little investment in anticipatory governance and resilience building, most of Bangladesh's disaster response stays reactive. Though institutional readiness and public awareness lag behind, early warning systems for climate disasters are getting better. Bangladesh also lacks proactive policies meant to lessen the effects of urban displacement, antibiotic resistance, or disinformation. Without a preventive strategy, the nation stays caught in a cycle of crisis response instead of crisis avoidance.

² Caballero-Anthony, Mely, and Alistair DB Cook, eds. *Non-traditional security in Asia: Issues, challenges and framework for action*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013.

³ Saber, Brigadier General Mohammad. "National Security of Bangladesh: challenges and options." *NDC E-JOURNAL* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1-26.



Source: LinkedIn

The Spectrum of Non-Traditional Security Threats Facing Bangladesh

a. Climate and Environmental Security

Among nations most vulnerable to climate change is Bangladesh. While saline intrusion reduces agricultural output in the southern coastal belt, sea level rise threatens to relocate over 20 million people by 2050.⁴ Apart from causing human and financial losses, recurrent floods, droughts, and cyclones strain infrastructure, livelihoods, and internal migration patterns, therefore endangering national stability. Further aggravating ecological fragilities are environmental deterioration, deforestation, and uncontrolled urbanization.

⁴ Ahmed, Sheikh Masud. "Non-Traditional Security Threats of Bangladesh: Challenges and Policy Options." *Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies* (2018): 1-21.

b. Cybersecurity and Digital Threats

Bangladesh is confronting growing cyber threats as it quickens its digital transformation under programs like "Digital Bangladesh." Cybercriminals and maybe hostile foreign actors increasingly target critical infrastructure like financial systems, government websites, power grids. The digital ecosystem is vulnerable without robust data protection rules, a national CERT (Computer Emergency Response Team), with teeth, and a trained cybersecurity workforce. Growing problems are cyber extortion, identity theft, false information, and digital spying.

c. Public Health Crises

Bangladesh handled the first COVID-19 reaction with relative resiliency, but the crisis revealed long-standing flaws in the healthcare system including underfunding, inadequate trained staff, and logistical constraints. Serious dangers are future pandemics, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and vaccine nationalism.⁵ For example, AMR has the ability to subvert contemporary medicine and, if neglected, might result in an estimated 5 million deaths worldwide by 2025. Particularly vulnerable to disease outbreaks are Bangladesh's highly populated urban areas.

d. Human Security and Displacement

The Rohingya issue has tested Bangladesh's diplomatic, humanitarian, and internal security strength. Still in camps in Cox's Bazar, over a million migrants from Myanmar strain resources and generate questions about community conflict, trafficking, and extremism. Beyond this, Bangladesh deals with major urban-rural migration, young unemployment, and socioeconomic unrest all of which can be destabilising elements. Preventing economic marginalisation from turning into political disturbance depends on a thorough human security perspective.

e. Disinformation and Information Warfare

Bangladesh's digital information environment is quite open for manipulation. Online radicalisation and false information have found home on social media sites. Deepfakes, false news, and foreign information operations harm societal cohesiveness and election integrity. As demonstrated by

⁵ Ewing, J. Jackson. "Traditional and non-traditional security: Exploring practical and conceptual challenges." In *Non-traditional security challenges in Asia*, pp. 29-45. Routledge, 2017.

community conflicts generated by false Facebook posts, disinformation campaigns may be weaponized by both domestic and international players to erode public confidence, polarise communities, and inspire violence.

Case Studies of NTS Impacts in Bangladesh



Source: Refugees International (Cyclone Amphan)

▪ 2020 Cyclone Amphan: Resilience and Coordination Gap

One of the fiercest storms in decades, Cyclone Amphan wreaked great damage on coastal areas of Bangladesh. Early warnings notwithstanding, COVID-19 limits and packed shelters impeded efforts for escape.⁶ The catastrophe revealed structural flaws including inadequate infrastructure, inadequate adapted housing, and disjointed cooperation among local authorities, disaster management organisations, and the medical field. Bangladesh has improved cyclone prediction,

⁶ Caballero-Anthony, Mely, and Ralf Emmers. "Understanding the dynamics of securitizing non-traditional security." In *Non-Traditional Security in Asia*, pp. 13-24. Routledge, 2017.

but Amphan showed the limits of present resilience measures in response to compound hazards—climate disaster during a pandemic. This emphasises the importance of anticipatory government, localised climate adaption plans, and coordinated emergency reactions.

- Pandemic COVID-19 Revealed Weak Healthcare Governance

The epidemic brought the public health system vulnerability of Bangladesh under clear attention. Medical supplies were limited, hospitals were overrun, and rural health facilities almost nonexistent. Deep governance gaps were exposed by important concerns including data transparency, inter-ministerial communication, and policy execution. While NGOs and community networks intervened, the state's incapacity to control the public health as well as socioeconomic elements of the crisis concurrently emphasises the lack of a consistent NTS reaction mechanism. This instance shows how a health crisis may turn into a whole national security crisis.⁷

- The Rohingya crisis: security-externality spillover in Cox's Bazar

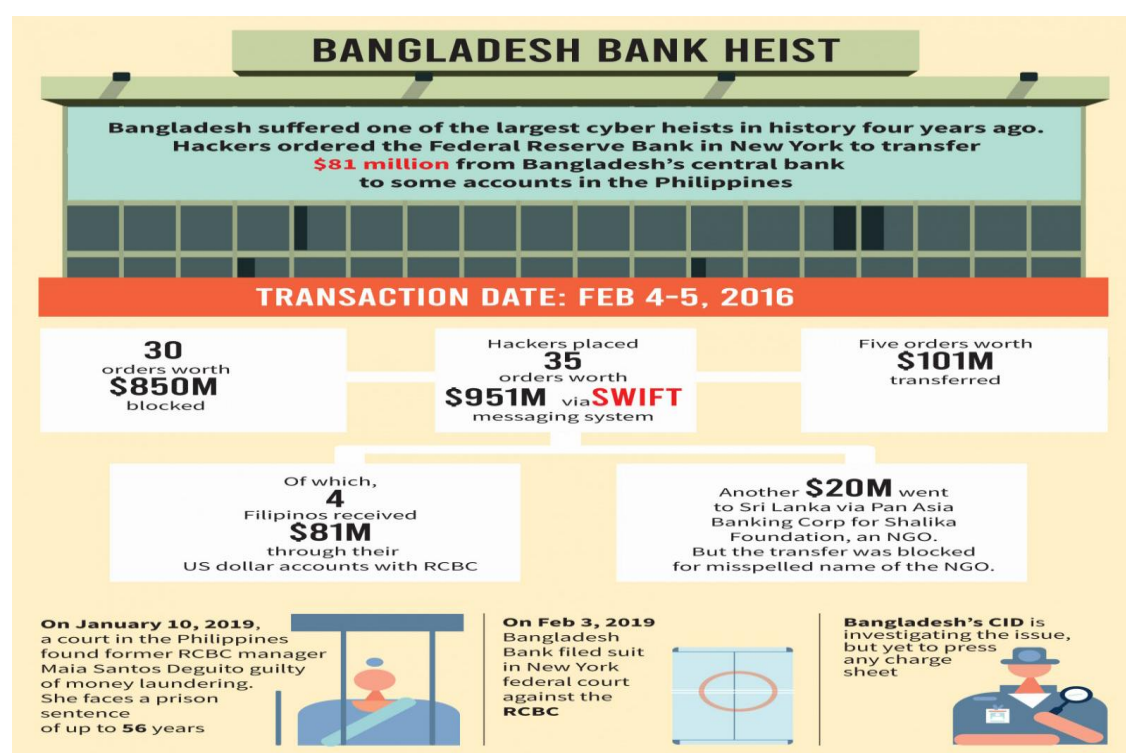
Bangladesh has welcomed nearly a million Rohingya refugees since 2017, most of them into the crowded camps of Cox's Bazar. Although the nation showed great humanitarian leadership, long-term existence of stateless people has resulted in unexpected security issues. These comprise environmental damage, human trafficking, and growing hostilities against the host population. Reports of militant recruitment attempts, transnational crime networks, and drug smuggling—e.g., yaba trade—in and near the camps indicate how a humanitarian catastrophe may bleed into issues of local and regional security. This situation emphasises the importance of a human security approach included into a larger NTS strategy.

- Recent cyberattacks on financial institutions: challenges to economic sovereignty

With the 2016 Bangladesh Bank heist where hackers pilfer \$81 million over the SWIFT payment system Bangladesh's cyber vulnerability became rather clear. Since then, government databases

⁷ Islam, Md Shariful. "Mapping security for Bangladesh: An emancipatory approach." *Journal of South Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2015): 243-260

and financial institutions have been routinely singled out. These events compromise public confidence in digital services, economic sovereignty, and international reputation. The nation's meagre cyber laws and institutional response capacity make it challenging to identify, discourage, and handle advanced threats. This shows how digital insecurity could compromise fundamental economic stability, thereby supporting the need of include cybersecurity as pillar of national security.



Source: The Business Standard

Why a National NTS Strategy Is Urgently Needed

Division of Current Response Mechanisms

Different agencies often working in silos manage responses to NTS warnings in Bangladesh. Under different ministries with little coordination are disaster management, public health, cyber defence, and migration concerns. Delays, double-edged attempts, and inefficiency follow from

this. A cohesive national strategy would simplify resource allocation, provide agreed standards, and encourage agency synergy.

Lack of a Unified National Security Strategy

Bangladesh does not have a formalised national security strategy reflecting contemporary challenges. Currently in use systems are mostly military or border-centric. By contrast, nations like Singapore and the United Kingdom have embraced comprehensive theories including public health, cyber, and environmental concerns.⁸ Bangladesh stays structurally inadequate to handle the interconnection of 21st-century hazards without a revised security philosophy.⁹

Insufficient foresight and risk-mapping systems

Bangladesh lacks a specific agency charged with strategic foresight or horizon scanning. For weather-related calamities, early warning systems exist; for long-term hazards include urban migration, water shortage, or digital warfare, there is no institutional framework. Countries like Finland and South Korea have created national risk boards and future planning commissions—models Bangladesh may learn from to avoid policy planning's blind spots.

Global Superior Practices Demand Strategic Compliance

Integrated security approaches are gradually taking the stage in global governance. NTS priorities are highlighted in the Sendai Framework, Human Development Reports published by UNDP, and NATO's emphasis on "resilience." Bangladesh, an active UN member and regional actor in BIMSTEC and SAARC, has to match its security architecture with these global principles if it is to be a credible, forward-looking participant.

⁸ Caballero-Anthony, Mely. *Negotiating governance on non-traditional security in Southeast Asia and beyond*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

⁹ Parker, Rita. "TRANSNATIONAL SECURITY THREATS AND NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES." *The Journal of Defence and Security* 3, no. 2 (2013): 130.



Source: Hanoi School of Business & Management

Key Pillars of a Bangladesh NTS Strategy

Global Partnerships: Work on regional NATTs (such as BIMSTEC, SAARC, UN)

1. Reform of Institutions Create a National Security Council including a Non-Traditional Security Wing.¹⁰

Empowerment of a revamped National Security Council (NSC) should enable control of both conventional and non-traditional threats. Representation from ministries of defence, health, environment, ICT, disaster management, and foreign affairs has to be part of this body. Policy responses, risk audits, and tracking cross-sectoral hazards would all be coordinated by a committed NTS Wing housed inside the NSC.

2. Strategic Risk Analysis National Centre for Foresight and Risk Intelligence

This suggested centre will be Bangladesh's first institutional risk foresight and scenario planning hub. It would examine new hazards, offer legislators strategic advice, and work with academic institutions, think tanks, and foreign partners. Early warning dashboards, simulations, and a yearly National Risk Report might all be outputs.

3. Inter-agency coordination via an integrated security protocol aligns ministries

¹⁰ Ferguson, R. James. "Non-Traditional Security Dilemmas on the Belt and Road." In *ISA Asia-Pacific Conference 2019: Asia-Pacific and World Order: Security, Economics, Identity and Beyond*. 2019.

Development of a formalised inter-ministerial protocol will help to guarantee timely communication, data exchange, and cooperative response planning. National crises—such as a zoonotic pandemic or cyber blackout—need coordinated command structures rather than separate responses. Real-time data from many ministries might be combined on a centralised crisis management system.

Civic Literacy on Climate, Cyber, and Health Security: Public Awareness and Education

Building resilience requires public involvement. Climate adaptation, misinformation literacy, and digital hygiene should be the main priorities of civic education initiatives included into national curriculum and public service broadcasting. Simulations and community-led awareness campaigns help to increase readiness and lessen panic during crises.

Strengthen Digital Governance and Data Protection Laws by Technology and Data Infrastructure
Bangladesh has to make investments in strong cybersecurity infrastructure, cloud security, AI ethics rules, and thorough data privacy regulations if it is to protect its digital front line. Embedded within secure-by-design ideas, digital transformation should guarantee transparent and robust platforms utilised for public services.

Bangladesh has to lead in forming a regional agenda on NATS by means of global partnerships (e.g., Bimstec, SAARC, UN). This covers helping with joint climate adaption projects, sharing best practices in pandemic readiness, and improving cyber diplomacy. Cross-border issues such as disinformation campaigns or transboundary water security call for global cooperation and confidence-building.

Monitoring developing trends in non-traditional security (NTS) depends much on civil society organisations (CSOs), think tanks, and academic institutions in Bangladesh. Tracking indices of climate vulnerability, mapping false information patterns, or researching patterns of internal displacement—these actors provide insightful analysis often ahead of official reactions. For instance, companies like CPD and BIPSS have issued early warnings on environmental hazards and cybersecurity. Funding and government data access for these organisations will help to create dispersed but very sensitive early warning systems.¹¹

Invite local resilience building from youth and grassroots networks.

¹¹ Arase, David. "Non-traditional security in China-ASEAN cooperation: The institutionalization of regional security cooperation and the evolution of East Asian regionalism." *Asian Survey* 50, no. 4 (2010): 808-833.

Particularly in rural and coastal Bangladesh, young people, local NGOs, and community-based organisations generally first respond to emergencies.¹² Youth-led projects in disaster readiness, climate education, cyber hygiene, and health awareness can help to create more locally grounded and inclusive national resilience efforts. Between national policy and local action, programs teaching university students or young groups in neighbourhood risk mapping, emergency simulations, and social media monitoring help to close the gap. Civil society serves not only in a reactive but also transforming capacity, empowering underprivileged voices to reshape the security conversation from the bottom up.

Support multidisciplinary education and policy innovation on NTS issues.

Bangladeshi conventional educational systems may view security as a discipline limited to defence studies or international relations. Integration of multidisciplinary courses covering cybersecurity, public health policy, environmental governance, and digital rights is much needed. Academic institutions should also foster students and researchers to provide proactive, data-driven solutions by incubating innovation laboratories and policy fellowships targeted on NTS concerns. Universities can work with government agencies to create training courses on new NTS hazards and mitigating techniques for local officials, media, and bureaucrats.

¹² Borchers, Henning. "ASEAN's environmental challenges and non-traditional security cooperation: towards a regional peacekeeping force?." *ASEAS-Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2014): 5-20.

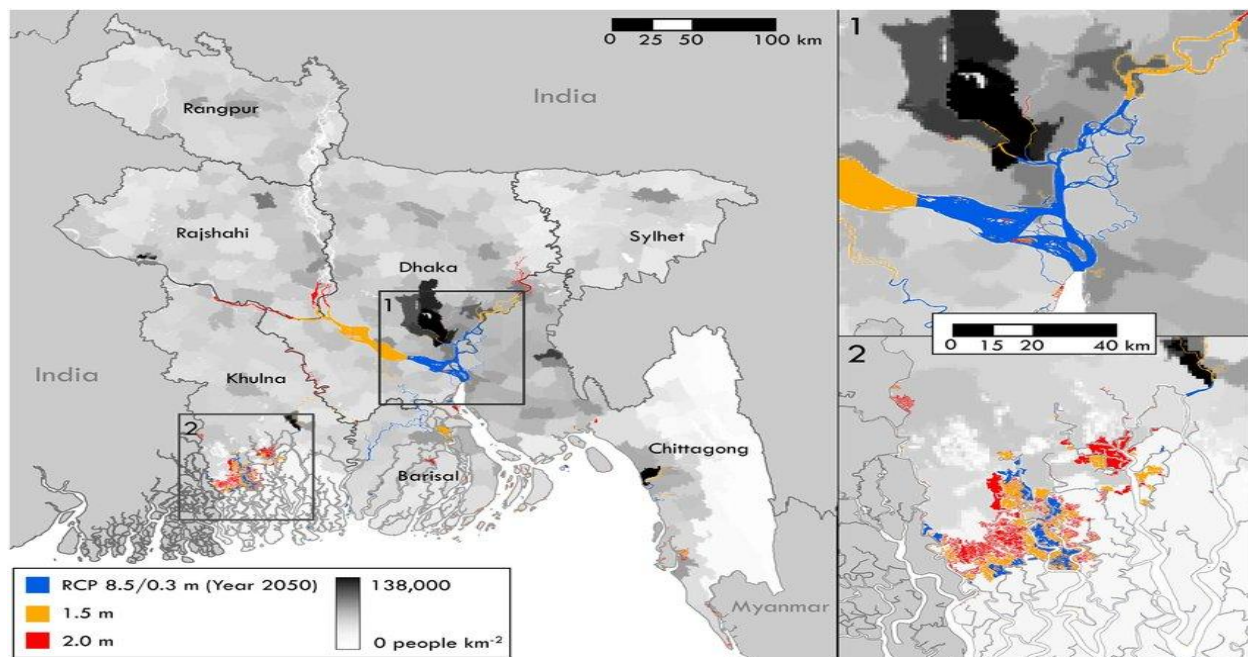


Fig: Inundation of the mean sea level rise scenarios. (van Gogh, 1889)

Challenges to Implementation and Political Will

1.The inactivity in Bureaucracies and Separated Organizations

Administrative machinery in Bangladesh sometimes lags in response to cross-cutting concerns. Ministries run inside vertical silos with little horizontal cooperation. This institutional rigidity prevents coordinated responses to complicated situations like pandemics or cyberattacks and slows information flow. Long-term planning is challenging and crisis management ineffective without shared responsibility and interministerial task teams.¹³

2.Conventional Security Agenda Political Priority

¹³ Siddiqua, R. U. K. H. S. A. N. A. "The situation of national security of Bangladesh: Explanation in aspect of Global and Regional context of Bangladesh Terrorism." *International journal of humanities and Arts* 3, no. 12 (2015): 213-226.

While NTS risks get little emphasis in national security debates, political leadership in Bangladesh still gives conventional threats—border conflicts, military modernisation, and counterterrorism first priority. This disparity reflects both political calculations and a residual Cold War-era perspective that defines country strength as military capability. Strategic foresight will be peripheral to national policy without strong political commitment to NTS reform.

3.Funding Restraints and Capacity Shortfalls

Whether it's public health labs, cyber defence systems, or climate-resilient homes, investing in preventative infrastructure calls for long-term financing and technical know-ahead. Still, compared to defence expenditure, budget allotments in these sectors remain meagre. Policies on paper notwithstanding, the lack of qualified specialists in strategic risk analysis, cyber forensics, or environmental data modelling inhibits the state's capacity to respond effectively.

4.Managing Global Press and Sovereignty Issues

Concerns about sovereignty and national image can impede Bangladesh's involvement with international institutions on matters such data governance, refugee rights, and climate mitigating action. Geopolitical rivalries, pressure from surrounding nations, and international donor conditions might make it politically sensitive to match home reforms with global best practices. Juggling home sovereignty with global cooperation is still a difficult chore needing diplomatic grace and institutional clarity.¹⁴

Conclusion: Securing the Future Through Strategic Foresight

Bangladesh is at a turning point. Ignorance of non-traditional security issues—climate crises, digital disruption, global pandemics, and societal fragmentation—is costing the globe exponentially more as they collide. One cannot consider security as a fixed, limited idea limited to boundaries and battalions anymore. It has to cover systematic resilience, socioeconomic stability, and more general defence of human dignity.

¹⁴ Chattopadhyay, Pratip. "Human Security as National Security: Understanding Pakistan in the Twenty-First Century." In *Human Security in Asia: Interrogating State, Society, and Policy*, pp. 215-228. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2024.

Bangladesh may reorient its national security paradigm towards long-term preparedness and inclusive governance by institutionalising a National Non-Traditional Security Strategy. This change calls for both institutional transformation and civic involvement as well as political will. The benefits are significant, though: A Bangladesh prepared to flourish rather than merely survive in the twenty-first century, not just safe but secure in the truest sense.