

BANGLADESH'S EVOLVING BALANCING STRATEGY: FROM TWO-WAY TO THREE-WAY?

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Abstract. Bangladesh has followed a balancing approach in its external relations historically. Over the last five decades, the balancing behaviour has undergone qualitative change due to Bangladesh's evolving national interest and power dynamics. Bangladesh has been striking a balance between India and China for a while now. However, the situation has changed since the announcement of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the revival of QUAD and the inking AUKUS pact. To counter the growing Chinese presence, a US stake has become visible in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, Bangladesh is now directly balancing the interests of three superpowers, India, China, and the USA. Existing literature cannot explain this new balancing scenario. This paper aims to explain Bangladesh's evolving balancing strategy. To do so, this paper will look at Bangladesh's foreign policy from a historical perspective and focus on the latest development in the Indo-Pacific region. To overcome the limits of existing literature, this paper will attempt to develop a new balancing framework, Three-Way Balancing. This paper will also focus on how Bangladesh can maintain its tradition of neutrality amid heated geopolitics between these three states. This paper will follow a qualitative approach and analyse secondary literature.

Keywords: Balancing, Bangladesh Foreign Policy, Soft-Balancing, Three-Way balancing, Indo-Pacific Strategy

Introduction

SINCE ITS INDEPENDENCE, BANGLADESH HAS BEEN FOLLOWING A balancing strategy in its foreign policy regarding regional powerhouses and great powers. The country's foreign policy has been centred on maintaining neutrality. As a result, Bangladesh follows "Friendship with All and Malice towards None"

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as the guiding principle in foreign policy. Over the decades, Bangladesh's balancing policy has evolved with national interest and power. However, Bangladesh never pursued hard balancing; instead, it relied on soft balancing owing to its small power status. In the last decade, many scholars also tried to understand the country's foreign policy from strategic hedging- a modern form admixing cooperation and confrontation at the same time. (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019: 1) However, it seems the core understanding is still related to Bangladesh's balancing strategy, as it has to strike a balance between its regional powerhouses and great powers at the end of the day.

Historically, Bangladesh used to balance India immediately after its independence. Amid the cold war, the country also had to maintain the balance between the rival blocs, but the geopolitics was less heated in South Asia than in many other regions. However, China quickly came into the scenario as it had a strategic rivalry with India. However, Chinese stake increased drastically not only in the region but also worldwide with the 'so-called' rise of China in the 2000s. The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and rampant globalisation of Chinese Development Finance also intensified its hegemonic rivalry with the United States of America (USA). Since China's rise, it also became an important development partner for Bangladesh. The foreign policy also had to take China as an important factor alongside India. Hence, Bangladesh used to maintain a Two-Way Balance between these two nations.

China's intensified rivalry with the USA and its allies also quickly transformed the Indo-Pacific region's geopolitics. The region quickly emerged as a hotbed for great power rivalries. The announcement of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), the revival of QUAD, and the AUKUS pact further heated geopolitics. Bangladesh could not avoid such rivalries as an Indo-Pacific nation, and its importance is growing amid rival blocs. However, the country is trying to maintain neutrality by striking a balance between the blocs.

Again, as the US has renewed its attention in this region to contain China, the country's stake has also increased, and the US is involved directly in this region, unlike the previous two or three decades. As a result, a new reality has emerged for Bangladesh where it has to maintain balance among the interests of three superpowers, the USA, China, and India. Therefore, the country's balancing framework is also subject to transform into a Three-Way from the previous Two-Way.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to provide a three-way balancing framework to explain Bangladesh's evolving balancing strategy. The literature on three-way balance is still limited and only semi-scholarly in nature, where this paper is likely to go into details. To do so, this paper will try Bangladesh's evolving balancing policy from a historical perspective; define the current

reality and dilemma for Bangladesh at present. After that, the paper will try to explain the three-way balance and attempt to prescribe a framework through which the country may be able to navigate amid such murky geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific between the superpowers yet maintaining neutrality.

Methodology and Research Questions

This qualitative research is based on secondary data such as books, journal articles, websites, blogs, and newspaper articles. The content analysis method is based on relevant textual literature to theorise the research framework and to link the framework and the findings.

The objective of the research is to explain how Bangladesh's balancing scenario is evolving and address the limit of the existing literature that mostly explains the Two-Way balance between China and India. Another objective of this paper is to provide a framework for Bangladesh in the current scenario.

In order to do so, this research will ask two questions:

- ✍ How has Bangladesh's balancing framework evolved from two-way to three-way?
- ✍ Does the existing balancing literature compatible with explaining Bangladesh's foreign policy behaviour?

To find the answers to these questions, it will start by identifying the existing gap in the literature.

Literature Review and Identifying Knowledge Gap

The study of foreign policy behaviour has always been at the centre of scholarly attention in the realm of International Relations. In order to understand how states operate in an anarchical world order, numerous literary works have been conducted on foreign policy theories, specifically on a balance of power theory.

The concept of 'balance of power' first appeared in the writing of Thucydides in 'History of the Peloponnesian War', where he stated how city-states were balancing against the growing power and aggression of Athens. (Thucydides 1972) Later on, Thomas Hobbes implicitly referred to balancing, saying 'the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself'. (Hobbes 1972; Brown et al. 2002) In 'Politics Among Nations', Morgenthau depicted balance of power as 'an actual state of affairs in which power is distributed among several nations with approximate equality'. (Morgenthau 1948: 134)

However, a broader understanding of this concept was developed by Kenneth Waltz in his book 'Theory of International Politics' (). Unlike Morgenthau, Waltz (1978: 105) argued that the behaviour of states is determined not by human nature but by the anarchic world order. Therefore, states increase power by expanding military capacity or through alliance building to ensure their survival in a competitive international system.

While Waltz's study focused on more defensive realism, Mearsheimer provided the concept of offensive realism in his book 'The Tragedy of Great Power Politics'. According to Mearsheimer (2001: 269), states maximise their relative power to strengthen their security to preserve their existence in a multipolar world. They employ buck-passing or balancing strategies depending on the situation. Nevertheless, scholars, including Robert Pape and T.V. Paul (2005), observed that balancing strategies were undergoing major transformations with the changes in power distribution in the post-Cold War period. T.V Paul, in his writing 'Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy' (2005: 46-71), argued that while countries used to increase their military might to counterbalance dominant states, in the post-Cold War era, major powers such as China, Russia, France, as well as Germany, India, employed soft balancing by using non-military means instead of hard balancing strategies.

Besides the theoretical development of the balance of power, many scholars focused on country-specific balancing strategies. T.V Paul termed China's rise 'peaceful rise strategy' or 'peaceful development strategy', which "aimed at accelerating its economic might through intensified trade of manufacturing goods, while deliberately keeping a low profile in the security arena". (Paul 2018: 3) Another study claimed it was China's "pursuit of economic pre-balancing to weaken the US hegemony" (Nazir 2021). In the case of India, Rajagopalan his article "Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific Strategies" (2020: 1) termed India's strategy as 'Evasive Balancing' which involves contradictory elements of "balancing China by building partnerships with the United States as well as with regional powers, while simultaneously pursuing a reassurance strategy to convince Beijing that India is not really balancing China."

While most of the prior research works on the balance of power theories focus mostly on balancing against one aggressor state or hegemon, very few articles focus on the states which require to ensure a balance between two or more powers at a time. Though Rajagopalan portrayed India's balancing strategies against the USA and China, the scenario is totally different from the countries like Bangladesh. Since Bangladesh shares strong bonds with both China and India, a vast array of studies has been conducted on Bangladesh two-way balancing strategies against these two regional rivals. Delwar Hossain and Shariful Islam's research (2021: 1) identifies the dilemmas of Bangladesh and Bangladesh's shifting strategy "towards a more cooperative framework for adjusting to

the emerging geopolitical environment.” Aminul Karim’s writing (2022), on the other hand, addresses the growing interest of the US in the Indo-Pacific and the implications of QUAD formations on South Asia and Bangladesh. Lailufar Yesmin also positioned Bangladesh in the growing power politics in the Indo-Pacific and its challenges.

Nonetheless, there is a clear gap in the existing literature on identifying Bangladesh’s shifting from its traditional two-way balancing to a three-way balancing strategy with the renewed engagement of the USA in South Asia. The existing literature perfectly explains the Two-Way balance between India and China but cannot explain the new reality where the US stake is increasing. Some semi-scholarly articles and opinion editorials addressed this issue, but these lack detailed and constructive analysis. Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding Bangladesh’s foreign policy behaviour in the changing geopolitical landscape. Furthermore, it also aims to contribute to the theoretical development of the balance of power by analysing three-way balancing strategies in the context of Bangladesh.

For that, the next section of this paper will describe its theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

Balance of Power

The balance of power is one of the most prominent theoretical ideas in the field of International Relations. Though Hans Morgenthau claimed the concept is “as old as political history itself” in his book ‘Politics Among Nations’, the balance of power as a core tenet of the realist school of thought evolved more systemically during the Renaissance age (Morgenthau 1973: 186; Tziampiris 2015: 22; Haslam 2002: 91).

In defining the term ‘balance of power,’ Paul denotes that while ‘balancing’ is a strategy or a state’s foreign policy behaviour, the balance of power is the “outcomes at the systemic or sub-systemic levels’ which implies maintaining power equilibrium among the states. (Paul et al. 2004: 2) As Kenneth Waltz, father of the neorealist school of thought, wrote in his book ‘Theory of International Politics,’ states operate in an anarchical international system where there is no sovereign central authority to regulate the behaviour of individual states. Therefore, they rely on a self-help system to ensure survival (Waltz 1979: 105). He also argued, “those who do not help themselves.....will lay themselves open to dangers, will suffer. Fear of such unwanted consequences stimulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balances of power” (Waltz 1979: 118).

The ultimate aim of balancing is to prevent a rising power from becoming too powerful to dominate all other countries. (Paul et al. 2004: 2) States can balance each other by using external or internal means. They can internally balance other states by increasing their military capability or externally balance through alliance building. Countries tend to join weaker coalitions to counter the stronger power as they perceive the rising power as their security threat. (Waltz 1979: 168; Schweller 2016: 4) States usually follow one of the four strategies for ensuring self-preservation. These are bandwagoning, buck-passing, hedging, and balancing.

Bandwagoning

While balancing involves countering the stronger counterpart, bandwagoning refers to the state's policy of aligning with the "source of danger". (Walt 1987: 17). This tendency is usually common among the weaker states, which neither have the capability to influence the existing distribution of power nor could make a significant difference in the international system through individual efforts. (Ian, 2003, p. 6) According to Annette Baker Fox (1969), the smaller states try to remain nonaligned amid the Great Power war; however, they "eventually tilt their allegiance to the winning side". (Fox 1969 cited by Labs 1992: 385)

Buck-Passing

According to Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder (1990: 138), states adopt a buck-passing strategy when they want to avoid war by "counting on third parties to bear the costs of stopping a rising hegemon". It often takes place in multipolar systems where a common aggressor and a state threaten multiple states can pass the buck to another state to manage the situation so that "they can remain unscathed while the buck-catcher defends the balance of power" (Mearsheimer 2001: 270).

Hedging

Strategic hedging, one of the most influential strategies, originated from the literature of international relations in the Asia-Pacific in the twenty-first century. Unlike bandwagoning and buck-passing, hedging is a mixed strategy involving cooperation and confrontation. (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019: 1) While some scholars argue that there is little difference between balancing and hedging as balancing can "constitute the military component of a broader hedging strategy

that also features economical and diplomatic engagement”, others argue they are unique. (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019: 3)

Balancing

Balancing refers to a situation where the state actively participates in maximising its power against the potential aggressor to ensure its survival as well as advance its security. (Waltz 1979: 126; Walt 1987: 21-22, and Mearsheimer 2001; 139, 156-157) Balancing can take two forms: hard balancing and soft balancing. Hard balancing is a strategy where states counteract the threatening conditions by advancing their military capability, whereas soft balancing involves non-military means such as international institutions, diplomatic coalitions, and economic policies which can delay, frustrate, and complicate the hegemonic policy of a dominant state without challenging its preponderance of power” (Feng and He 2017)

Though hard balancing was dominant in the cold war period, the liberal world order facilitated by economic globalisation, the rise of international institutions as well as the challenge in the translation of economic power into military power has made it costly for the states to engage in hard balancing and countries began to employ soft balancing against the global powers (Paul et al. 2004: 4).

With the changes in the international system from a unipolar world order to a multipolar one, along with economic globalisation and growing interdependency among states, countries are also adopting balancing strategies focusing on their specific interests. For instance, by undertaking several trades and investment policies, China has emerged as a global economic superpower without posing a direct military threat to the United States. By adopting this economic pre-balancing strategy, China balances the existing superpower in international politics (Brawley 2004; Li and Ye 2019: 73). India is also adopted evasive balancing as its Indo-Pacific strategy, where it is maintaining a strong relationship with the USA and Japan to counter the rise of China as a regional and global power as well as cooperating with China on several issues, leaving the actual motive of India unclear (Rajagopalan 2020: 1).

Based on this theoretical framework, this paper will scrutinise how the balancing framework evolved in the context of Bangladesh and analyse whether the existing balancing literature is compatible with explaining Bangladesh’s foreign policy behaviour.

Bangladesh's Balancing Policy: A Historical Overview

Since its journey of fifty years as a nation, Bangladesh has achieved several milestones with its foreign policy (Chowdhury 2011). Immediately after its independence, Bangladesh based its foreign policy on two ideas, Strengthening security and sovereignty and the quest for resources for development. Both aspirations require external cooperation with other states.

Amid the heated Cold War and its belief in global solidarity, Bangladesh emphasised friendship with all states and the peaceful coexistence of all states, according to the UN charter. As a newly emerged nation, these not only strengthened Bangladesh's sovereignty but also pinned the national security ideas for Bangladesh. As a war-torn country, Bangladesh wanted to gain recognition as a state and build partnerships to fight acute hunger and poverty. Bangladesh opted for a non-alignment approach to ensure an independent foreign policy during the peak of the Cold War. The idea of non-alignment and neutrality policy also invoked a balancing strategy in Bangladesh's foreign policy.

In the 1980s, Bangladesh prioritised economic development, which was essential for addressing the socio-economic challenges. During this period, Bangladesh focused on aid, trade, and infrastructural cooperation with neighbouring states from Western countries (Hussain 2005). The West and U.S. alone became the largest trading partner of Bangladesh, where Bangladesh generated revenue from export commodities. Bangladesh emphasised regional relations for national development to bolster economic ties with South Asian neighbours. In the later phase of the 90s, Bangladesh shifted strategically towards bandwagoning and alliance building (Bhardwaj 2003). Between the late 1970s and early 1980, Bangladesh also quested for resource-building with foreign aid. As a result, Bangladesh created a strong bond with China, the USA, and the Muslim world. The new ties resulted in huge aid from the Middle East to Bangladesh. Bangladesh opted for development through aid and focused on raising aid from such countries. However, relations with neighbouring India transformed as gradually it was perceived as a contributing factor to Bangladesh's security. Ultimately, a balance became visible as China entered the picture.

At the end of the 1990s, Bangladesh shifted and tried to deepen relations with major Global powers. In the early 2000s, Bangladesh signed a defence agreement with China and initiated Bangladesh-USA military ties to strengthen national security.

In 2010, Bangladesh increased its focus on economic and infrastructural development. At the same time, China's rise took place and emerged as one of the important powers in international politics. Chinese stake also increased

massively in South Asia's regional politics. So, Bangladesh had to take a balancing approach between India and China, ensuring its development. Bangladesh liberalised trade regimes for foreign investors with significant incentives. Bangladesh's ties with other states and actors also increased.

Due to an increased focus on economic development, the country emerged as a fast-growing economy attracting massive foreign investment. Bangladesh's GDP grew to US\$302 billion in 2019 (Huzen 2019). Bangladesh was the second largest recipient of FDI in South Asia (Minar 2018).

As South Asian Politics revolves around Sino-Indian rivalry in a broad sense, Bangladesh often relied on strategic hedging for its interest. Many scholars tend to see Bangladesh's deepening engagement with China in the decade of the 2010s as strategic hedging.

However, the situation again changed after the US renewed its focus on South Asia, especially under the Biden administration. The revival of Quad, the Indo-Pacific strategy, and the AUKUS pact made it visible to the white eye that the West and its regional allies are directly trying to contain China. As a result, the geopolitics in the region has become heated, unlike ever. The US foreign policy prioritising Democracy, Human Rights, and security agreements now poses new challenges for Bangladesh. The US is pursuing Bangladesh to sign two security agreements: the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). These two agreements have conflicting interests with Chinese interests in the region. Bangladesh has been stalling the negotiations for a while now.

Bangladesh's Balancing Strategy and Sino-Indian Quest for Regional Hegemony

Bangladesh has been pursuing a balancing attempt to secure its interests. It avoids directly opposing any one actor since it might be difficult to engage one power without jeopardising the interests of the other. As mentioned, it also occasionally follows strategic hedging to maximise its national interest. Such a diversification strategy of Bangladesh ensures involvement with big and small states in the international system. Instead of battling the political repercussions of switching from one foreign corporation to another, Bangladesh has focused on addressing all main powers simultaneously (Bhatia 2019). As a result, there is a new tendency among scholars to understand Bangladesh's foreign policy behaviour as strategic hedging.

Bangladesh needs to maintain balance as security and economic aspiration remain the main goals. Bangladesh has had reliable commercial

relationships with India, China, and the USA for decades. India surrounds Bangladesh on three sides. Bangladesh would thus have to consider India in its foreign policy considerations. Bangladesh's nearest neighbour is India, and Bangladesh depends on India for bilateral cooperation, commerce, and security.

Nevertheless, to satisfy Bangladesh's development thirst, Bangladesh has to keep sound political and economic ties with China. The hedging technique in this situation is essential to working with both nations (Hossain and Islam 2022). Bangladesh can thus not choose a side in the trade dispute or any other ideological dispute between the US and China or India and China. So, Bangladesh adheres to a soft balancing plan by refraining from any alignment.

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative: Address Bangladesh's development imperative

The 21st century is transforming China-Bangladesh ties, with a greater range of mutual collaboration and benefits. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt. China aimed to increase its participation in global trade through the BRI, especially by facilitating infrastructural developments in Global South. BRI promised development assistance to the country to promote interconnectivity and economic growth along its corridors for Bangladesh in terms of commerce, investments, and connectivity. The execution of numerous government-to-government initiatives was addressed during the Chinese president's visit to Bangladesh in October 2016 (Hossain 2018). China then pledged to spend roughly \$40 billion in Bangladesh. Since then, China has contributed \$13.6 billion in joint - ventures and \$24.45 billion in bilateral aid to Bangladesh for infrastructural projects. Eight infrastructure development initiatives between Bangladesh and China, totalling more than \$9.45 billion in funding, were signed in 2016. These included the \$3.3 billion Padma Bridge rail service, the \$1.9 billion Payra power generation plant, the \$1 billion digital networking project, and the \$1.32 billion power grid infrastructure enhancement project (Lim and Mukherjee 2019). A 783-acre Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone (CEIZ) was also being built in the Chittagong district's Anwara Upazila. China allowed 97% of Bangladeshi goods duty-free access to its marketplace in 2020 (Al Mabru 2020). By building ports and an overland economic corridor linking China's landlocked regions, China hoped to get access to the Bay of Bengal. By aligning Bangladesh's national interest with Chinese aspirations, Bangladesh is ensuring its infrastructural development over the last decade.

Chinese net FDI input was \$396.99 million in 2019, accounting for 38.34% of all net FDI inflow to Bangladesh for infrastructure development. With a share of 18.94%, China was Bangladesh's biggest trading partner in 2018 (Aditya 2021). That

was more trading than was done with the US and Germany and almost twice as much trade with India. Bangladesh also increased its competitiveness through the BRI and the expansion of its infrastructure. Bangladesh also purchases most military weapons from China. Bangladesh requests \$1 billion from China to regulate the Teesta River's water resources more effectively (Shahid 2021). The Teesta flows from India into Bangladesh, and it has long been a divisive topic to share its water. The important thing to note is that Bangladesh, even in its ties with China, does not minimise the importance of India's relationship and is not so ignorant as to underestimate China.

India's Act East Policy: Bangladesh and India's Interdependency

Bangladesh's geographic position with India compels both nations to retain strategic relations in all-encompassing domains. India perceives Bangladesh as an important neighbour and valued friend in South Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific region. India is interested in Bangladesh for strategic reasons. India also wants access to new markets and to continue receiving remittances from its fifth-largest source, Bangladesh (Chand 2019). To promote the flow of products and services from West Bengal to impoverished Northeast India as well as to link to the Bay of Bengal, India strives to establish better east-west connections. This connection to Bangladesh benefits India economically greatly during times of peace. India and Bangladesh opened the 'Maitri Setu' in March 2021 in order to improve the infrastructural connection between the two countries (Anwar 2022a). Bangladesh is also in India's plans for the "Look East Policy" (Kumar Das 2010). For India's Look East strategy, the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), which includes Bangladesh, Northeastern India, Bhutan, and Nepal, is receiving extended focus. The two countries benefit from close collaboration between Bangladesh and India, including several active projects like transporting goods of Indian commodities via Bangladesh's Ashuganj port to Northeast India (Korolev 2016).

Given its size and location, Bangladesh may be Northeast India's most significant financial neighbour. There is a potential market for processed goods from Bangladesh in Northeast India. Nationwide, India invests heavily in Bangladesh and has allocated land to create exclusive "Indian economic zones" there (Yasmin 2018). India's anticipated power corridor for transferring hydropower from Arunachal Pradesh to the rest of India would extend via Bangladesh.

Regarding regional organisations, India has joined the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Bangladesh is one of India's main entry points to East Asia, making it a crucial component of the BIMSTEC structure (Yasmin 2019).

Apart from economic dependency, both countries share cultural, political, and security ties. Moreover, India is also the powerhouse in regional politics and has its own aspiration in regional politics. Therefore, there is both dependence and a balancing posture between the countries.

The Growing Geostrategic Significance of Bangladesh

The global and regional power competition allows Bangladesh to maximise its objectives due to its growing geopolitical significance. That is made feasible by its longstanding neutrality in international affairs. Effectively fostering amicable ties with the big powers has prepared Bangladesh to strike that balance. Similarly, neutrality opens the door for Bangladesh to participate in major initiatives by Global powers and has become the cornerstone of Bangladesh's balancing approach (Siow 2022). Bangladesh's neutrality policy allows it to strike a soft balance in its relationship with China and India. Bangladesh has recognised that India and China would invest to their advantage. China may outperform India economically in Bangladesh, but India and Bangladesh have far stronger and tighter ties than Bangladesh.

Instead of relying on debt finance, Bangladesh's objective is to attract private investments, particularly from China. India's growing interest in the Indo-Pacific region and Africa, as well as China's intrusion into India's historic sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean, are all factors in the contest (Anwar 2022a). Also, the USA needs Bangladesh for its own interests involving issues of the Quad and Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). So, Bangladesh's geopolitical position is becoming important in both regional and global politics.

Amid heated geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region, superpowers presently have contradicting interests. In this context, Bangladesh may seek out a "three-way-balancing" strategy involving China, India, and the USA. Bangladesh intends to utilise such relations as leverage to negotiate better terms with the great powers. Bangladesh's balancing position in an interconnected and globalised society ensures equitable growth for the country that goes beyond material and infrastructural concerns (Anwar 2022b). Bangladesh has a cooperation framework with the USA to address shared issues, including climate change and sustainability, women's rights, violent extremism, and refugee and migration problems. While Bangladesh focuses on the East, it collaborates with the West and its allies, including Japan, Australia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, on crucial international problems and concerns.

As a growing economic power in the neighbourhood, Bangladesh mobilises its economy, investment, geostrategic location, and connectivity projects as a soft balancing strategy tool. These instruments allow Bangladesh to maximise the odds between the superpowers.

The Great Power Politics in Indo-Pacific and the Challenges for Bangladesh

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a theatre of Great Power rivalry in the twenty-first century. With China's increasing capability and assertiveness in the region under its flagship BRI and the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Strategy with its allies to counterbalance China, the focus of the great power politics has shifted from Atlantic to Indo-Pacific, consolidating in the South Asian region ([Purushothsman 2016: 1](#); [Deb and Wilson 2021](#); [Anwar 2019](#)).

The Indo-Pacific Strategy

Since the Indo-Pacific region is made up of more than half of the population, around two-thirds of the global economy, as well as seven of the largest military powers in the world, the regional and extra-regional powers, including the USA, India, Japan, Australia, perceive China's growing dominance in the region as a threat to their national interest. As stated in the US National Security Strategy 2017, through BRI, China aims to "displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor" ([The White House 2017](#)) Thereby, the United States and its allies adopted the US Indo-Pacific strategy in 2017 under President Donald for a free and open Indo-Pacific ([The White House 2017](#)). In 2023, the Biden Administration published its Indo-Pacific Strategy formally, which succeeded the strategy of 2017.

After 2017, several concerned actors, such as the EU, France, and Canada, announced their Indo-Pacific Strategy for the next six years. In 2023, Japan also announced its vision regarding the Indo-Pacific region.

Under the Indo-Pacific strategy in 2017, the United States, along with India, Japan, and Australia, revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which was first initiated as a High Availability Disaster Recovery cooperation in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. In November 2017, the countries agreed to bring this cooperative framework back as a centrepiece of the Indo-Pacific strategy for keeping the critical sea routes free and open for all ([the White House 2018](#); [CRS 2022: 1](#); [Singh 2021](#); [Kliem 2020: 16](#)) Though the US administration push forward the commitment of QUAD is to ensure rule-based

international order where countries are free from any types of political, military and economic dominance, according to congressional research service, “China’s growing influence and military assertiveness appear to undergird the initiative’s motives.” (CRS 2022 1)

For the past two decades, the US has focused on elsewhere in the earth, especially in the Middle- East, due to its strategic interest. It had the least attention to South Asia during the whole time. However, since the announcement of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the South Asia and Indo-Pacific region is finding them within the US attention.

As a result, a growing US interest is visible in the region. Under the Biden administration, the US engages with South Asia through its security agreements and Democracy and Human Rights policy. The US and its allies have already announced counter-initiatives, such as Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), to contain China’s growing presence. As a result of such renewed US interest in the region, Bangladesh’s foreign policy is also taking the US interest in its calculation.

The Growing Significance of South Asia and QUAD-China Stalemate

With the changing geopolitical calculations and rise of power competition in the Indo-Pacific, South Asia has become significantly important for all parties due to its geopolitical and geostrategic locations. While the traditional discourse of South Asian politics revolved around Sino-Indian and India-Pakistan rivalry, South Asia emerged as a crucial region for China, India, and the United States. Where India perceives South Asia as its sphere of dominance, for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, “South Asia is where the land and maritime Silk Roads meet” (Anwar 2019: 6). As South Asian port cities act as gateways to the Middle East, Africa and the sea routes across the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca that connect the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean are significant for China as almost 80% of its energy comes through this corridor, China is extensively investing in roads and ports built in the countries including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar to connect the maritime hubs with mainland China (Anwar 2019: 6). To counter China’s strong presence, QUAD tries to contain China’s rise by strengthening bilateral and multilateral partnerships with regional countries. However, the intensity of this competition and South Asian countries’ complex interdependence on the major powers have put South Asia in a QUAD-China stalemate (Rashid 2022).

Questioning the Unitary Idea of QUAD

While many scholars consider QUAD a unitary force as countries are tying together with the common interest of restraining China's influence, it is often unnoticed that countries joined the alliance to pursue their own national interests. Through QUAD, India is opting to maintain its security and establish itself as a regional powerhouse. The USA is attempting to maintain its power position in Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia. Japan, in contrast, due to its history of conflict with China, does not prefer a regional order dominated by China, whereas Australia sees QUAD as an opportunity to enhance its bilateral, regional, and multi-lateral networks ([Rashid 2022](#); [CRS 2022: 2](#)).

As a result, QUAD is not a unitary idea; the members have diverse interest interests. Furthermore, in the globalised era, where countries depend on each other on various means, including military, economy, and technologies, it is tough for South Asian countries like Bangladesh to pick a preferred side in this power competition.

The Dilemma for Bangladesh

The great power politics in the Indo-Pacific has put Bangladesh in a dilemma. Due to its geostrategic locations as a bordering country of India on three sides, access to the Bay of Bengal, and its border with Rakhine state, which can provide a gateway for China to access the Bay of Bengal directly, every stakeholder of Indo-Pacific expects Bangladesh to be on their sides. However, because of the complex interdependence on each key player, including India, China, and the United States, Bangladesh fell into a dilemma to take a clear stance.

From a geopolitical perspective, India is not only a close ally who contributed to the independence of Bangladesh but also an important strategic partner due to its geographical proximity, strong socio-cultural linkages as well as one of the most significant development partners in the region ([Chowdhury 2022](#)). On the one hand, India put Bangladesh on the top of its 'neighborhood first policy'. It invested extensively in the infrastructural projects in Bangladesh to build an east-west route for facilitating the movement of goods and fostering trade between the two countries to gain control over its northeastern provinces as well as curb China's influence over Bangladesh ([Anwar 2022b](#)). On the other hand, the rival of India, China, is the top trading partner, largest foreign direct investor, trade importer, and arms supplier of Bangladesh ([Haroon 2022](#); [Anwar 2022b](#)). Bangladesh highly relies on China for its infrastructural development and economic growth. China has invested \$38.05 billion in Bangladesh under its Belt and Road Initiative as a strategic partner. It is nearly 10% of Bangladesh's GDP, as well as the largest amount of investment in Bangladesh by a single country ([Mrida 2016](#)). In 2020, China also allowed duty-free access to 97% of Bangladeshi

products in the Chinese market (Dhaka Tribune 2020; Anwar 2022b). Though Bangladesh has maintained a balanced approach between these two powers by diversifying its areas of cooperation, the changing attitude of the United States towards Bangladesh from a 'bottomless basket' to an essential strategic partner in South Asia has made the choices more challenging for Bangladesh.

As a result of dilemma, dependence, and diverse interests, Bangladesh's balancing policy is also evolving in the empirical field. The next section of this paper will discuss this evolution in detail.

Bangladesh's Evolving Balancing Strategy: From Two-Way to Three-Way

While Bangladesh maintained a balanced approach between China and India by strengthening geopolitical and cultural ties with India and economic relations with China, the United States growing engagements with the South Asian countries to curtail China's assertiveness and establish a strong presence in the region has pushed Bangladesh from a two-way to three-way balancing (Rashid 2022).

A Three-Way Balancing among China, India, and the US.

Traditionally, the United States looked at South Asia through the lens of India. However, after 2018, the growing Chinese influence and Sino-Indian power competition provoked the United States to take a proactive approach towards South Asia, specifically towards Bangladesh. Due to Bangladesh's strategic locations and relations with India and China, the Biden Administration renewed its interest in deepening Bangladesh-US relations through security cooperation. In 2019, the US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper proposed a military modernisation plan for 2030 for Bangladesh's counterpart (Hassan 2020). In March 2022, Bangladesh and the USA approved a draft of GSOMIA (Rahman 2022). However, approving the draft does not mean that two countries are signing the agreement; rather, it is a diplomatic effort to create a space amid the rivalry.

However, these changes in realities put Bangladesh in hot water in terms of balancing power. Though Bangladesh used to follow hedging, a mixed strategy, as its foreign policy towards India and China, in the current Sino-Indian and Sino-QUAD stalemate, strategic hedging seems unviable for Bangladesh as it creates mistrust and confusion among the countries. For example, in October 2020, the Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun, in his meeting with his Bangladesh counterpart, stated that "The United States sees Bangladesh as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region, and we're committed to growing our partnership in this regard to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh will be a centerpiece of our work in the

region”. ([The US Embassy in Bangladesh 2020](#); [Siddiquee 2022: 14](#)) Many scholars consider this remark as an invitation to join QUAD. ([Siddiquee 2022: 14](#); [Bhattacharjee 2021](#)) After that, in May 2021, Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming warned Bangladesh not to join any anti-Beijing club by saying, “obviously, it will not be a good idea for Bangladesh to participate in this small club of four because it will substantially damage our bilateral relationship” ([Siddiquee 2022: 14](#); [Bhattacharjee 2021](#)). Apart from the QUAD, the US is overtly pursuing Bangladesh to join in its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). During Several visits by US diplomats and the annual Partnership Dialogue and Security Dialogue, the US invited Bangladesh to join its IPS ([Prothom Alo 2023](#)). Any ambiguous strategy might deteriorate the existing relations by making both rivals feel insecure about Bangladesh’s strategic position ([Rashid 2022](#)).

Furthermore, many analysts argue that the US sanction on RAB and human rights violation allegations in Bangladesh has a geopolitical dimension. Since the US considers Bangladesh a ‘Pro-Chinese’ state, its imposition of sanctions upon the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an elite force of Bangladesh, might be a coercive measure to bring Bangladesh out of China’s influence ([Rashid 2022](#)). In this circumstance, Bangladesh has no alternative but to strike a three-way balance between China, India, and the United States.

Balancing Options for Bangladesh

Given the circumstances, this paper proposes that Bangladesh should prioritise formulating its strategy to balance three nuclear powers: China, India, and the USA, based on its beliefs, values, and guiding principles. As Ahmed ([2022](#)) noted, the foreign policy principle of Bangladesh, “friendship towards all, malice towards none,” is especially true for a developing country like Bangladesh, whose primary goal is economic betterment rather than geopolitics”. Therefore, to maintain warm relations with the major powers while fulfilling their national interests, Bangladesh should employ a soft balancing approach emphasising economic development and connectivity, defence cooperation, and multilateralism.

Trade, Investment, and Connectivity

Since economic development is one of the core national interests of Bangladesh and the key players of the great power politics are also pursuing their geopolitical motives using economic incentives, Bangladesh should harness the economic advantage by maintaining neutrality or non-alignment as its guiding principle. China provides Bangladesh with extensive investments in infrastructural projects and fostering connectivity, whereas India’s contribution is relatively less than China, the USA, and Japan. Therefore, Bangladesh must

strengthen its economic ties with China and Japan while maintaining geopolitical, cultural, and defence cooperation with India and the USA.

Diversifying Defence Cooperation

Bangladesh should also emphasise increasing its military capability by strengthening security cooperation with diverse countries. However, Bangladesh should take cautious steps in securing national objectives without tilting towards any bloc or particular country. Apart from Superpowers, increasing ties with various middle powers may also allow the country to pursue its national interest.

Regional Organisations

While maintaining balance with the powers, Bangladesh must utilise the existing regional organisations to “keep continuing its bargaining positions and cards intact” (Siddique 2022: 24). Bangladesh is already a member of many international multilateral platforms, including the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and ASEAN Regional Forum. Bangladesh is also a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and an active member of regional organisations, including the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIM-TEC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The country also has membership in Developing 8 (D8) and is observing Colombo Security Conclave (CSC). Through these multilateral forums, Bangladesh should avoid being highly dependent on a particular power and strengthen its capability by cooperating with diverse actors.

Formulating Indo-Pacific Outlook

On 24th July 2023, Bangladesh announced its Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO). The 15-point outlook reflects Bangladesh’s stance on Indo-Pacific affairs. In the outlook, Bangladesh reaffirmed its intention to strike a balance among the great powers while abiding by existing liberal values and multilateralism. However, the announcement is a public diplomacy to clarify its position, and its success depends upon Bangladesh’s diplomacy, capability, and navigating foreign relations that may help the country to navigate accordingly and maximise its national interest. An IPO of its own would also serve as a guide for the country and would also benefit in negotiations.

Conclusion

As existing scholarly literature is insufficient to explain latest developments yet with the growing US stake, there is a limit to understand Bangladesh's current balancing scenario. Even though semi-scholarly literature has discussed this issue, they lack detailed analysis due to their short forms. Against this backdrop, this paper tried to explain Bangladesh's balancing strategy and its evolution until the present context. This paper examined the great power stakes in regional and global politics and their impact on Bangladesh's foreign policy. Strategic hedging in this regard may send the wrong signal to other great powers. Therefore, Bangladesh requires a balancing strategy.

In this context, this paper advocates for a Three-Way Balancing framework from a soft balancing approach. Bangladesh may follow strategic hedging from time to time, but it will be short-term considering the heat of great power politics and their stake. Bangladesh has many instruments to strike a three-way balance, including its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), robust economy, connectivity schemes and infrastructural development projects. Moreover, the country's geostrategic position as an Indian Ocean state could also be a blessing in this regard.

However, it will be tough for the country to address the growing US stake shortly, considering the US interest in inking security pacts, namely GSOMIA and ACSA, as they directly contradict China's interest in this region. Moreover, the US policy of Human Rights and Democracy will also be tougher for Bangladesh to maintain as the country is still struggling with Human Development and is dependent on a bottom-heavy economy.

Perhaps, Bangladesh's balancing scenario is one of the most difficult, considering the stake, power involved and diverse interests. On the one hand, the US and India have a mutual interest in containing China, yet India is interested in emerging as the region's sole powerhouse. On the other hand, China is one of Bangladesh's most crucial development partners. Striking a balance between these powers and maintaining their interest will be a tough job for Bangladesh.

Again, as the country follows a neutrality policy, such a scenario may also bring new opportunities for the country considering its instruments such as FDI, development projects, and firm belief in multilateralism.

In the coming days, the geopolitics will be even tougher. There is also a possibility that a Russian stake in this region may also increase, considering Russia's recent approach to the region and its re-emergence as a direct challenge to the US in international politics. If Russia continues to increase its stake in the

Indo-Pacific region, the balancing strategy may again evolve according to national power, interest and the number of actors involved. However, this is still too early to elaborate further.

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