The Nexus Between Political Stability and Foreign Policy Effectiveness in Bangladesh

Shamshil Arefin[1]

Introduction

In the simplest of terms Foreign Policy according to academics is the way and manners through which one state interacts with another. The international system is made of actors who interact and engage with one another on issues that affect them in order to reach mutual consensus, understand each other or find a solution that is acceptable to all. Foreign Policy can be understood as an extension of national policy as the government tries to address the foreign aspects of their national policies that are affecting them domestically. The world is moving towards a multipolar and multilateral world, that is, a state must not only engage with multiple powerful states who influence international politics but also other non-state actors who hold significant sway on how global agendas are shaped[2].

Foreign Policy Effectiveness

Foreign Policy Effectiveness can be understood as the ability of a state to achieve its foreign policy objectives through strategic actions and diplomatic engagements. For any state its effectiveness can be measured by its success in securing economic development, enhancing security, and fostering regional cooperation. The government aims to position their state as a pivotal player in their region while navigating complex relationships with neighboring countries which may be both

---

[1] Shamshil Arefin is currently a Research Intern at Bangladesh Institute for Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). He has completed his BSS in International Relations from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

[2] Sajid Karim and Mohammad Jasim Uddin, "Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: Emerging Challenges," BIISS 37, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 339–62, https://doi.org/10.56888/BIISSj2016v37n4a3.

friendly and hostile. Effective foreign policy is crucial for achieving a developing state's long-term goal for transforming itself into a developed economy[3]. Such objectives underscore the importance of leveraging international partnerships for sustainable development and addressing challenges such as regional conflicts, resource sharing, climate change and regional instability.

Key Components of Effective Foreign Policy

Diplomatic Engagement

Diplomacy is the primary tool for conducting foreign relations. It involves negotiations, dialogue, and communication between states to resolve conflicts, establish agreements, and promote mutual understanding. Diplomats represent their countries in international forums and engage in bilateral or multilateral discussions to advance national interests. Active diplomacy is essential for building and maintaining relationships with other nations. A state's commitment to founding principles or its historical development can guide its diplomatic efforts since its founding.

Economic Diplomacy

Economic instruments such as trade agreements, economic sanctions, and foreign aid are critical for achieving foreign policy objectives. Economic sanctions can pressure other nations to change their behavior by restricting trade or financial transactions. Conversely, foreign aid can be used to foster goodwill and strengthen alliances. Economic cooperation is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's foreign policy. The country seeks to attract foreign investment and enhance trade relations to support its economic development goals. For instance, initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework aim to strengthen economic ties with major economies while promoting regional integration[4].

Security Cooperation

The use of the security sector is a significant component of foreign policy, particularly in matters of national security. This includes military interventions, defense alliances (such as NATO), and

---

[3] James Rosenau, The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy, New York: The Free Press, 1971, p. 67.
[4] Jin Mun Jeong, "Economic Sanctions and Income Inequality: Impacts of Trade Restrictions and Foreign Aid Suspension on Target Countries:," <i>Conflict Management and Peace Science</i> 37, no.6 (February 10, 2020): 674–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894219900759.

deterrence strategies aimed at preventing aggression from other states. The ability to project military power can influence negotiations and deter potential threats. Security concerns significantly influence Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions. The country has prioritized collaborations on counterterrorism, disaster management, and maritime security with neighbors and international partners. This focus on security is vital for maintaining internal stability and safeguarding national interests[5].

Multilateralism

Multilateralism refers to the process by which multiple countries engage in coordinated diplomatic interactions to address shared concerns or pursue common objectives. It typically involves three or more states working together, contrasting with bilateral (two states) or unilateral (one state) approaches. Bangladesh actively participates in regional and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Multilateral engagement allows Bangladesh to advocate for its interests on global platforms while fostering cooperation on shared challenges like climate change and humanitarian crises[6].

Internal Political Stability

Internal political stability is defined as the ability of a government to maintain order, manage conflicts, and ensure the effective functioning of institutions without resorting to violence or significant unrest. It is essential for a nation's governance and policymaking as it creates an environment conducive to economic growth, social cohesion, and effective governance[7]. A stable political environment fosters predictability in policy implementation, which is crucial for attracting foreign investment and enhancing a country's international standing. According to Mushtaq Khan in his analysis of political settlements, the sustainability of political institutions is closely linked

---

[5] National Defence College, "Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: Roadmap for Realisation of Vision 2041," in NDC Journal (Proceedings Seminar on Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: Roadmap for Realisation of Vision 2041, National Defence College, 2016).

[6] Sharin Shajahan Naomi, "Bangladesh Foreign Policy Approach Should Shift to Multi-Alignment," Institute for Security & Development Policy (blog), 2023, https://www.isdp.eu/bangladesh-foreign-policy-approach-should-shift-to-multi-alignment/.

[7] Christopher Hill, The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 1.

to their compatibility with the distribution of power within society; when powerful groups perceive their interests are being met, stability is more likely to be maintained1.

Several factors contribute to internal political stability:

Economic Conditions

Economic performance plays a vital role in influencing political stability. A robust economy can enhance government legitimacy and public support, while economic downturns often lead to dissatisfaction and unrest. For instance, the World Bank highlights that economic stability and growth can improve social trust in government institutions, which in turn reinforces political stability[8].

Social Cohesion

Social factors, including ethnic and religious diversity, significantly impact stability. Societies that embrace inclusivity and equitable representation tend to experience greater social cohesion. Conversely, ethnic tensions or discrimination can lead to instability. Research indicates that countries with high levels of social trust among diverse groups are better equipped to manage conflicts and maintain political stability[9].

Public Trust in Government

The trust of citizens place in their government is a critical determinant of political stability. High levels of public trust facilitate compliance with laws and policies, while low trust can lead to disengagement from civic duties and increased opposition to government actions. The OECD emphasizes that trust in government is foundational for effective governance; without it, governments struggle to implement policies effectively and respond to societal needs[10].

---

[8] Saki Kumagai and Federica Iorio, "Building Trust in Government through Citizen Engagement" (World Bank Group, 2018), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/ar/440761581607070452/pdf/Building-Trust-in-Government-through-Citizen-Engagement.pdf.

[9] ibid

[10] OECD, "OECD Trust Survey," 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/trust-in-government.html.

Foreign Policy in Bangladesh's Context

For Bangladesh, the foundational principles of its foreign policy are articulated in its Constitution, particularly in Article 25, which emphasizes respect for national sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Bangladesh's commitment to "friendship with all and malice towards none" has guided its diplomatic efforts since independence. The primary goals of Bangladesh's foreign policy include ensuring economic advancement through trade and investment, maintaining regional stability, and upholding its cultural identity while promoting international peace[11].

The Nexus Between Political Stability and Foreign Policy

Political stability serves as a cornerstone for foreign policy effectiveness by ensuring a government has the legitimacy, continuity, and capacity to engage confidently with international partners. A stable political environment fosters trust among foreign nations, as consistent leadership reduces the risk of sudden policy reversals, allowing allies and trading partners to rely on a nation's commitments[12]. Moreover, political stability allows a country to allocate resources effectively toward international priorities rather than expanding them on managing internal unrest or political rivalries. For instance, stable governments are better positioned to negotiate trade agreements, manage diplomatic disputes, and participate meaningfully in multilateral organizations. Stability also enhances the credibility of a nation's foreign policy by demonstrating that it has broad domestic support, making its international stances more persuasive.

Conversely, political instability erodes foreign policy effectiveness by creating uncertainty and reducing the government's focus on international issues. Leadership changes, internal conflicts, or frequent policy shifts can weaken a country's negotiating position and diminish its influence[13]. Instability often emboldens adversaries and undermines alliances, as foreign powers may hesitate

[11] Towkir Hossain, "What Exactly Is Bangladesh's Foreign Policy?," The Business Standard, June 19, 2023, https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/what-exactly-bangladeshs-foreign-policy-652574.

[12] Simone Dietrich, Minhaj Mahmud, and Matthew S. Winters, "Foreign Aid, Foreign Policy, and Domestic Government Legitimacy: Experimental Evidence from Bangladesh," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 133–48, https://doi.org/10.1086/694235.

[13] Rumki Basu, "Public Policy in India: Transformatory Shifts or Incremental Changes?," *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 65, no. 1 (February 6, 2019): 225–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/0019556118822030.

to engage with or invest in an unpredictable nation. For example, countries experiencing political turmoil often struggle to implement or enforce international agreements, resulting in strained relations or loss of diplomatic capital.

Furthermore, stable governments can project soft power more effectively by showcasing their internal success and governance models as examples for others. They are better equipped to handle transnational challenges, such as climate change or security threats, as they can dedicate consistent attention to these issues. In sum, political stability not only reinforces a nation's capacity to formulate and implement foreign policy but also enhances its standing and reliability on the global stage, creating a virtuous cycle of influence and cooperation.

Impact of Instability: Challenges in Foreign Policy Execution

Political Turmoil and Its Consequences

Bangladesh's history of political instability has often hampered its foreign policy effectiveness. For example, during the political unrest surrounding the 2014 general elections, characterized by widespread violence and boycotts by opposition parties, the country's international image suffered. This instability led to strained relations with foreign investors and partners who were concerned about the country's governance and security environment. Such episodes highlight how internal discord can undermine diplomatic efforts and economic engagement[14].

Regime Changes and Foreign Policy Shifts

The transition from military rule to democratic governance in the early 1990s illustrates how regime changes can impact foreign policy direction. During periods of military rule, Bangladesh's foreign policy was often aligned closely with Pakistan due to shared military interests. However, as democratic governance was restored, there was a significant shift towards India and other regional players. This oscillation reflects how internal political dynamics can lead to abrupt changes in foreign policy priorities, complicating relationships with other nations[15].

---

[14] Arafatul Islam, "Why Bangladesh Needs Foreign Observers during Election," dw.com (Deutsche Welle, November 26, 2018), https://www.dw.com/en/why-bangladesh-needs-foreign-observers-during-election/a-46456151.

[15] AHSAN, ABUL. "BANGLADESH'S FOREIGN POLICY: IN SEARCH OF SECURITY AND A NEW ROLE." World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues 3, no. 1 (1999): 50–59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45064567.

Recent Political Developments

Allegations of authoritarianism under Sheikh Hasina's government have raised concerns among Western nations regarding human rights and democratic practices. This situation has led to cautious engagement from countries like the United States, which balance their strategic interests in the region against their commitment to promoting democracy. Moreover, with the sanction of the U.S. Treasury Department on several high-ranking law-enforcement officials due to reports of human rights abuses, the perceived leniency which was received by Bangladesh was reduced[16]. The ouster of Sheikh Hasina and the formation of the interim government under Dr. Mohammad Younus has seen widespread support from western countries including the US, as prominent American politicians voiced their support for the new government[17].

The Case for Bangladesh

Oscillating Foreign Policy

Bangladesh's foreign policy has exhibited significant variation across different political regimes, as successive governments, led by political parties with differing ideologies, have altered the country's perceived alliances. This has resulted in an oscillating foreign policy approach, characterized by shifts between fostering closer ties with India and cultivating relations with China. The Awami League, leveraging its historical ties established during Bangladesh's Liberation War, has prioritized strong relations with India during its time in power. Conversely, when the BNP assumed power, it emphasized strengthening ties with China and other nations, thereby reducing the closeness with India that had been cultivated under the preceding Awami League government[18].

---

[16] Prothom Alo, "Sanctions on RAB, Visa Policy Affected Relations with the US: Foreign Minister," Prothomalo (Prothom Alo English, May 13, 2024), https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/zu3h9yja0l.

[17] United News of Bangladesh, "Yunus in New York with High-Profile Meetings Lined up on UNGA Sidelines," The Daily Star, September 24, 2024, https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/yunus-new-york-high-profile-meetings-lined-unga-sidelines-3710861.

[18] ibid

Bangladesh-India Relations

Bangladesh's internal political stability has significantly influenced its foreign policy, particularly in its relations with India. The Awami League, under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has maintained a stable political environment since 2009, which has allowed for constructive engagement with India. This stability has facilitated key agreements, such as the 2015 Land Boundary Agreement, which resolved long-standing border disputes and strengthened bilateral ties. The stability enabled Bangladesh to assert its interests more effectively, leading to increased cooperation in areas like trade, security, and infrastructure development[19].

Engagement with China

Bangladesh's strategic positioning between India and China has also been shaped by its internal stability. The government has adeptly navigated relations with both powers, leveraging its geopolitical importance to attract investments from China while maintaining a balanced approach towards India. For instance, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has seen significant investment in Bangladesh's infrastructure projects, bolstered by a stable government that can ensure project continuity and security. This diplomatic balancing act underscores how internal stability can enhance a country's agency in foreign policy[20].

Southeast Asia and Multilateral Engagement

The stable political climate in Bangladesh has allowed it to engage more actively in regional organizations like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). This engagement reflects a proactive foreign policy stance that seeks to enhance regional cooperation and economic integration. A stable government is crucial for participating effectively in such multilateral frameworks, where consistent policy direction is necessary for fostering collaboration among member states[21].

---

[19] Shah Alam, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Trends and Challenges," *International Journal of Research* 7, no. 12 (June 9, 2020): 243–51, https://doi.org/10.29121/GRANTHAALAYAH.V7.I12.2019.318.

[20] Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, "Bangladesh and Emerging Donors – India and China," July 22, 2024, 179–221, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003311706-7.

[21] Mustafizur Rahman et al., "Connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia: A Bangladesh Country Study ," Asian Development Bank Institute (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute, 2014), http://www.adbi.org/workingpaper/2014/09/24/6414.connecting.south.asia.southeast.asia/.

Conclusion

The interplay between political stability and foreign policy effectiveness is evident in Bangladesh's diplomatic trajectory. The nation's oscillating foreign policy, shaped by regime changes and ideological shifts, underscores the critical role of stable governance in fostering consistent and strategic international relations. Political stability has enabled Bangladesh to strengthen bilateral ties, engage in multilateral frameworks, and leverage its geopolitical position for economic and security benefits. Conversely, periods of instability have often disrupted diplomatic efforts, weakened international partnerships, and diminished the country's global standing. Moving forward, fostering a stable political environment will be essential for Bangladesh to navigate its complex geopolitical challenges and establish itself as a reliable and proactive player on the global stage. By aligning its domestic stability with a coherent foreign policy vision, Bangladesh can achieve its broader goals of economic growth, regional cooperation, and global influence.