DOMESTIC INPUTS IN BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY:
A CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL
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Abstract
Foreign policy is the set of principles that guides a state’s external relations with other state and non-state actors in the international system. The objective of foreign policy is to ensure national interest of a country outside its own territory in carrying out negotiations, signing treaties, joining forums and in other issues concerning the country’s economic, geopolitical and strategic interests. However, as neoclassical realism assumes, dealing with external environment does not necessitate that the regional and global settings solely influence decision-making procedures of foreign policy. The role of domestic inputs cannot be overlooked in influencing foreign policy formulation process. Foreign policy formulation process of Bangladesh is influenced by both external environment and domestic considerations. The domestic inputs in Bangladesh foreign policy are supposed to be working in a participatory manner as a country running under democratic principles as mentioned in the constitution. What domestic inputs are playing decisive role in foreign policy decision making in Bangladesh? This paper addresses the question from a neoclassical realist perspective and argues that the domestic inputs in Bangladesh are not properly functioning. In analyzing the role of domestic inputs, the paper reviews major decisions in Bangladesh foreign policy bearing theoretical and policy implications.

Introduction
Foreign Policy is defined as an extension of domestic policy for dealing with external actors in order to pursue national interest of a country at the international level. International system, regional setting, geopolitical compulsion, economic interconnectedness and many other external factors play a vital role in shaping the formulation of foreign policy. Foreign policy decision making process is thus supposed to be influenced by external factors and systemic pressures. However, it cannot be concluded that external factors solely play the role in formulating foreign policy as the process consists of diverse policy instruments.¹ A domestic lens is inevitably associated with the decision

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¹ Helen B. Milner and Dustin Tinglay, Sailing the Water’s Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2015, p. 7
making process of foreign policy in which internal environment, ideology of decision makers, public opinion, political parties and other issues play significant roles. International relations and domestic politics are so interrelated that they should be analyzed simultaneously, as wholes. Bangladesh foreign policy decision making process is likewise influenced by a number of domestic inputs which play a very crucial role in shaping the country’s foreign policy directions. The trends, priorities, objectives and orientations of Bangladesh foreign policy have changed significantly in different times depending on domestic socio political environment. In the age of global interconnectedness the geopolitical significance of Bangladesh is being felt by powerful regional and global actors and the role of Bangladesh in international arena has got multifaceted character. The process of globalization has brought nation states closer than ever and the importance of pro-active diplomacy and dynamism in foreign policy decision making process has increased manifold. It is undeniably necessary to identify the focal point of foreign policy decision making and know what issues play role in transforming foreign policy behaviour of Bangladesh. It is in this context it becomes imperative to study the domestic inputs that shape foreign policy decision making process of Bangladesh. The number of domestic inputs operational in decision making process is enormous. Several past events suggest that there was lack of coordination and combination of factors involved in foreign policy formulation process in Bangladesh. A few institutions play big roles in determining the foreign policy directions. The paper examines the foreign policy functions of Bangladesh in different times, influence of regime changes in foreign policy formulation, role of bureaucracy, political parties, parliament, public opinion and important policy makers and periodical changes in Bangladesh foreign policy.

**Framework of Analysis: Neoclassical Realism**

The relative power position in international system has a role to play but this is not overwhelming except an intervening role of domestic decision makers. The post-Cold War politics has demonstrated the efficacy and relevance of this argument in different cases. Foreign policy formulation takes into account the internal variables along with external pressures. Neoclassical realism assumes that intervening variables, such as the internal structures of states and the

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perceptions of leaders, act as pivotal intermediaries between the pressures of power configurations and the decisions of actors. The term ‘neoclassical realism’ was coined by Gideon Rose in a 1998 *World Politics* review article that cements the linkage between external environment and domestic pressure. Neoclassical realists stand in the middle of *Innenpolitik* and *Aussenpolitik* viewpoints.

In order to analyze Bangladesh foreign policy, as neo classical realists believe, ‘understanding the links between power and policy requires close examination of the contexts within which foreign policies are formulated and implemented.’ Bangladesh achieved independence in 1971 and it started its journey as a follower of parliamentary democracy. The primary objective of Bangladesh foreign policy in the initial years was to gain recognition from as many countries as possible. The ideological perspectives and leadership played a role along with Cold War politics at that point of time. In the neoclassical realist world, leaders can be constrained by both international and domestic politics. Thus, a combination of domestic variables and international structure is visible in foreign policy of Bangladesh from the very beginning. The national decision makers had to consider the external reality as can be seen in case of Delhi tripartite agreement in 1974. Before the tripartite agreement, during a talk between India and Pakistan in New Delhi on 18 August, 1973, Aziz Ahmed, the leader of the Pakistani delegation, dangled the threat of trying 203 Bengalis detained in Pakistan if Bangladesh’s proposed trial of 195 Pakistani prisoners of war was not dropped. Besides, Bangladesh, seriously affected by the worldwide oil crisis and other economic problems, became vulnerable to the pressure tactics of the oil rich "brothers" which required a diplomatic response

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5 *Innenpolitik* is a German word meaning ‘domestic policy’ while *Aussenpolitik* is a German word referring to ‘foreign policy’. The terms are used by Fareed Zakaria, Bhumitra Chakma and others in different articles.


7 *Ibid*, 152


9 *Ibid*, p. 230
to a deadlock situation which resulted in compromise from all parties. In return, Bangladesh gained recognition from Pakistan as an independent country which was crucial for the country at that point of time. However, not always the systemic pressure could actively intervene. Bangladesh decided to be a part of Non-Aligned Movement as an attempt to stay away from close clutch of bipolar rivalry. For neo classical realism, to paraphrase Clausewitz, explaining foreign policy is usually very simple, but even the simplest explanation is difficult.¹⁰ A combination of domestic factors and external pressures became prominent as can be seen in time of all succeeding regimes in Bangladesh.

Domestic factors such as economic condition, number of migrant workers, and emergence of ready-made garment industries shaped Bangladesh foreign policy orientation from time to time.¹¹ External factors like Bangladesh’s geo strategic location in between South and Southeast Asia, water sharing of international rivers lying through the heart of the country did have important contributing role too. Bangladesh, from the beginning, had to face external pressures of various types from various corners. Some powerful countries did not recognize the independence of Bangladesh in the initial years. Foreign policy objectives likewise were affected by those. In turn, domestic policy changes could also be observed from internal regime changes in Bangladesh. Significant transformation in foreign policy posture took place with the change of political regime in the country. The above mentioned situation can be linked up with the following assumption that ‘neoclassical realism aims to explain how states adjust to systemic changes. Neo-classical realism thinkers emphasize the constraining effects of the international system but nevertheless recognize that considerable scope exists for the exercise of national foreign policy preference.’¹²

So, it becomes clear as William Wallace has argued that ‘foreign policy is that area of politics which bridges the all-important boundary between the nation-state and its international environment’.¹³ It is also quite conspicuous that neoclassical realism not only deals with system level approach, but also takes

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state level and individual level analyses into account. However, this is necessary to recall that neo-classical realism is not beyond criticism as there have been divisive ontological and epistemological debates in the history of the discipline of International Relations.14 Neo-classical realist scholars emphasize the role of policymaking executives. Domestic inputs in Bangladesh foreign policy is an important field of study that require extensive academic investigation. This should not be viewed as opportunistic justification to use neoclassical realism to explain domestic inputs in foreign policy decision making as what makes neoclassical realist theory ‘new’ is its ongoing attempt to systematize the wide and varied insights of classical realists within parsimonious theory, or to put it in reverse, to identify the appropriate intervening variables that can imbue realism’s structural variant with a greater explanatory richness.15 It prioritizes and stresses ‘power, interests and coalition making as the central elements in a theory of politics’ but seeks to recapture classical realists’ appreciation that we need to look within societies as well as between them, to deny that states are simple, ‘irreducible atoms whose power and interests are to be assessed.’16

Waltz states that “A domestic political structure is defined, first, according to the principle by which it is ordered; second, by specification of the functions of the formally differentiated units; and third, by the distribution of capabilities across those units.”17 This helps understand how roles of different institutions should be categorized according to precise needs. In foreign policy formulation process, it is held that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the parliament, public opinion and bureaucrats play a wide variety of role within the internal state structure. Mark Webber and Michael Smith suggest that contemporary foreign policy focuses on the ways in which, ‘and the extent to which, national governments have succeeded in dealing with the challenges of a substantially transformed world’.18 As neoclassical realists say, to understand the way states

16 Ibid, p. 141
17 Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics, Waveland Press, Illinois, 1979, p. 82
18 M. Webber and M.H. Smith, eds., Foreign policy in a transformed world, Pearsons Education Limited, Harlow, p. 22
interpret and respond to their external environment, one must analyze how systemic pressures are translated through unit level intervening variables such as decision-makers' perceptions and domestic state structure. It is in this context neoclassical realism has been used as a framework of analysis to describe role of domestic inputs in Bangladesh foreign policy. The next section presents a list of five sets of domestic-level variables.

**Bangladesh Foreign Policy and Domestic Inputs**

Critics often note that Bangladesh does not have a foreign policy rather than foreign relations. Such views are supported by the evidence of frequent transformations in foreign policy orientations caused by regime changes.

The Bangladesh Constitution sets forth some basic principles which clarify the existence of Bangladesh foreign policy. Foreign policy suffers from political polarization and partisan stance rather than objective analysis of national interest. The Constitution lays down the basis of Bangladesh foreign policy in articles 25, 63 and 145(A). Article 25 mentions the principle of promotion of international peace, security and solidarity, article 63 talks about declaration of war and article 145(A) discusses the code of international treaties. In addition to this, there is an acceptance that Bangladesh foreign policy stands on the principle of “friendship to all, malice to none.” The objectives of Bangladesh foreign policy focus on the principles of national security, peaceful co-existence and development. For a veteran diplomat, Bangladesh has two broad foreign policy aspirations – first, the search for its security and preservation of sovereignty, and second, the quest for resources for its development and economic welfare. The means and methods of pursuing the foreign policy aspirations change over time and domestic inputs play crucial role in this regard.

20 Ambassador Nasim Ferdous mentioned the viewpoint in a conversation with the author on December 03, 2013
21 Ambassador Ashfaqur Rahman observed so at a workshop held in the University of Dhaka on August 31, 2013
24 Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, “Foundations of Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy Interactions”, ISAS Insights, No. 120, March 2011, p.03
Domestic inputs may be defined as combination of domestic actors and factors that play role in determining foreign policy courses of a particular country. Along with international systemic structure, there are a wide range of domestic sources of inputs from which foreign policy options are guided. Domestic inputs may vary from country to country, regime to regime on the basis of the system of governance. While examining Bangladesh’s foreign policy decision making, the following domestic inputs may be examined.

a. Idiosyncratic Factors of the Leadership

Idiosyncratic factors play an important role in the making and shaping of a state’s foreign policy. In case of foreign affairs, inactivity on the part of leaders in the face of demands for action will be penalized because it will be viewed as neglectful of national interest, while activity in excess of that demanded by the constituency will be penalized because it will be viewed as a diversion of resources away from more important tasks. Since individuals are exposed to different experiences and everyone is to some extent unique, decision makers inevitably develop beliefs and outlooks that are to some extent idiosyncratic and peculiar to them. The Prime minister, under the parliamentary system of Bangladesh, is not “first among the equals”, but virtually is the most powerful person in the government. It has been observed in Bangladesh that the head of the executive controls core issues of defense and foreign affairs, something embedded in the political culture of the country. The political parties in Bangladesh have a tendency to avoid democratic practices in conducting party affairs and in almost all cases the voice of party head remains the strongest and unchallenged. When party head becomes the Prime Minister the cabinet members rarely challenge his/her decisions.

The personal choices of prime ministers are thus reflected in foreign policy directions. The AL chief, Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was the most dominant personality in Bangladesh politics, and he had near absolute authority over his party and the government. In the second half of that decade, that role was played by the chief of the military regime and founder of the BNP, General

Ziaur Rahman.\textsuperscript{29} When these two personalities were assassinated in separate military coups, their positions within their respective political parties were inherited by close relatives: in the case of the AL, Sheikh Hasina (current prime minister), Mujib’s daughter, took charge of the party, while in the case of the BNP, Zia’s widow, Khaleda Zia, became the party’s chairperson; and since the 1980s, these two figures have dominated Bangladesh politics.\textsuperscript{30} Interestingly, the ideals of Ziaur Rahman are held by Khaleda Zia, as seen in the latter’s favorable foreign policy orientations toward China and the Middle East. By contrast, the legacy of Sheikh Mujib can be observed in Hasina’s approach to dealing with India and Russia. The change of foreign policy attitude along with the change of person in office demonstrates how crucial role prime minister plays in formulating Bangladesh foreign policy.

The Prime Minister also chooses advisors whose role in Bangladesh foreign policy may not be publicly visible always, but undoubtedly the advisors play a big role in foreign policy decision making process.\textsuperscript{31} Prime minister discusses foreign policy issues with chosen advisors, a few bureaucrats and a limited number of ministers known as “kitchen cabinet”.\textsuperscript{32} The role of advisors could be publicly understood especially during the Awami League led grand alliance government during 2009-2013 tenure. It was seen that the advisors of foreign affairs and economic affairs were given special assignments during government’s negotiation with India, USA and World Bank in recent years. Their activities and promptitude at times outshined the accomplishments of foreign ministry. Gowher Rizvi, advisor of international affairs to the prime minister Sheikh Hasina, clarifies that advisors work on the basis of given duties to them being assigned by the prime minister and they play advisory role.\textsuperscript{33} He disregards any discussion of tussle between foreign minister and foreign policy advisor as “unnecessary myth”.\textsuperscript{34} Nonetheless, the negotiation phase with regard to Teesta river water sharing treaty shows lack of coordination among the advisors and ministers. The influence of idiosyncratic factors of the head of the government will be exemplified in the next section.

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\textsuperscript{29} Rounaq Jahan, \textit{Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues}, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1980
\textsuperscript{31} Interview with Ambassador Waliur Rahman on November 03, 2013
\textsuperscript{32} Harun ur Rashid, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 35
\textsuperscript{33} Interview of Gowher Rizvi In Independent TV, April 02, 2012, available at http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=3YtC4L1Oh90, accessed on December 15, 2013
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, accessed on December 15, 2013
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b. Institutional Factors

A government is a vast conglomerate of loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of its own. Apart from the head of the government, institutions like the ministry of foreign affairs, parliament, bureaucracy, intelligence agencies play important role in foreign policy decision making in varying degrees. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is primarily responsible for the formulation of foreign policy. The foreign minister is supposed to play leading role in this regard. During the regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, foreign office played role hand in hand with the Prime Minister’s office, although under the overwhelming influence of Mujib’s principles. Ziaur Rahman used to consult his foreign minister Muhammad Shamsul Huq on various foreign policy issues, but there was no account of anyone else’s involvement in Muhammad Shamsul Huq’s narrative. After the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1990, the foreign ministry was expected to play a leading role in shaping foreign policy directions. Professional diplomats insist, the foreign ministry plays a key role in prioritizing foreign policy issues. However, the reality is that prime minister can “hire and fire” cabinet ministers, and hence, ministers often wish to tender advice what the prime minister would like to hear. It is a fact that the foreign office co-ordinates with other concerned ministries only after the prime minister sets the direction of foreign policy.

The national parliament is another important institution in the formulation of foreign policy. In theory, it is the prime law making institution formed by the elected representatives, who are expected to debate issues related to public interests. Ideally, any treaty with international organizations or foreign countries needs to be discussed in the parliament where people’s representatives will have a say on behalf of people’s interests. By scrutinizing the issues, the parliament may press the government to review its thinking and change or make “fine tuning” of some aspects of foreign policy. In reality, the Parliament in Bangladesh rarely plays an active role in deliberating issues related to foreign affairs. Due to the political culture of Bangladesh, the party members rarely disagree with party chief’s stance fearing they may violate article 70 of the constitution, which equates party discipline with strict

36 Interview with Ambassador Muhammad Zamir on November 07, 2013
38 Ibid, pp. 35-36
adherence to a top-down decision process. As a consequence decisions taken by the higher authority are unquestionably passed in the parliament if ruling party has a brute majority in the parliament which has been the case in Bangladesh in recent regimes. The Bangladesh Parliament has a standing committee for foreign affairs and theoretically foreign minister is accountable to the standing committee. In practice it could be seen that often foreign ministers did not bother to attend the meetings called by the standing committee on several occasions.39

Bureaucracy is another crucial institution in foreign policy formulations that works ‘behind the scene’ and is assigned with executing foreign policy tasks as per directions.40 It is undeniably the civil servants who are major stakeholders in foreign policy making. The officers of the foreign office and those who are posted abroad implement foreign policy decisions.41 By dint of being posted in foreign office they are the ground level staffs who look at the decision implementing process and negotiation stakes closely. As Bangladesh foreign policy directions are not static, bureaucrats are to work according to the will of government. As a consequence, the regime priorities become important in case of any government coming to power and bureaucrats need to satisfy the needs of executive decision makers. The opinion of civil servants in this regard is not adequately considered.

It is important to note that civil and military secret intelligence services have a vital role to play in the process of formulating foreign policy.42 The intelligence gathering is considered to be an integral part of diplomacy since the inception of the notion. In democratic institutions, intelligence services are important too, but in Bangladesh they are one of the key role players as they are directly answerable to the prime minister only. It is the prime minister’s domain to obtain information from intelligence services and s/he may or may not pass on the gathered information to the cabinet colleagues on a “need to know” basis.43 The important officials of intelligence agencies are selected on the basis of allegiance to the incumbent regime and key leader; hence intelligence services too tend to satisfy cherishes of the prime minister. In turn the prime minister

39 Report, “Parliamentary standing committees are working slowly”, in the Daily Samakal, January 29, 2017
40 Interview with Ambassador Afsarul Qader on November 06, 2013
43 Ibid, p.37
generally trusts the options put forth by the intelligence services than formal decision making authorities. Thus it can be observed that institutional factors in Bangladesh are centralized with almost no autonomy in making foreign policy decisions in an objective manner.

c. Societal Factors

Societal actors such as public opinion and media may play varying role in the foreign policy decision process. In most cases, when the executive branch of the government, headed by the prime minister, formulates a policy, the parliament and the mass people either remain indifferent or exercise a marginal role in determining the direction of foreign policy. However, the “informed public” expresses their views through the print and electronic media though. On the other hand, public opinion is formulated and interpreted in different ways by different regimes to suit policy planning. From supply side mechanism, during the military rule, it was seen that religion and Bangladeshi nationalism were used politically to raise anti-Indian public opinion which suited with government’s actions. On the other hand, different interpretations are given by Sheikh Hasina regime to mould public opinion about India. For example, in 2016, Bangladesh allowed India to build a mega coal plant in the ecologically sensitive Sundarbans mangrove forest despite strong reservation from national and international environment activists, however, the government continues to reiterate that the Indo-Bangla power plant has no chance of causing damage to the Sundarbans.

The role of media is also important. Media helps people know facts and figures. With regard to border killings by the Indian Border Security Force, media play important roles in forming public opinion. Steps of government do not give signals that media outcry could have strongly influenced decision making process of the government. From demand side mechanism, there is in fact no way in which people can participate in decision making process and express

45 Ibid, p. 36
46 Shoaib Daniyal, “Hindi-Bangla bhai-bhai: How Dhaka became India's most important ally in the subcontinent”, Scroll.in, October 13, 2016
48 Chelsea Harvey, “A new power plant could devastate the world’s largest mangrove forest”, The Washington Post, July 18, 2016
their views. Civil society does raise voice through media, but dissenting voices are demonized often. Therefore what people actually want does not get reflected and public voices remain unheard leaving foreign policy decisions a top-down approach mostly. But, democratic governments need to act in ways consistent with general views of the public.\textsuperscript{50}

d. Ideological Factors
Ideological beliefs of the ruling parties have always mattered in shaping foreign policy orientations in Bangladesh. Incumbent governments align their foreign policy priorities with the party ideology. Upholding national interest is a prime concern for any government. The question is then who defines national interest? It has been seen that there is no continuity in foreign policy directions of Bangladesh. Part of the reason lies with the fact that different regimes view national interest from different lenses. When ideological divisions over an issue are very large, this ideological structuring makes substitution across the policy instruments very difficult.\textsuperscript{51} For instance, the incumbent government in 2001, thought that it was in national interest to adopt a ’Look East’ policy. The next regime did not act on the Look East policy, and instead chose to look west by getting closer with India. In fact, the regime interest worked in both cases like all other circumstances. The next section of the paper will discuss with examples how party ideologies of Awami League and BNP contribute to foreign policy formulation. Evidence can be found in the foreign policy attitudes of Bangladesh toward China, the USA and the Middle East. Although senior government officials choose what would best suit their goals, they often set national priorities through the lens of political ideologies.

e. Interest Groups
Interest groups keep close contact with high ups of the government to promote their interests in foreign policy decision making. Individuals in these groups tend to have similar preferences and thus strong incentives to seek policies that will benefit themselves.\textsuperscript{52} In an era of global interconnectedness, economic doors are opening incrementally in different forms. Business groups have good influential power in persuading government to take trade friendly approaches. In case of foreign visits by the prime ministers, it is seen that business community takes part. Ready-made garments exporters are importantly viewed

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\textsuperscript{50} Helen V. Milner and Dustin Tinglay, \textit{Op. cit,} p. 186
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p. 196
\textsuperscript{52} Helen V. Milner and Dustin Tinglay, \textit{Op. cit,} p. 77
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in eyes of foreign policy decision makers. Bangladesh’s relations with Myanmar are perceived to have close influence of the business lobbies. Military lobbies also influence decision making to some extent. The Foreign Office has to accommodate military personnel in designated posts at home and abroad. Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, a think tank of Bangladesh government is headed by a military officer. UN peacekeeping and weapons purchase issues have important impacts upon foreign policy directions. Aid dependence also affects foreign policy decision making. Bangladesh tries to maintain close contacts with aid giving countries and agencies to promote economic development.

Overall, it can be seen from conventional wisdom that the prime minister ultimately decides what will be the foreign policy directions of the country. The advisors are chosen by him/her and they are selected on the basis of allegiance to party principles. As a consequence, prime ministers’ visions get reflected in advisor’s decisions. The foreign minister also plays role as s/he is officially is assigned in charge of conduction of the ministry of foreign affairs. But in the democratic system of Bangladesh, foreign minister does not have the scope to act very autonomously. At times, the role of senior party leaders is considered as significant as at vital times prime minister discusses issues with selected party leaders. Tabarak Hossain lists role of public opinion, shadow of India, aid dependence, geographical position as key domestic inputs to have played role in Bangladesh foreign policy formulation. In practice, however, political leadership ultimately appears as the key factor in deciding foreign policy issues. Abul Kalam describes globalized systemic inputs in and process of national decision making taking the impact of political process, institutions and market forces into account. The historical impression of foreign policy decision making suggests that polarized political priorities immensely influenced foreign policy directions of Bangladesh. The basic nature of parliamentary democracy demands exercise of pluralism and participation. Unlike many other democratic countries, foreign policy has not experienced democratic process of institutionalization of Bangladesh. There was an influence of ideological principles held by the regimes in determining foreign

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53 Tabarak Hussain, “Domestic Inputs in Bangladesh Foreign Policy”, in S.R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain (eds.), Bangladesh: Global Politics, Volume three, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1988

policy directions along with change in external political dynamics. The next section exemplifies how domestic inputs interplay in the case of Bangladesh through case studies.

**Major Decisions of Bangladesh Foreign Policy**

This section investigates three major decisions of Bangladesh during three regimes that will help understand the role of domestic inputs and the shifting nature of Bangladesh foreign policy orientation. From the perspectives of the long term influences of the decisions, significance in guiding foreign policy orientation and the wide reach of policies at the international level, the three cases are viewed as major decisions in Bangladesh foreign policy.\(^{55}\) Investigation of these will help understand the actors and factors that are generally taken into consideration. However, Houghton warns that “foreign policy decision making theory is not like supermarket, where we simply drop into our grocery basket the things we like.”\(^{56}\) Therefore, the domestic political context and chronology of events need to be kept in mind while analyzing the following case studies.

**Case 1: Foreign Policy Shift towards Muslim Countries**

Bangladeshis are not culturally as close to the Arabs, the Persians or the Turks as the Pakistanis or the North Indians are,\(^{57}\) and the geopolitical reality of Bangladesh does not necessitate her closeness with the Muslim world.\(^ {58}\) Yet Bangladesh foreign policy is significantly known for its intimacy with the Muslim countries.\(^ {59}\) This is in fact the product of a foreign policy shift consciously taken by the Bangladeshi policymakers. The partition of Pakistan and the formation of independent Bangladesh created a source of discord between the latter and the Muslim countries in the Arab and the Middle East region. The search for diplomatic recognition and foreign aid required Bangladesh a shift in foreign policy that prioritizes maintaining close relations with the Muslim World.

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55 Cases for investigation have been selected considering the opinion held by different experts regarding the far reaching implications of the decisions
59 *Ibid*, p. 110
Bangladesh foreign policy’s shift towards the Muslim countries progressed in various stages. The initial foreign policy pursuit was quest for recognition but Muslim countries did not happily agree to recognize because of Pakistan’s attempts to convince these countries that the birth of Bangladesh was part of Indian conspiracy while constitutional provisions of secularism and socialism were viewed in suspicious eyes in Muslim countries. The first Muslim country to recognize Bangladesh was Malaysia which was the 43rd country to do so, while Iraq was the first Muslim Arab country which was the 76th nation to do so. In 1972, when Bangladesh’s application for the membership to the Geneva-based World Health Organization (WHO) was put to vote, all Islamic countries except Egypt and Iraq voted against the admission of Bangladesh into WHO. The meager response from the Muslim countries compelled the newly independent Bangladesh to recognize that diplomatic support from the Muslim majority countries would be crucial for playing an active role in international institutions.

Bangladesh had its first opportunity to demonstrate overt support for an Arab cause during the Arab-Israel War of 1973 when rallies, processions and public meetings supporting the Arab cause were held all over Bangladesh resulting in sending of a twenty-eight member army medical unit in the war front and fifty tons of Bangladeshi tea in Egypt as a gesture of goodwill and solidarity with the Arabs in their fight against Israel. Domestically, government retained the study of Islamiat and Arabic in school syllabus introduced during the Pakistani days and Islamic Academy (currently known as Bangladesh Islamic Foundation) continued getting government’s financial support. These actions were intended to make it clear to Muslim countries that Bangladesh’s principles of secularism and socialism would not stand in her way of patronizing the religion in practice. Bangladesh participated in the second Islamic Summit.

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62 Ibid, p. 278
Conference which was held in Lahore on February 22, 1974.\textsuperscript{66} It can be observed how international relations were maintained making changes in domestic arena from a neoclassical realist point of view. However, whether the decision making process was participatory remains as a question.

After the assassination of Sheikh Mujib and subsequent regime changes, Bangladesh foreign policy was closely aligned with the Muslim countries through various steps taken at home and abroad. The extent of this decision was so large that a separate article of the constitution was added in order to accommodate the transformation. Major insertions and deletions took place in the constitutional provisions with a view to desecularizing it\textsuperscript{67} as President Zia amended the constitution of Bangladesh in 1977 stating that “Bangladesh shall endeavor to consolidate and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity as article 25 (2) of the constitution.\textsuperscript{68} The prospect of getting Arab financial support as external source for materializing ambitious economic programs appeared to be high on the successive governments’ agenda.\textsuperscript{69}

The foreign policy decision to shift towards Muslim countries served in a two-fold manner. The decision benefitted economically and politically.\textsuperscript{70} “Islamization” of the constitution was adopted to appease the local pro-Islamic sentiments and to project Bangladesh’s deep commitment to Islamic ideals and precepts to the Islamic world.\textsuperscript{71} The Zia and Ershad regimes used Islam for political ends\textsuperscript{72} as it lacked proper constitutional validity and popular support was a necessity at that time which was gained by Islamist gesture.

If one looks at the decision making process from the perspective of domestic inputs, there was no real parliament working at that time and constitutional amendment came through martial law proclamation. Decisions were taken in a dictatorial manner during the military rules of Zia and Ershad. The Supreme Court in 2010 delivered a verdict declaring the Fifth Amendment

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\item \textsuperscript{66} Akmal Hussain, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 117
\item \textsuperscript{67} In the preamble of the constitution, ‘Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) was added; and dropping secularism as one of the state principles, the following was added by the same proclamation: “Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions.”; \textit{Ibid.}, p.119
\item \textsuperscript{68} Harun ur Rashid, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 279
\item \textsuperscript{69} K.M. Mohsin, \textit{Op. cit.}, p.14
\item \textsuperscript{70} Akmal Hussain, p. 119
\item \textsuperscript{71} Harun ur Rashid, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 279
\item \textsuperscript{72} Akmal Hussain, \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 122
\end{itemize}
unconstitutional and through the fifteenth amendment article 25(2) was omitted. The omission of the article from the constitution has not resulted in any hostile reaction from the Muslim countries proving the fact that Islamization of the constitution at that time was used to attain political means. The key leader of the time, President Zia defined national interest and it had significant imprint in foreign policy decision making of that point of time.

In 2015, the Sheikh Hasina regime decided to join a Saudi Arabia-led 34 state “Islamic military coalition” to fight terrorism. The decision came as a surprise to many as the form and structure of the alliance remains vague since the coalition has “no practical arrangements, no joint forces, no military coordination, no defined objectives or methods.” It can be understood that the decision was taken to serve economic interests in the Middle East. However, from a foreign policy perspective, such a major decision deserved approval from the national parliament. But, the decision was taken without public debates and discussions, so much so that a senior minister in the cabinet also raised questions about the decision making procedure in this case. Foreign policy formulation like in this case demonstrates how idiosyncratic factors of political leadership play influential role in setting foreign policy priorities.

**Case 2: Tilt towards the East**

The foreign policy orientation that caused much debates and discussions after Khaleda Zia came in power after 2001 general elections was the policy of 'Look East.' It refers to developing enhanced trading and commercial relations with the countries of East and Southeast Asia in an effort to reduce Bangladesh’s economic dependence on India. It is very often said that as Bangladesh is no longer constrained by any political ideology, whereas trade and economic collaboration should be the guiding principle in expanding its foreign relations. Therefore, Bangladesh’s eastward policy shift was viewed as emanating from purely economic reasons. One may ask as to why relations

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76 Report, “It's time to unite, fight terrorism: PM says Saudi-led alliance creates scope for Muslim unity”, *The Daily Star*, June 23, 2016

77 Akmal Hussain, “Bangladesh’s New Foreign Policy Direction in Southeast and East Asia: Perspective and Goals”, *Journal of International Development and Cooperation*, Vol. 12, No. 01, 2005, p. 02
with India are being brought into the discussion while analyzing the domestic inputs to ‘Look East’ policy. It should be noted that the Bangladesh polity is often polarized between two camps: pro-India and anti-India. The India card remains latent in most cases, except for it being emerged as a major issue during national elections.78 In Bangladesh’s electoral politics, the Awami League is labeled as a pro-India party for its favorable attitudes toward India. The Awami League’s archrival, BNP, thus found the ‘Look East’ policy a logical stance to align with foreign policy posture of distancing from India.

The BNP, created by the first military ruler, General Zia, emphasized a religious identity for the Bangladesh polity, and had maintained an apparently anti-India stance. During Khaleda Zia’s BNP regime, the party maintained such a stance, which in turn resulted in New Delhi’s demonstration of little interest in improving relations with Bangladesh during Khaleda’s 1991-1996 BNP regime.79 In contrast, there was significant development of relations with India when the Awami League ruled during 1996-2001 period but Sheikh Hasina’s approach was much criticized by BNP. The party has a past record of looking at India as a hostile neighbor80 and the Indian government felt that BNP leading the 4-party alliance government that comprises two religious parties is inclined to a hostile anti-Indian attitude.81 There was initially no change in India’s attitude when Khaleda Zia came to power in 2001 as can be understood by sending of an emissary by the Hindu nationalist party BJP led government of India to convey the message to new government of Bangladesh that India was willing to keep the bilateral relations in the right path.82 However, bilateral relations fast deteriorated by mainly three issues: the migration of people across border, Indian allegation against Bangladesh of giving shelter to anti-India armed groups and Bangladesh’s failure to get trade concessions from India.83 BNP’s stance was critically viewed by India when it came to power and assuming so, BNP shifted eastward looking for broader cooperation with countries located in East and Southeast Asia.

Khaleda Zia told a gathering in Dhaka that her government was marching towards the East because "it would bring good for us at this moment" while she

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78 Smruti S. Pattanaik, “Internal Political Dynamics and Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy Towards India”, Strategic Analysis, Vol. 29, No. 3, July-September 2005, pp. 395-426
79 Bhumitra Chakma, Op. cit., p.09
80 Akmal Hussain, Op. cit., p.05
81 Ibid, p.04
82 Akmal Hussain, Op. cit., p.03
83 Ibid, pp.03-04
accused her predecessor, Sheikh Hasina, of pursuing a subservient foreign policy dictated by a particular country (indicating India).\(^8^4\) It appeared that Bangladesh really wanted to come out of the economic stranglehold of its large western neighbor, India.\(^8^5\) Analysts viewed the new stance on ‘Look East’ gave a clear signal that Khaleda’s year-old administration wanted to reduce Dhaka's dependence on traditional allies like India.\(^8^6\) Optimists viewed that under the dispensation of 'Look East' policy adopted in 2001, Dhaka's relations with the countries of South East Asia gave Bangladesh’s foreign relations a strategic depth that went beyond South Asia.\(^8^7\)

However, the Bangladesh government's much-trumpeted ‘Look East’ policy did not make much progress as the initiative was "limited in words, not in reality", observed parliamentary committee of the ministry of foreign affairs of that time which asked the ministry to make diplomatic efforts to remove apparent constraints hampering closer ties with countries like Japan and South Korea, and especially China, which the committee members said is a "tested friend of Bangladesh".\(^8^8\) In fact, it cannot be a pragmatic policy of having unrealistic dreams about benefits from the East by giving less attention to South Asia.\(^8^9\) India had seriously felt security threat during that regime by various activities with regard to insurgents of her Northeast region. The weakening of ties with India might have compelled the then regime to look east, but it is a geographical reality for Bangladesh can hardly ignore its erstwhile neighbor India.

It can be observed that the political ideology and party principles of the regime worked as domestic inputs in decision making as reflected in shaping the shift in foreign policy of Bangladesh. Lack of institutional vision was apparent in this case. The orientation, consequently, saw a complete turnabout within a few years not taking the form of a sustainable strategy in Bangladesh foreign policy.

\(^8^7\) Shamsher M. Chowdhury, Op. cit., accessed on December 10, 2013s
\(^8^9\) Akmal Hussian, Op. cit., p.10
Case 3: India-positive Policy Approach

Bangladesh foreign policy’s gesture of closeness with India after the Awami League-led grand alliance government came in power in 2009 is considered as a new shift in foreign policy direction marked with much hypes. During this period, Hasina initiated a radical departure in Dhaka’s approach towards New Delhi, adopting a very India-positive foreign policy orientation in order to build a long-term, irreversible bilateral relationship.\(^{90}\) Theoretically, there were alternative choices for the government when deciding upon the country’s India policy; for example, it could have continued with the policy of its predecessors and maintained closer ties with China and Pakistan at the expense of India; or it could have opted for a ‘neutral’ or ‘balanced’ approach, engaging India, China and Pakistan/Islamic countries on an equal footing.\(^{91}\) Why is it that Bangladesh aligned towards India departing from previous political regime’s policy of distance with India?

The answer lies not only in personality of Sheikh Hasina, as policy change is hard to explain using personality factor alone, since personality is relatively fixed,\(^{92}\) therefore, one needs to look at domestic level variables - the configuration of domestic political forces and the ideological division of the Bangladesh polity - and external variables, i.e. India's actions toward Bangladesh, acted in an interactive fashion and affected the course of Sheikh Hasina government's India policy.\(^{93}\) Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Hasina's international affairs advisor, maintains that in Bangladesh there is a realization that India is her biggest and closest neighbor, and the earlier policy of hostility is futile in a rapidly globalizing society.\(^{94}\) It is interesting to note that interpretation about India’s importance for Bangladesh from the key leaders and officials varied in the previous regime.

Sheikh Hasina went to New Delhi in January 2010 to meet her Indian counterpart when at the summit meeting, they agreed to a forward-looking, transformative agenda in order to build what they called an ‘irreversible’ cooperative relationship between the two neighbors; and in September 2011, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid a return visit to Dhaka to carry

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\(^{90}\) Bhumitra Chakma, *Op. cit.*, p.01
\(^{91}\) Ibid., p.11
forward the transformative agenda initiated in 2010. The close partnership continues even though the regime changed in India and Narendra Modi of BJP came to power. Modi visited Bangladesh in 2015 and apart from that the two leaders had several meetings while attending various multilateral events programs. Albeit there are some critically important issues yet unresolved, there were signs of significant development of relations in between the two countries in politico-security sectors, trade and investment areas including people to people connectivity and cultural exchange programs. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is the dominant figure within her party, the AL, as well as within the government and owing to a variety of factors like ideological stance, domestic polity, regime interest, party principles, she is personally committed to pursue an India-positive foreign policy and build a closer relationship with the country’s biggest neighbor.

It would be logical to conclude that Sheikh Hasina played a decisive role in bringing about a change in the country’s India policy as her role is critically important in government decision-making while her positive perception about India was principally formed through her personal experience and ideological stance. Questions remain as to how public opinion actually reacted with such policies and decisions. Some of the policy positions adopted by the Hasina government was widely criticized. The list includes: a plan for the joint construction of Rampal coal-fired power plant near the Sundarbans, granting transit and trans-shipment facilities for Indian goods and commodities including heavy equipments for a power plant in Tripura, comments from prime minister’s advisors about not demanding duties in return of transit. In addition, the continued killing of Bangladeshi citizens by Indian border force, concerns over India’s steps to build Tipaimukh dam, and lack of progress over the signing of Teesta water sharing agreement are some of the contending issues yet to be settled by the Hasina regime with its Indian counterpart. Government officials are yet to provide satisfactory answers to concerns over the net gains from the Hasina government’s India positive policy.

The foreign minister was reportedly found absent in several meetings called by the parliamentary standing committee on international affairs in different times


96 Ibid, p.18

97 Ibid, p.19
to talk on these issues. Disappointment rose so high at times that an influential parliamentarian from the Awami League-led grand alliance questioned in the parliament whether the prime minister’s advisors in Bangladesh were actually the advisors of India. Critics view that obsession with regime security has perhaps compelled the Hasina government to adopt a pro-India policy by ignoring public opinion at home. As Bhumiitra Chakma notes, among the domestic factors, the personality factor, in this case Prime Minister Hasina’s stance on India, plays a decisive role in the foreign policy making process in Bangladesh.

Summary and Conclusion
Several lessons can be drawn from this paper. Among the five sets of domestic-level factors discussed in this paper, only the idiosyncratic factors of leadership and the ideological stance of the party appear to have more influence in the three cases discussed. In contrast, institutions, societal factors and interest groups appear to have less influence in foreign policymaking.

First, political leadership continues to dominate the foreign policy decision process. This was evident during the military rulers’ policy of getting close to the Middle East, Khaleda Zia’s Look East policy, and Sheikh Hasina’s India policy. Although senior party leaders, especially, foreign ministers and advisers are often consulted, it is widely viewed that the party leaders make the vital decisions.

Second, the political ideology of the incumbent government plays a role in shaping the policy choices. This was evident during the overtly Islamist orientation of the Zia and Ershad regimes, as well as the Khaleda Zia regime. The secular ideology of Awami League also had encouraged Hasina to maintain closer relations with India. While the religious and secular ideologies had influenced Bangladesh Governments’ policies toward the Middle East and India, respectively, one can notice that a liberal market ideology has also encouraged the choice of Look East policy for Bangladesh.

Third, domestic institutions such as the national parliament and its concerned standing committee appear to have no role in the foreign policy formulation process. During the military regimes, the parliament’s role was reduced to endorsing the decisions taken by the dictator. After the restoration of

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parliamentary democracy, neither the Khaleda regime nor the Hasina government took any visible initiatives to engage the parliament in the foreign policy formulation process. Another institution, the Foreign Ministry is believed to play a role in agenda setting and maintaining the due bureaucratic process but there is lack of evidence on its influence in foreign policy process.

Fourth, the role of public opinion is ambiguous in the foreign policy process. While successive governments may have avoided decisions, whether on the Middle East, Southeast Asia or India, that could have antagonized public opinion, there are no institutional mechanisms through which public opinion are generated on certain policy issues. Consequently, the effect of public opinion on foreign policy decisions is hardly substantiated.

Fifth, various interest groups such as business lobbies may have secured financial benefits from the foreign policy decisions taken by incumbent governments. However, there is a lack of evidence on their influence in the foreign policy formulation process in Bangladesh.

In light of the above lessons, what is the theoretical implication of this paper? I argue that domestic factors matter in foreign policy. This paper mapped a list of such domestic level variables and explored their relative influence in three cases. It complements the neo-realist school of thought which argues that systemic factors are channeled through domestic level variables in shaping the foreign policy outcomes. Following the tradition of neo-classical realism, future studies should explore how system-induced pressures interacted with idiosyncratic factors, party ideology, and other state-level variables in shaping the foreign policy of Bangladesh.