U.S.- BANGLADESH DEFENSE RELATIONS

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The United States had been giving huge quantities of military aid to South Asian sub-continent, particularly to Pakistan of which Bangladesh was part until 1971. Bangladesh did not receive any military aid from the USA. Bangladesh like any other independent country, wanted to build its defense capability, but the policy makers in Washington seemed not to attach importance to Bangladesh’s request for defense equipment as USA did not perceive any serious threat to Bangladesh’s national security. Thomas Stern, an official of the State Department’s Political and Military Affairs Division, informed the Senate Arms Control and Security Arrangements Committee that the US does not desire an arms supply relationship with Bangladesh... We would, however, be prepared to consider export license request for cash sales on a commercial basis of limited type of military equipment such as transport and communication items.

Consequently, Bangladesh could procure items for its defense. For this purpose, the US government also provided some modest grants. In 1983 Bangladesh received a remittance of $400,000 from the US services Headquarters for buying these items and this was the general background of the US Bangladesh defense relations.

US interest in Bangladesh was not strategic, but it was Washington’s interest not to allow this new country, so close to the Indian Ocean, where US had vital strategic interests, to be totally under either the Soviet sphere of influence of that of China. For the same reason, Washington wanted a stable Bangladesh, as any power vacuum in Bangladesh created by political and economic chaos resulting in upsetting the status quo was not in its interest.

The defense relations between Bangladesh and the United States Strengthen during the time of Gulf war when 2300 member of Bangladesh army contingent served with coalition forces. With the invitation of US Bangladeshi troops participated in the multinational effort to restore democracy to Haiti.

Now two countries’ militaries have shared a warm and mutually beneficial relationship. There are joint military exercises between the two countries. The US military personnel expressed the view that the exercise will strengthen the bridge of friendship between the two countries.

National Security of Bangladesh

National security refers to the protection of core values, while the definition of core value is complex, at least three are vital in any conception of security: territorial integrity or unity; foreign policy autonomy or independence; and the maintenance of national power. National in turn is a summation of at least three components: military power, economic development and internal order. National unity and independence in other words depend on national power, which in turn rests on military, economic and political strength. The relationship of these values is of course dialectical: a sense of unity and independence are the bases for national powers as much as the other way round.

For Bangladesh, poverty, malnutrition, increasing unemployment and underemployment, rising external debt and dependence on outside help were the issues that threatened its national security. Md. Nuruzzaman rightly put these questions when he asks what does security mean for Bangladesh? What are the source of her insecurity and how menacing they are? To what extent do the prevailing sources of threats undermine her security? What strategies both in internal and external contexts, should Bangladesh follow to preserve and strengthen her national security?

India factor

India’s size, military, industrial, scientific and nuclear capabilities have caused a fear psychosis among smaller countries of the region. New Delhi plead that India has never been a predatory state in the part nor had been an expansionist power to dominate others. This assertion or assessment on the part of India is not being shared by other South Asian nation. Then what should India do? How a climate
of trust can be generated? How can smaller nations take it for granted that India’s motivations and its politico military resources would not be directed against them?\(^\text{11}\)

India has fashioned three kinds of responses, by which it tries to reduce the insecurity of the small states and there incentive to turn to non-regional powers.\(^\text{12}\) The first response has been to forge bilateral agreements with the smaller states, agreements that give India a role in their external security and obviate the need for non-regional protectors. Thus, India has treaty arrangements with Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. As things stand, Bhutan treaty is stable, the Bangladesh treaty seems unlikely to be renewed, and the Nepal treaty is under pressure but may well subsist. In any case, though, India will be deeply implicated if there is a serious external threat to either Bangladesh or Nepal - an – both countries recognize this. New Delhi has tacit droit de regard, and while neither country will say so publicly this is altogether unacceptable to Dhaka and Kathmandu. A second response to the insecurity of the small states has been New Delhi’s insistence that, in the event of internal instabilities, which require military and other forms of assistance, India should be consulted and used as a first resort. Commentators in South Asia have called this “the India doctrine”. Finally, India has reacted to the unease of its small neighbors by fostering regionalism. New Delhi hopes that regional concave will reassure the smaller states with respect to India’s motives and actions. SAARC is the example of this strategy, but India’s attempts to bring South Asian nations into regional arrangements have a longer history, dating back to the Asian Relations Conference of March 1947.\(^\text{13}\)

The combination of regional strategies has worked since the mid 1970s, outside powers including China have made it clear that they see India as the regional hub and that they are not interested in propping up these states against New Delhi. Obviously, Pakistan remains the exception, although even here both Washington’s and Beijing’s politics have been much more nuanced since about 1976.\(^\text{14}\)

As regards Bangladesh, India has certain problems to sort them out in an amicable manner. Problematic issues like the Farakka barrage, New Moor island, Tin Bigha corridor and the recent one the raising of barbed wires along the border have caused irritants in bilateral relations of India and Bangladesh.\(^\text{15}\)

Bangladesh’s policy towards Indian Ocean as a zone of peace  
In the early years of independence, Bangladesh supported Indian Ocean as a zone of peace because of two reasons. First, since Indo-Bangladesh relations then were raised to the level of a ‘special relationship’ sealed by a twenty five-year friendship treaty. India was not considered a threat to Bangladesh’s security and therefore Indian naval ambition and its effects on Bangladesh’s maritime interests were not factors in Bangladesh’s security calculations. Bangladesh’s interests with regard to the Indian Ocean coincided with that of India. Second, the then government saw Bangladesh’s independence war as a struggle against economic and political exploitation which was equated with western imperialism, it was therefore, natural for the government to take a position against the western military presence in the Indian Ocean.\(^\text{16}\)

This policy however, changed with the fall of Mujib government, which also brought about a reversal of Indian attitude towards Bangladesh. Perception of India in Bangladesh radically changed from that of a benefactor to that of powerful adversary whose interests are at considerable variance with those of Bangladesh. Since then, enthusiasms for converting the Indian Ocean into a zone of peace.\(^\text{17}\)

Pragmatism dictates that Bangladesh should be wary of Indian naval ambition. The significant enhancement of India’s naval capabilities since 1971 is but a prelude to increased naval projection over a vaster area that are likely to manifest in the coming decade. With the dispute over maritime boundary still to be settled, which will affect Bangladesh’s share of the oceans and its resources, Bangladesh cannot afford to be complacent about India’s growing naval might and its readiness to force an issue if need be.\(^\text{18}\)

Under this changed circumstance, presence of the navies of the major power can and does serve as a check on the ambitions of the regional navies, and this can only be to Bangladesh’s interest. By the same token, the conversion of Diego Garcia to an American naval base is a necessary deterrent to regional naval ambitions and provides at least psychological security to countries like Singapore, Bangladesh,
Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia among many others. Thus Bangladesh should carefully weigh its interests in the context of regional realities and adopt policies regarding the Indian Ocean and the law of the Seas accordingly.19

Development of military relations with the United States

Strategy is not a universal science, but particularly to the power or actor concerned. American strategic outlook is based on calculations of American national interest in the specific circumstances in which decision are made and actions are taken.20

The Bangladesh Army, Navy and Air Force are composed of regular military members. The 110,000 members, seven division armies modeled and organized along British lines, similar to other armies on the Indian Sub-continent. However, it has adopted US army tactical planning procedures, training management techniques, and non commissioned officer educational systems. It also is eager to improve its peacekeeping operation capabilities and is working with the US military in that area.21

The US has always denied the defense supplies to Bangladesh.22 However, continuous efforts of Bangladesh bring some good results. In 1995, the Bangladesh Air Force made its largest purchase from the US to date-12T-37 Jet trainers.23 The US government under the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program delivered four C-130B aircraft as a ‘gift’ to Bangladesh for enhancing the country’s capability of peacekeeping operation by the Bangladesh Air Force (BAF).24

Since late 1970s, Bangladesh military personnel receive professional training assistance from the United States through International Military Education Training Program (IMET).25 Visits of high ranked military officials and combined military exercises, conferences, seminars, such as Pacific Area Senior Officers Logistic Seminars (PASOLS) and Pacific Army Management Seminar(PAMS) are also held under the program.26

Since 1988, several joint military exercises and national building works have been undertaken, by the US and Bangladesh Armed Forces.27 The US Department of Defense responded to the 1991 cyclone with over US $28 million in kind assistance including medical supplies, other relief commodities and repair of the Chittagong Airport by Corps of Engineer Personnel.28 In addition the US President dispatched a joint task force of 4600 marines and 2965 sailors, along with seven ships including the helicopter carrier USS Tarawa, 28 helicopters and ten landing craft. The relief mission engaged in air and amphibious transport, communications, medical and engineering assessments and assistance.29 The relief efforts of US troops are credited with having saved as many as 200,000 lives.30

As a part of a joint military exercises with the Bangladesh Army and to participate in a Habitat for Humanity Project Five Houses jointly built by the members of the US Marine Corps and the Bangladesh Army at Haluaghat in Jessore.Habitat for Humanity country Director for Bangladesh Edward Fernando stated that American Power Generation Company AES provided $4800 for construction of the houses. The families which received the houses included day laborers and a motor vehicle driver. Three of the recipients are women.31

In 1978 Bangladesh signed an agreement with the US voluntary organization Peace Corps and in 1998 they started their function in Bangladesh after signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two countries. 25 members of Peace Corps arrived in Bangladesh in 1998 to train primary school teachers on how to teach English language.32

Bangladesh is seeking US assistance to get a regional UN institute for peace-keepers, Dhaka had hosted, with the help of US army’s Pacific Command, a four-day seminar on South Asian Peace-keeping Experience where Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stated that Dhaka would be the ideal location for such an institute where troops from Asia-Pacific countries could be trained in peace-keeping. With more than a thousand personnel in eleven missions, Bangladesh is today one of the largest contributors to UN peace-keeping.33

The military cooperation between the two countries seen positive which will go a long way. The US troop platoons have visited Bangladesh on several occasions in the past to conduct joint military exercises. There have been three such exercises involving the armies of the two countries in the last ten years. Since 1982, a liaison team comprising the Pacific Command of the US and the Bangladesh military has been
in operation to coordinate their actions in the Indian Ocean Zone, including in times of disasters, breach of peace and/or hostility in the region. More than 300 military personnel from Bangladesh have received training in the US since 1979. The US military assistance to Bangladesh too has been fairly steady since the 1980s.34

Bangladesh and the US are carrying out joint exercises as a symbol of their collaboration, ‘Operation Seabat’ an exercise between US Navy and Bangladesh Navy and Air Force was held in August 1995 in the Bay-of-Bengal.35 According to Commander Brian Prindle of US Navy, this exercises focused on cooperation between US and Bangladesh naval forces in fields of surveillance, search and rescue operation during natural calamities, a legacy of the 1991 post cyclonic disaster rescue ‘Operation Sea Angel’. It was also aimed at forging cooperation between US Navy and Bangladesh Air Force in search and rescue technique. The joint exercise is a part of the series underway since 1992. The exercises are held twice annually since 1992 and they sustain and augment Bangladesh US interactions. These exercises afford Bangladesh considerable leverage in its relationship with Washington. 36

Military relationship between the two countries further developed by the visit of Chief of the US Armed Forces General Dennis Joe Reimol, in April 1998, who headed a 97member goodwill delegation. Reimol met the Prime Minister, President and senior defense officials.37

US proposal of Naval Bases and SOFA with Bangladesh

The first US proposal had come as early as 1969. Joseph Farland, the then American envoy to Pakistan, had met Mujib and Maulana Bhashani soon after Yahya Khan had taken over from Ayub. Farland promised to help the separatist movement with political and material support if Mujib or Bhashani started it. In return, the new government would have to hand over St. Martin Island, including Manpura to the United States. Both Bhashani and Mujib did not agree, possibly for fear of a clash with India. In 1971, at the height of the negotiations Mujib was having on the political future of Pakistan, Farland repeated the proposal at the crucial closed-door meeting he had with Mujib on 21 March. The army crackdown was still four days away. 38

After independence, the offer was renewed in 1974 during the visit to the Sub-continent of the American Secretary of State, Henry A. Kissinger. Mujib was then struggling to run an economy buffeted by a countrywide famine that had left 27,000 starvation deaths and equally devastating floods. Kissinger is reported to have promised to bale out Bangladesh from its economic problems in return for a secret transfer of the control of St. Martin Island. Mujib however did not agree. 39

In early 1980s a Soviet military analyst postulated that the United States wanted to use the Bangladesh Islands, including Manpura; as part of a new chain of Indian Ocean bases to surround the eastern part of Africa, South West Asia and South Asia. Pentagon wanted to use islands belonging to Bangladesh and the former British naval base at Trincomalee in Sri Lanka as well as the South African naval base near Simonstown.40

Lieutenant General J ames M. Lee, Commander of the US land force in the Western Pacific, during his five days visit to Bangladesh in early 1984 held extensive discussions with the then president and chief Martial Law Administrator Lt. General H.M. Ershad, the Chief of the Bangladesh Navy and Air Force, the Chief of General Staff and the Defense Secretary to the Bangladesh government. The U.S. government was interested in obtaining landing facilities for the Seventh Fleet Planes in emergency situations. Chittagong the only Bangladesh port open to the sea was considered unfit for berthing for big warships. The Seventh Fleet could not therefore be keen on obtaining berthing facilities for its warships, which rank among the largest and most sophisticated in the world. But emergency landing facilities including refueling amenities in the Bay of Bengal could be of tremendous advantage for its planes. Three senior officers of the Asia pacific command made an extensive tour not only of Chittagong but also of St. Martin and Manpura Islands, in the same year while the U.S. was looking for emergency landing facilities for the Seventh Fleet at Chittagong, it wanted establish naval bases in the two Islands.41 Because of strong opposition from domestic level Bangladesh government did not allow USA to establish naval bases in Bangladesh Islands.

In 1998 the US diplomat, Mr. Bill Richardson, during his visit to Bangladesh proposed SOFA agreement to Bangladesh government which is most controversial issue. SOFA would facilitate unhindered entry of the US troops into Bangladesh, in times of emergency, without
having to comply with even visa and passport formalities. Equipment and supply would also have been allowed to be brought in without being subject to customs formalities. 43

Sections of the media, intelligentsia and left-leaning politicians argued that the proposed agreement contained unequal provisions would work against Bangladesh’s sovereignty and dignity. The “pro-liberation” group which supported the Awami League on most issues too came out against such an agreement, as its acceptance would tantamount to sell out of national sovereignty.44

Responding to such criticism, the US authorities clarified on June 18, 1998 that SOFA was not conceived as a military pact and that it would not facilitate the establishment of a U.S. military base in Bangladesh. They said that the agreement would lay down the procedures for “the movement of US personnel and supplies into a host nation for an exercise.” The two countries are signatories to a temporary treaty for conducting joint exercises; they have also signed a Memorandum of Understanding relating to the status of U.S. troops.46

American officials viewed the proposed SOFA as a logical extension of the MOUs signed by the two countries to determine the status of the US forces during joint exercises. In 1998, the joint exercises focused on combating the narcotics Mafia, organizing disaster relief, conducting air and sea rescue operations, building schools and providing medical training and treatment.47

The “anti-liberation group”, which opposed the independence struggle in 1971 and which is now an ally of religious fundamental forces argued that Bangladesh needs a “security umbrella” of a major power to defend its interests in the nuclearized sub-continent. Strategic affairs experts who subscribe to this theory said that consequent to India’s nuclear tests, it would be necessary for Bangladesh to enter into a military cooperation agreement with a major nuclear power “even if it meant that the islands in the Bay of Bengal would have to be made a base for that power.” Several intellectuals likewise argued in favor of Bangladesh taking shelter under the security umbrella of a major power like the US “to counter any Indian design.”48

SOFA’s ostensible aim is to help Bangladesh manage relief operations during natural calamities. But it is the magnitude and nature of US relief operations that make India uneasy. In Asia Japan and Kazakhstan signed SOFA, an entire US airborne division validated a massive rapid deployment action plan. The division took off from the US in large troop carriers, refueled mid-air and landed on improvised airfields in Kazakhstan. A high Indian official checked on this hush-hush exercise which, India believes, was essentially to test how fast US forces could land in Kashmir in strength, should trouble erupt there.49

Singapore and other American client states in the region view these moves a counterpoise against Chinese expansionism. As Kishore Mahbubani, permanent secretary (policy) in Singapore’s ministry of foreign affairs, wrote in Foreign Affairs, “China should understand why there is a strong impulse in the region to retain elements of the status quo. The U.S. military presence is one key element. There is a consensus Washington’s defense establishment this presence should not be scaled back.”50

Indian analysts feel that there has been a heightening of US military activity in the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific. As Cohen said, “India is a growing actor, Russia is a potential player and Europe is increasingly linked to the (Asia Pacific) region through a variety of dialogues and entities. Anticipating and managing this sea of change of American forces that provide certainty and confidence. This has been summarized in our continued commitment to maintain approximately 100,000 U.S. personnel forward deployed in Asia pacific.” He declared that the US wanted to enhance its military capability in the region.51

The U.S. has also approached Sri Lanka for military facilities but Colombo has not yet responded favorably, partly respectively India’s concerns. The Americans, meanwhile, are planning to base a full-fledged fifth fleet in Manama, Bahrain, in place of a few units of the US navy’s central command. Indian analysts ascribe this heightened US attention to two factors: Indian nuclear tests, and Bangladesh’s natural gas deposits.52

The offshore natural gas deposits have attracted dozen western oil companies into Bangladesh, a basket-case economy now in the
process of transformation. Initially the estimate was that the deposit would not exceed 10 trillion cubic feet. Now the Anglo-American energy explorers have struck 100 to 120 trillion cubic feet.53

With a changing economic profile Bangladesh is emerging as a key player in south Asian geopolitics. The Americans are playing on Dhaka’s desire for a higher international profile. The deal is that Washington would help Dhaka get a regional UN institute for peace-keepers, if Dhaka agrees to lie on the American SOFA.54

A section of the media reported that during their meeting in New Delhi, Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee advised Sheikh Hasina, the then Prime Minister against entering into such an agreement with the U.S. The Sheikh Hasina Government also viewed SOFA from another perspective. In its view, Bangladesh, as an active member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, owed it to the region not to allow the entry of foreign forces “which may have profound and far-reaching consequences.” The Government has elaborately, but cautiously, explained that the stationing of foreign troops or their frequent entry into the country might have an “adverse impact” within and outside the country.55

Bangladesh is factoring in the views of its friends in the region, who might be displeased by such an agreement. Bangladesh has military cooperation arrangements with a number of other countries, including India, Pakistan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore which involves regular joint military exercises, but none of these nations had proposed such an agreement.56

However U.S.A. did not drop the idea of Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Bangladesh. Mary Ann Peters US Ambassador to Bangladesh said recently that “we’ve not dropped the idea ... we’ve this agreement with many countries around the world ... It makes easier military to military cooperation and exchanges.57

Briefing a group of journalists at the US Center, she said that the U.S.A. and Bangladesh had been doing military exercises and training over the years, but every time it required signing of MOU by the two sides, which was a delaying process. If there was such an arrangement like SOFA, provision of MOU would not be required and
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11. Ibid.

12. Kanti Bajpai, n.6. p.84

13. Ibid.

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21. Background Note: Bangladesh, n.3.


23. Dilara Chowdhury, n.2.


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30. Background note: Bangladesh n.5.


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