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Foreign Policy Making Process in Bangladesh: An Assessment.*

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Abstract: Foreign Policy of a nation is a complex and dynamic political course that she pursues in relation to other states with a view to promoting and protecting her national interests. Bangladesh's foreign policy's main principal 'friendship to all, malice towards none' is the basis of foreign relations with other countries. The effectiveness of Bangladesh's foreign policy depends to a great extent on the stable flow of domestic inputs in the form of greater and effective participation of domestic groups and institutions in the foreign policy process.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Institutions, Parliament, Ministry, Constitution.

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I. Introduction:

Foreign policy is a series of decisions made by particular actors using specific decision-making process. It is made and implemented within an international and domestic political context, which must me understood by a state in order to determine the best foreign policy option. Foreign policy is shaped not by any single but by a varied combination of factors, objective conditions, security environment, national unity, resource strength, social values, domestic pressures etc. Dr. Henry Kissinger once said, "a nation's values define what is just, its strength determines what is possible, its domestic structure decides what policies can be implemented." Foreign Policy formulation of small states is a arduous process; it has become more difficult in the contemporary world situation. Bangladesh belongs to the category of small states in terms of its size, population, natural resources, state of economy, and military capability. Its "smallness" is reflected in the foreign policy decisions since its advent as an independent state. The foreign policy of any country at any point of time is a product of its history, experience, compulsions and challenges. Foreign policy is a strong instrument to promote and protect our national security, regional stability, rapid economic growth and greater international cohesion and cooperation to advance the cause of peace and progress. In fact, understanding objectivities, scopes and compulsions of foreign policy are imperative.

Foreign Policy of a nation is a complex and dynamic political course that she pursues in relation to other states with a view to promoting and protecting her national interests. Foreign Policy consists of the actions which a state undertakes to achieve its national interest in the dynamic global environment. K. J. Holsti said, "the action of a state towards international environment and the conditions, usually domestic, under which-these action are formulated concerned essentially with foreign policy." Prussian diplomat and statesman Otto Von Bismarck defined the extension of domestic policy is foreign policy. Foreign policy refers to the policy of a sovereign state to achieve its desired goals to the foreign countries. Professor F. S. Northedge said that "Foreign policy constitutes an endless dialogue between the powers of continuity and the powers of change". The clarity and vigor of a nation's foreign policy largely depends on the state of its domestic policies in different areas. In this regard Professor F.S. Northedge mentioned, "The formulation of foreign policy then represents, on its domestic side, a continuous series of compromises and adjustments between the different elements of government and social structure." Because a foreign policy consists of selected national interests presumably formulated into a logically consistent whole that is then implemented, any foreign policy can be viewed analytically in three phases: conception, content, and implementation.

The primary objective of any foreign policy making is to further the national ideals, strengthen national security, and safeguard independence and territorial integrity; and an increasingly important component of national interest centres on advancing the country's economic interests.

Essentially, foreign policy making consists of the sum total of the efforts by a state in pursuit of what it perceives to be its interest in its relationship with other states. ¹⁰ Like other states the foreign policy formulation in Bangladesh is done on the interpretation of national interest by the regime in power. Formulation of policy for

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the conduct of foreign relations is a continuing process, trying to match the desirable with the possible. Policy makers are expected to examine all available options before selecting the most practical with a view to achieving desired results. They also need to bear in mind the essential correlation between policy and resources. Outlining the basis of Bangladesh's foreign policy Bangabandhu once said, "We are a small country, we want friendship with all and malice towards none." Bangladesh's foreign policy's main principal 'friendship to all, malice towards none' is the basis of foreign relations with other countries. Of course this dictum always influences and inspirations in our foreign policy decision making process. In the present time also Bangladesh has not deviated from the above mentioned principle. Foreign policy making is a vital assignment for any state, irrespective of its size and power by which it maximizes its national interests and minimizes threats to its national security emanating from international system.

The foreign policy of Bangladesh, like that of any other state is also primarily a projection of the country's socio-economic and political compulsions in international politics. The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971 in South Asia appears to be a unique phenomenon in international affairs. Bangladesh's options in foreign policy appear to be limited because of its geographical location, small size of the territory and limited economic resources. For an effective foreign policy that involves ideological projections and the safeguarding of national interests, a little bit of consensus in internal politics on vital foreign policy issues must prevail. But this is a matter of regret that internal dissension in Bangladesh politics, frequent deviation from ideological standards, and lack of consensus has been reflected in the foreign policy.

This paper examines documents (e.g., existing literature) and interview transcripts. Documentary information helps to collect explicit data and usually comes from several of sources, such as government documents, academic researches and articles sourced from print media, etc. On the other hand, this paper adopts semi-structured interview by constructing topic guide and selecting respondents purposively. In addition, the paper adopts interpretive approach, a method of qualitative data analysis.

Formal Institutions: An important issue is foreign policy making, which involves multifaceted and diverse actors, various institutions and process. ¹⁵ In Bangladesh, foreign policy decisions are made at the interactions of both formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions are National Assembly (Jatiyo Sangsad), President, Prime Minister, Chief Martial Law Administrator, parliamentary standing committee, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their missions abroad with their yearly reports, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Commerce, other ministries, civil bureaucrats, and armed forces.

Prime Minister: At the top of the organizations pyramid for the foreign policy, stands the head of the Government, be she/he President, Prime Minister, or Dictator, is the key figure in all foreign policy decisions. ¹⁶ Their psychological characteristics, beliefs and personality traits massively affect on Bangladesh's foreign policy. ¹⁷ At present, Bangladesh is governed by the Westminster parliamentary system. It is the executive that takes the final decision on a particular issue on behalf of Bangladesh. The Prime Minister can "hire and fire" Cabinet Ministers. Under the Westminster system the Prime Minister could be a powerful dictator under the guise of democracy. The Prime Minister determines in broad terms the direction and thrust of the foreign policy. The Prime Minister is accountable to the Parliament and to the people for the decision. The Prime Minister is the executive head of the government in the country and the Prime Minster entrusts to a great extent the Foreign Minister with the responsibility to explain why such a decision on a particular issue has been adopted in respect of foreign relations. ¹⁸ Above all, The Prime Minister and the Cabinet set the direction of foreign policy in Bangladesh.

Parliament: In most of the democratic countries, the party which commands majority in parliamentary elections, forms the government and strives to implement its own polities and priorities. In the parliament the prominent leaders especially the Chairmen of Foreign Affairs, Defense and other related committees have considerable influence on foreign policy decisions. To some extent, legislature can exercise the right to control executive's foreign policy decisions, either by refusing or by ratifying or changing their substance or time.

Bangladesh Parliament can play a decisive role in the formulation of foreign policy. Parliament, being the forum of the elected representatives of the people, needs to provide its inputs in the formulation of foreign policy. By analyzing the existing issues, Parliament may press the government to review its thinking and change of some aspects of foreign policy. The debate in the Parliament on the foreign policy is likely to attract the attention of the media and by extension to the people at large. The debates and "Questions Time" on foreign policy in the Parliament provide the government the reactions of the MPs on the policy. Another important function the Parliament does is the discussion of issues in the Parliamentary Standing Committees by the MPs of the ruling and opposition parties. These committees can play a significant role in formulating policy in foreign policy. A democratic country is supposed to have popular participation in important foreign policy issues through their elected representatives. Former Bangladeshi foreign minister said, "No foreign policy, however, carefully planned, can be stronger than the inner strength of a nation. The success of a nation's foreign policy depends pre-eminently on the strength of its foundation. National unity and national consensus on basic national issues form the cornerstones of this foundation." Parliament has a clear constitutional role, the nature of power

structure in Bangladesh, however, could not allow it to grow and develop as an involved institution, particularly in foreign policy making.

Foreign Ministry and Other Ministries: The process of formulation of policy options and policy decision making is basically initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the basis of reports received from Bangladesh missions abroad and other sources. The Ministry also analyses and interprets all the report received from various sources. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the principal channel of communication between Bangladesh and other countries. For all foreign missions located in Dhaka, Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the primary point of contact. It is natural that Minister of External Affairs should emerge as the most important factor in the making of foreign policy, though it is true that much depends upon his human and intellectual qualities. As a Minister, not only is he in charge of the Ministry, but he is in the very centre of foreign affairs. He is the link between the Cabinet and the Ministry as well as between the country and the foreign powers. He is in direct contact with the representatives of foreign countries accredited to Dhaka. He has power to influence policy, both in its formulation and in its implementation. Projection of Bangladesh abroad is one of the basic functions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Embassies/Missions of Bangladesh contribute to the process of foreign policy making and implementation through a complex range of activities that includes: representation, protection and projection of defined values and interests of Bangladesh, negotiations, reporting-advising, consular activities and self administration.²² The members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and others Foreign Service have, no doubt, an important role to play in the planning of foreign policy. The Foreign Ministry has the vital role to play practically in all aspects of foreign policy.

Other Ministries of the government of Bangladesh in varying degrees also contribute to the inputs for external policy making and participate in its implementation. The External Resources Division (ERD) of the Ministry of Finance is the second most involved organ of the government in the process of external relations. The process of external financial and aid relations are structurally coordinated at the level of the Finance Minister. The process of external trade relations is conducted by the Ministries of Commerce and Industries. Most of the policy issues relating to Bangladesh foreign trade are initiated by the Ministry of Commerce. Both Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Commerce have their representatives in the Embassies as Economic Ministers/Counsellors to conduct external economic relations on their behalf.²³ The complex process of Bangladesh's foreign policy making continue to be the critical challenges. A degree of institutional and functional fusion and innovation is called for to improve foreign policy planning in the Ministry.

Bangladesh Armed Forces: The Bangladesh army also contributes to the foreign policy making of Bangladesh. It is clearly manifested by the invitation of the UN Security Council to Bangladesh Army to form the part of the UN peacekeeping forces in Namibia, Iran-Iraq border, Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Senegal, Sierraleone, Congo and Liberia. The role of Bangladesh armed forces in the multinational forces of Saudi Arabia, during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1991, also demonstrates its significant role in the foreign relations of Bangladesh. When a country finds it difficult or impossible to conduct its external relations through peaceful means, the armed forces are obliged to pursue national interests through other means. A new dimension in the role of the armed forces of Bangladesh in the conduct of external relations began with the induction and lateral entries of military officers in various important positions in the Bangladesh Foreign Service particularly as Ambassadors, Ministers and Counsellors. Bangladesh's regular participation in the UN peacekeeping missions originates from her constitutional obligations to maintain peace, freedom and justice across the world.

Constitution: According to Bangladesh's constitutional provision, preserving national interest and safeguarding national power lie at the essence of Bangladesh foreign policy. On foreign policy Article 25 of the constitution runs as follows:

"The state shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes, and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter, and on the basis of those principles shall:

- a] Strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament;
- b] Uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; and
- c] Support oppressed people throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism." Foreign policy of Bangladesh aims to ensure territorial integrity of the state which includes internal security and protection from external aggression. The constitutional stipulations indicate peace as the cornerstone of Bangladesh foreign policy. In earliest statesman, Father of the Nation Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared Bangladesh to be the "Switzerland of the East". Theoretically maintain possible

because Bangladesh is a peace loving country. According to Bangladesh's constitutional provision, preserving the national interest and safeguarding national power lie at the milestone of Bangladesh foreign policy. Bangladesh's regular participation in the UN peacekeeping missions originates from her constitutional obligations to maintain peace, freedom and justice across the world.

Informal Institutions: Informal institutions include political parties, press and media, non-government organizations, and groups and associations.

Political Parties: In any democratic political system, political party is considered as a means for capturing political power and the mechanism for widening popular participation; aggregating and articulating the interests and demands of diverse segments of the social spectrum to the executive which performs the act of policy formulation; recruiting political leadership; providing a link between government and mass citizenry. Political party and foreign policy are seemingly different but they do have substantial linkages which affect each other's course of actions, and decisions. Actually, in parliamentary system the leader of the party becomes the leader of parliament, and the leader of the parliament (of majority party) becomes the Head of the Government. In this way the linkage between political party and foreign policy is obvious especially in parliamentary system. Political party and foreign policy both are the byproduct of broad social order. The previous commitments and precedents, the socio-economic structure, attitudes of the formal and informal social and religious organizations, various means of mass communication and public opinion all play a significant role in influencing foreign policy decisions and in determining the nature of the party structure and competition.

Like other countries of the world in Bangladesh political parties play a crucial role in influencing the foreign policy of the country outside the government. On the major foreign policy issues they give suggestions to the government, express their opinion through public meeting, public protest, and newspaper statements and influence the foreign policy decisions.²⁹ The direction of foreign policy depends on the political leader of a country at a given time. Often it has been seen that a non-elected leader could pursue a path contrary to the wishes and aspirations of the people.

In Bangladesh, opposition political parties constitute the major institutions outside the government which concerns themselves with issues relating to external relations. But their structural weakness and lack of experience and specialized competence oblige them to confine their role to those external issues having more direct bearing on domestic political climate. Political parties in Bangladesh by and large do not have adequate organizational capability but on major issues of foreign relations, they demonstrate their views often through public protests, organization of public meetings and newspaper statements.³⁰ Another type of demand which has impact on the foreign policy is based on the ideology of the ruling party. All political parties in Bangladesh have some commitments on foreign policy on the basis of their ideology and are determined to implement them when elected to power.

Press and Media: The press and media play a dynamic role by covering news and views, highlighting major issues on foreign policy and analyzing the government's policies. Press and media create public opinion and contribute to the foreign policy decision making process. Press and media has become very vocal and influential element of foreign policy decision making process in the age of globalization not only Bangladesh, but also other countries.³¹

Intelligence Services: Intelligence services have a vital role to play in the foreign policy decision making process. These agencies are, generally speaking, answerable to the Prime Minister. It is the Prime Minister's domain to gather information from the intelligence services. The Prime Minister may pass on the information to the cabinet colleagues on a need to know basis. The impact of the views from the intelligence agencies on foreign policy appears to be considerable.

Other Institutions: Bangladesh's universities and special institutions, like Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA), Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) contribute to the foreign policy decision making process by undertaking studies on various problems and issues of foreign policy. BIISS which contribute to the decision making process by undertaking studies on particular problems or issues. BIISS is also trying to bridge the existing gap between theory and practice through collaborative efforts between academicians and policy makers, planners and professionals. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), think tanks, civil society also play dynamic role foreign policy decision making process. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have in recent years developed all over the world as a new factor in international relations. Their pragmatic impact on international relations is yet to be clearly perceived in Bangladesh.

Universities and other higher seats of learning in Bangladesh have often sought to make themselves intellectually relevant and effective in relation to foreign policy questions. University based organizations of

teachers and students with different political persuasions have at times taken open position on certain foreign policy issues. There is also a growing interest within the academic circle of Bangladesh to discuss and debate foreign policy questions. Many University teachers have now recognized publications and monographs on foreign issues. Universities all over the world are known to provide necessary intellectual basis or rational for foreign policy activities of their governments. As the universities of Bangladesh are coming out of their relative isolation, it is expected that they would become centers of influence in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy of Bangladesh. ³⁴ University's teachers sometimes given their opinion and ideas in particular foreign policy issues, those process lessen day by day in Bangladesh. ³⁵ The emphasis to Prime Minister leadership in foreign policy is not to deny, or even to diminish, the significance of other actors, agencies, or influences upon the policy process.

II. Conclusion:

It is true that various factors that contribute to foreign policy decision making process. The effectiveness of Bangladesh's foreign policy depends to a great extent on the stable flow of domestic inputs in the form of greater and effective participation of domestic groups and institutions in the foreign policy process. For implementation, our foreign policy will be a source of strength in support of regional and global peace and progress. Bangladesh, which was once called an international basket case, now has immense geo-strategic and geo-economic importance. Foreign policy begins at home. No government in Bangladesh could ignore geographical reality in fashioning a foreign policy. Sometimes values have an effective role in Bangladesh's foreign policy formulations. When dealing with the values that influence the foreign policy decision-making process. Bangladesh cannot ignore the fact that foreign friendly countries can influence in many ways the shape of foreign policy.

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