



Five Decades of Bangladesh-US Relations: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the United States took an opposite stand on the question of independence of Bangladesh, the relationship started developing since the US recognition to Bangladesh in 1972. Apart from few exceptions, most of the governments of Bangladesh under different political regimes intended to remain in good terms with the US. However, the relationships have not always been an ascending one as Bangladesh used to remain secondary concern for US foreign policy preferences. It is after the calamitous event of 9/11 that brought

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South Asia into US strategic calculations. Being a Muslim majority country, Bangladesh got special significance to the US in the context of fear from religious extremism during the post 9/11 era. Lately, the ever-increasing trend in bilateral trade, significant boost in the importance of the Indian Ocean region and the Bay of Bengal, voluminous involvement of China in both economic and military affairs of Bangladesh, the renewed relationship of the USA with India, and the complex Rohingya crisis have altogether gave rise to such a reality that the USA cannot afford to ignore the importance of Bangladesh anymore. In fact, both the systemic constraints and domestic realities along with leadership perception played decisive role in shaping the Bangladesh-USA bilateral relations throughout the past five decades. Against this backdrop, the paper considers neoclassical realist framework to explain Bangladesh-US relations and thus attempts to signify how systemic and domestic factors influence foreign policy of states.

The United States opposed Bangladesh's Independence War in 1971 while India and Soviet Union supported Bangladesh in its struggle for freedom against Pakistan. After the defeat of Pakistan it took only a few months for Washington to recognise Bangladesh as an independent country. While Cold War geopolitical calculations influenced the US policy towards Bangladesh, the newly born state soon realized that Indo-Soviet support could hardly fulfil its economic and humanitarian needs. Under such reality, Bangladesh sought to strengthen relations with the western donors without compromising its balanced approach to the two superpowers. Over the past fifty years, Bangladesh has reduced its donor dependence and boosted up trade and investment. Such developments have come in the context of a gradually liberalizing economy of the post-Cold War era. It is in this context that the United States has emerged as a top source of foreign direct investment (FDI) for Bangladesh. Yet relations between Dhaka and Washington have

ebbed and flowed. US pressures on democracy, good governance, and human rights have consistently featured in bilateral dialogues. Counterterrorism emerged as a new policy agenda in the post-9/11 era. As Bangladesh joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, Washington has also remained wary of Beijing's growing influence in Dhaka. Against this backdrop, this paper analyses the five decades of Bangladesh-US relations. It argues that while much has been written on Dhaka-Washington ties from a historical perspective, there are fewer theory-driven empirical analysis of the topic. This paper addresses the lacuna in the existing literature by offering a neoclassical realist analysis of Bangladesh-US relations.

Foreign policy making is a dynamic process involving diverse factors including the state capabilities, leadership quality, regional and global power structures, and the positioning of a state within those structures. Because none of these factors are permanent, states always adapt to the changing circumstances.¹ The paper will explore how Bangladesh-US relations have evolved over the years, and which factors have shaped the changes and continuities in bilateral relations between the two countries.

The paper employs a qualitative research method, and relies heavily on secondary data collected from books, journals, newspapers, policy papers, and other pertinent sources including online platforms. It progresses in three sections. The first section discusses the neoclassical realist theory of International Relations (IR). The second section analyses five decades of Bangladesh-US relations through the lens of neoclassical realism. The concluding section summarizes key findings.

Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism

Political realism is the most influential theory of IR.² Realist scholars seek to explain the *reality* of international politics "as it is, not as it ought to be."³ Although different variants of realism agree on the primacy of state in international politics, they sharply differ with each other on the most appropriate

levels of analysis. For classical realists, human being is inherently selfish and international politics is a continuous struggle for power emanating from that flawed human nature.⁴ In contrast, neorealists focus on the international system and the ways the system structures state behaviour. For neorealism, it is not human behaviour, rather it is anarchy – meaning the absence of a supranational authority – which leads states to act the way that they do.⁵⁶

Classical realists, such as E. H. Carr, attacked the prospect of progress through the creation of international institutions, like the League of Nations. Instead, they focused on the perpetual role of power and self-interest in shaping state behaviour. With the outbreak of World War II, classical realism gained currency in analysing the foreign policy formulation of the postwar great powers. In the 1970s, neorealism emerged as a more rigorous variant of realism emphasising on anarchy as the ordering principle of the international system. For Kenneth Waltz, the guru of neorealism, states' behaviours are determined by the distribution of power, rather than states' domestic institutions, diplomacy, statecraft, and human nature. He also argued bipolarity to be the most stable arrangement.

Neoclassical realism offers a bridge between classical realism and neorealism. Coined by Gideon Rose, it emerged as a new strand of realist perspective in the late 1990s. The neoclassical realist school is developed by scholarly contributions of Thomas Christensen, William Wohlforth, Randall Schweller, Fareed Zakaria and Gideon Rose. Rose argues that

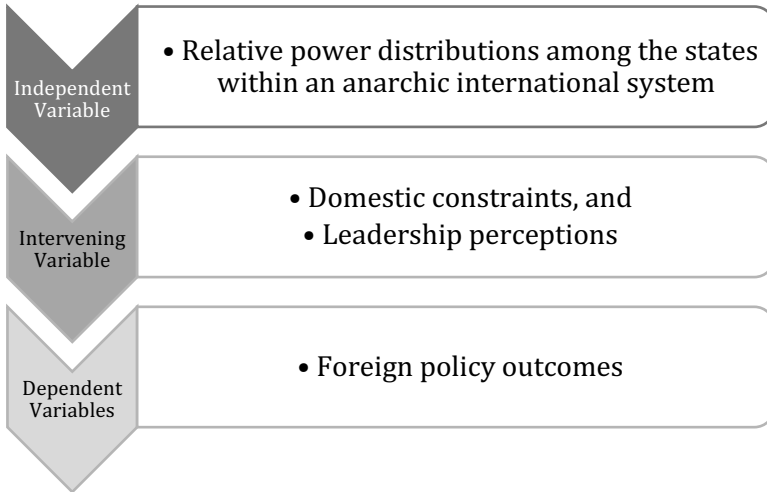
the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities... [T]he impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit-level.⁷

In simpler terms, neoclassical realists hold that while formulating foreign and security policies states largely respond to the constraints and opportunities posed by the international system. However, these responses are shaped by unit-level domestic factors such as relationship between state and its society, nature of its political regime, strategic culture, perceptions and quality of leadership and so on. This is how neoclassical realism seeks to bring a synthesis between system-level and state-level variables within a coherent theoretical framework. According to Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman:

Neoclassical realism seeks to explain variation in the foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints. It makes no pretence about explaining broad patterns of systemic or recurring outcomes. Thus, a neoclassical realist hypothesis might explain the likely diplomatic, economic, and military responses of particular states to systemic imperatives, but it cannot explain the systemic consequences of those responses.⁸

While neorealists argue that in an anarchical environment systemic pressures immediately influence the behaviours of states, neoclassical realists reject that idea. On the contrary, they believe that the extent of systemic effects on the states are subject to relative power and the internal factors of the states.⁹ In other words, neoclassical realists reject the view that systemic stimuli shapes specific foreign policy outcomes. In the neoclassical realist tradition, there are three distinct variables: independent, intervening, and dependent. The relative distribution of power in the international system is an independent variable, while domestic constraints and leadership perceptions are intervening variables, and foreign policy outcomes are dependent variables (Figure 1).¹⁰

Figure-1: Neoclassical Realist Logic of Foreign Policy



Source: Prepared by the authors

Having discussed the theoretical debates in IR and a brief introduction to neoclassical realism, the remainder of the paper will now provide a theoretical analysis of Bangladesh-US relations in three historical episodes.

Explaining Bangladesh-US Relations

The United States recognised Bangladesh on 4 April 1972. This section argues that over the past fifty years, relations between these two countries have evolved in three distinct phases: from an era of dependency, and an episode of slow engagement to a phase of robust collaboration. Taking a neoclassical realist framework, it shows that external pressures were channelled through domestic political processes to shape the nature and outcome of relations in each of the three historical episodes.

An Era of Dependency (1970s-1980s)

The global systemic pressures structured the foreign policy choices of Bangladesh both during its Independence War and

the decades that followed. At the height of the Cold War bloc politics, the South Asian strategic environment was heavily influenced by the geopolitical competitions between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was thus hardly surprising that the then West Pakistan secured the crucial US strategic support in an effort to prevent the cessation of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). Bangladesh, on the other hand, got the monumental support from India and the Soviet Union. Washington had to accept the dismemberment of its South Asian ally, Pakistan, and alter the course of its diplomacy by extending official recognition to Bangladesh with an aim to reduce Soviet influence in the newly independent country.¹¹ For the national leadership in Bangladesh, diplomatic recognition and development support were the top priorities. Although the pro-Moscow elites had a huge influence in the political regime of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect of independent Bangladesh, Dhaka had to align their national priorities with the prevailing geopolitical realities.¹² For a war ravaged developing nation, this was the beginning of an era of dependency on Western economic assistance, particularly US support during the decades of 1970s and 1980s.

The relationship got momentum with official expression of interest by the US to work with Bangladesh. The then US Secretary of State, William P. Rogers stated: “we look forward to good relations with this new country.”¹³ Soon after, the diplomatic mission at Dhaka was elevated to a full-fledged embassy on 18 May 1972 and by the end of 1972 the USA pledged some \$300 million assistance to Bangladesh.¹⁴

Although in the pro-independence era Bangladesh’s relations with India and USSR became more consolidated, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman embraced the policy of nonalignment in world politics as a pragmatic approach to foreign policy.¹⁵ He paid visits to both the USA and the USSR, and declared Bangladesh to be the “Switzerland of the East” implying its neutrality. However, Bangladesh’s signing of 25-year friendship treaty with India, modelled after a similar Indo-Soviet pact created the

impression among many in the West that Bangladesh was yet to move out of the Soviet axis.¹⁶

In the face of insufficient economic support from Indo-Soviet axis, Bangladesh desperately needed more economic assistance, and thus sought to rely on the United States, which eventually emerged as a durable source of food aid and infrastructure development partner. Dhaka's economic dependence on Washington continued until the early 1980s when Japanese assistance reached the similar level. As of September 1987, US cumulative assistance to Bangladesh reached US\$ 2.8 billion – almost half of which came as food and other agricultural commodity assistance under Public Law 480 (PL-480) programme.¹⁷ Although US withdrawal of PL-480 due to Bangladesh's export of jute to Cuba played aggravated the 1974 famine in Bangladesh and destabilised the bilateral relations, Washington soon resumed the programme as Bangladesh reassessed its trade with Cuba.¹⁸

After Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination, Washington maintained close ties with the short-lived Khondakar Mushtaque regime in Dhaka, and boosted up relations with the subsequent military regimes of Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad. During the Zia regime, relations between Dhaka and New Delhi deteriorated, and for some political analysts, this reflected the prevailing anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh. While during the Mujib regime, Bangladesh sought to normalise relations with Pakistan, and a fresh start happened with Mujib attending the 1974 Lahore Summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Dhaka sought to improve the relations further during the Zia regime. Dhaka's re-orientation of relations with New Delhi and Islamabad bode well with the American geopolitical interests in the region.

During Zia's tenure, Bangladesh adopted a policy of denationalisation, which helped gaining Washington's confidence, and soon the United States replaced India as the largest donor country.¹⁹ In 1979, Bangladesh's signing of the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* opened up

a way for the United States to assist in setting up a nuclear research reactor near Dhaka.²⁰ Both Zia and Ershad visited the White House giving relations with the United States a top priority. Zia met President Jimmy Carter in 1980 and Ershad met President Ronald Reagan in 1983, and the Bangladeshi presidents' Washington visit further elevated bilateral relations between Dhaka and Washington. It was the time when the Bangladeshi policymakers chose to promote private entrepreneurship and free market economy which yielded significant amount of US assistance and investment. Military-strategic partnership followed economic support. This was evident in 1986 when the commander in chief of US Pacific Command, Admiral R. J. Hays, made a historic visit to Bangladesh.

Slow Move to Engagement (1990-2000)

The second episode in Bangladesh-US relations marked a slow move to closer cooperation and engagement in various issue areas. As neorealist scholars suggest systemic pressures and incentives shape the foreign policy outcomes via state structures and domestic level variables, it is essential for us first to shed light on the external environment that set the parameters of Bangladesh-US relations during this period. The 1990s marked the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States as the lone superpower. In the post-Cold War era, western liberal values like free market economy, democracy, rule of law and human rights started to spread out throughout the world in a burgeoning fashion. For political scientists, it was not only the time for a 'third wave' of democratisation but also an era of endless potential for liberal market economy.²¹

Like many parts of the world, the tide of democracy also swept Bangladesh causing the fall of Ershad's dictatorial regime and the restoration of multi-party democracy through a largely free and fair election won by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of Zia, won the 1990 parliamentary elections, and became the first female prime minister. The Khaleda regime finished its five-year tenure

(1991-1995) and was defeated by Awami League leader and daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina in the 1996 elections. The Hasina regime also finished its five-year tenure only to be handing over power to Khaleda in 2001.

During this new era of economic engagement, Bangladesh continued to receive US assistance for the promotion of democracy and good governance. In a friendly gesture, the United States also absolved US\$260 million debts of Bangladesh.²² Bangladesh, on the other hand, embraced globalisation, liberalised its market further and emphasised export. Apart from regular economic assistance, in 1991 Washington made significant contribution by offering relief to the cyclone-hit Bangladesh under the rubric of *Operation Sea Angel*.²³ Bangladesh, on the other hand, sent troops in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission following the First Gulf War in 1991. Bangladeshi troops further participated in significant number of UN peacekeeping missions with their US counterparts which added new dynamics to the bilateral relationship. The joint military exercises of the two friendly nations that began in 1992 continued. In August 1995, the US Navy and Bangladesh Navy and Air Force took part in the *Operation Seabat*, a joint military exercise 5 in the Bay of Bengal.²⁴ The joint exercises provided an opportunity for capacity building of Bangladeshi military forces in the domains of maritime surveillance, search and rescue operations, and disaster management. It is in this context, in July 1998, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with regard to the activities of the US Peace Corps in Bangladesh marked another testimony of close engagement between the two nations.²⁵

While in the first two decades US investment to Bangladesh was very insignificant, it got momentum particularly during the Hasina regime (1996-2001). Until 1996, US FDI inflow to Bangladesh was totalled US\$ 20 million, which sharply rose to US\$ 750 million by 1999.²⁶ Bilateral trade also witnessed a steady growth from US\$ 891.49 million in 1991-92 to US\$ 2.26

billion in 1998-99, making the United States the largest export destination of Bangladesh with a positive trade balance of more than US\$ 1.66 billion.²⁷ Two significant high-profile visits were made during this era of engagement that cemented Dhaka-Washington ties. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid an official visit to Washington in 1996, which was reciprocated by US President Bill Clinton in 2000. Clinton was the first US President to visit Bangladesh, and during his visit, he remarked: "Tomorrow the sun will rise on a deeper friendship between America and Bangladesh... I am proud of the kind of partnership we are forging."²⁸ Later in that year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid another official visit to the USA. While bilateral trade and economic cooperation between the two countries progressed during the 1990s, Bangladesh continued to receive US aid in the areas of agriculture, energy security, and disaster management, amongst others.

Looking at this era through a neoclassical realist lens, one would easily understand how the unipolar international system structured the foreign policy choices of Bangladesh to remain supportive of the US global leadership. Major political parties and their top leaders recognized the need for maintaining the bilateral relationship. In the context of a newly democratised environment of the 1990s, the nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) played an active role in poverty alleviation and promoting democratic consciousness, but their role in foreign policy could hardly be seen. The military elites obviously had an interest in maintaining the joint military exercises, with the US forces while maintaining their dependence on the Chinese military hardware. But there were domestic pressure groups which set the tone of the Bangladesh-US relations by rejecting the proposal for a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States. The pressure groups also aired serious concerns over any US proposal to establish naval base in the Bay of Bengal. For political pundits, due to domestic factors, such as pressures from different political parties, intellectuals, civil society groups and media, the incumbent governments in the

1990s did not consider any of the US proposals on SOFA or naval base. In a nutshell, while Dhaka-Washington ties were moving in the direction of slow economic engagement, concerns over national security and freedom of action have certainly shaped the contours of Bangladesh foreign policy toward the United States.

The Search for Robust Collaboration (2001-Present)

Since 2001 the search for robust collaboration in security and economic matters has highly featured in Bangladesh-US relations. How have external and domestic factors interplayed in shaping the Dhaka-Washington ties in the third wave?

Several systemic factors challenged US hegemony during this period. The list includes the spread of transnational terrorism, the resurgence of Russia, global economic meltdown, the rise of China and the nuclearisation of North Korea. Hence, cooperation on counterterrorism and non-proliferation, and concerted actions in global economic governance would emerge as key systemic pressures for Bangladesh to structure its foreign policy choices in maintaining bilateral relations with the United States. Former US ambassador to Bangladesh James F. Moriarty reiterated his 3D theorem of US priorities in Bangladesh – democracy, development, and denial of space to terrorism.²⁹

The visits of several high level US officials including Secretary of State Collin Powell in 2003, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld in 2004, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2012 put much emphasis on cooperation between these two countries in the areas of counterterrorism, maritime security, and disaster management. But counterterrorism emerged as a key policy domain for bilateral cooperation. The signing of the Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative in 2013 is a milestone in this regard. Bangladesh has participated in State Department's Antiterrorism Assistance Programme and also received funding for law enforcement training.³⁰ In the backdrop of the Holey Artisan terrorist attack in 2016, the visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry highlighted the importance

of cooperation in terrorism and security areas. In 2018, both the countries conducted Multiple Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCETs) events and Subject Matter Expert Exchanges focusing on counter-terrorism issues. Apart from government-to-government cooperation, the United States has also been collaborating with various NGOs and CSOs in Bangladesh for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program.

Defence partnership also continued between the two countries. Bangladesh is keen to maintain collaboration with the United States to achieve its 'Forces Goal 2030' to modernise the armed forces.³¹ Bangladesh-US defence relations significantly strengthened by the regular participation of Bangladeshi forces in various training programmes organised by the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), formerly known as US Pacific Command.³² Washington has prioritized strengthening the capacity of Bangladesh peacekeeping training programs.³³

Bangladesh's defence purchase from the US is also in steady increase as it reached US\$110 million in last 9 years since 2010.³⁴ To strengthen the capacity of Bangladesh Navy, Washington offered two Hamiltonian-class cutter of US coast Guard to Bangladesh – Jervis in 2013 and Rush in 2015. To cover the cost of procurement and delivery of five coastal patrol boats to the Bangladesh Navy, Washington gave \$5.3 million in 2018.³⁵ To take the defence collaboration to the next level, the two countries are in the process of signing two significant defence agreements including the Acquisitions and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). While the ACSA is usually aimed at facilitating US forces to exchange common types of support like food, fuel, transportation, ammunition, and equipment, the GSOMIA is one of the four foundational agreements that the USA typically signs with its allies and close partners to facilitate sales of cutting-edge military technologies and interoperability between the militaries.³⁶ Given the fact that China has been the largest arms supplier to Bangladesh for quite a long time, both Dhaka and Washington have discarded any

possibility that this feathering defence relationship with would deteriorate Bangladesh's relations with its neighbours.

Dhaka and Washington have also sought to diversify bilateral relations. Increased collaboration in trade, commerce and investment has effectively broadened the horizon for cooperation between Bangladesh and the United States. In 2012, the two countries signed strategic dialogue agreement, and since then officials from both sides meet on a yearly basis. The Partnership Dialogue provides a platform to advance the common interests across the full range of bilateral and regional issues, and to consolidate trust by addressing respective concerns. Apart from progresses in defence and security cooperation, one immediate outcome of this dialogue was the signing of long-awaited Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (TICFA) in November 2013. The agreement is an annual platform to identify and address obstacles to increasing bilateral trade and investment. Till date, five meetings have taken place, which sufficiently signifies both the countries' commitment to boost trade and investment opportunities and facilitate the existing flow of goods and services.

Dhaka-Washington bilateral trade has experienced formidable growth in the last few years. With US\$ 8.2 billion of two-way trade, Bangladesh stands as the 51st largest trading partner of the United States, only behind India in South Asia.³⁷ Dhaka's export to Washington accounted US\$ 6.1 billion in 2018, which was 62.8% increase from 2008.³⁸ The United States is the single largest market for Bangladeshi export goods in the world.³⁹ For US products, Bangladesh remains a sound export destination. The USA exported goods worth US\$ 2.1 billion to Bangladesh in 2018 making Bangladesh its 63rd largest goods export market.⁴⁰ The US export to Bangladesh also observed unswerving augmentation as the export in 2018 accounted 41.2% increase from 2017 and 344.7% increase from 2008.⁴¹ As of 2018, Bangladesh enjoys US\$ 4 billion trade advantage.⁴²

Following the Tazreen Fashions fire and Rana Plaza building collapse which hundreds of garment workers, the United States suspended the generalised system of preference (GSP) facility for Bangladesh in June 2013 citing serious flaws in labour rights standard and workplace safety.⁴³ Introduced in 1976, GSP is a trade scheme that permits 122 least developed and developing countries to export more than 5,000 goods to the US markets with very low or zero-duty benefit. Although the suspension of GSP has been a setback for the growing Bangladesh-US economic relations, it is argued that Bangladesh's exports to the USA had not been affected as such since only less than 1% of the exported goods used to get GSP facility.⁴⁴ Bangladesh is rather more concerned about lowering the import duties imposed by the USA on its readymade garments which constitutes about 90% of its exports to the USA.⁴⁵

Despite repeated US concerns regarding the fragile conditions of democracy, justice, labour rights and safety, and overall governance in Bangladesh, Washington has traditionally been one of the leading investors in Bangladesh. As of June 2019, the United States accounted for almost 20% of the total FDI stock in Bangladesh, which is approximately US\$ 3.68 billion.⁴⁶ Washington has traditionally been one of the major development partners of Bangladesh. In fact, it is the second largest bilateral donor, after Japan, providing nearly US\$ 4 billion in five decades.⁴⁷ In 2019, Washington gave US\$ 350.62 million worth development aid to Dhaka to cover humanitarian assistance, health, economic development, programme management, democracy, human rights, and governance.⁴⁸

The foregoing discussion has focused on the broadening of Dhaka-Washington ties in the areas of counterterrorism, defence partnership, peacekeeping, trade, and development aid. From a systemic perspective, the desire of the United States to counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region is of utmost importance. But for Bangladesh, several domestic level factors have shaped the parameters of relations in the past two decades. First, since the late 1990s, the rise of faith-based extremism has created the context for Bangladesh to prioritise

capacity building of its security and intelligence agencies. Hence, the political elites and senior leadership in both the armed forces and the civilian police have found counterterrorism partnership to be of great value in combating terrorism. The military leadership and their political masters have also converged on growing defence ties for modernisation of the military and for enhancing the training and performance of Bangladeshi peacekeepers. The business lobbies and the NGO community have joined the list of stakeholders to ensure that Dhaka-Washington ties are broadened in the areas of trade and development. In a nutshell, a host of domestic level actors and factors in Bangladesh have largely remained supportive of a robust strategic-economic-and-development partnership with the United States.

There are some occasional hiccups in the bilateral relations between Dhaka and Washington. Recent years have seen the United States voicing concerns over authoritarianism, systematic persecution of political opposition, and excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies. Concerns over the absence of trade union rights have also featured partnership dialogues. Needless to say, such pressures are partly the result of the State Department's in-house assessment and partly stimulated by a critical stance of Bangladeshi media, NGOs, and political parties. Here lies the essence of neoclassical realism in analysing the bilateral relationship between Dhaka and Washington.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has employed the neoclassical realist framework to analyse five decades of Bangladesh-US relations. It shows that partnership between the two countries has moved from Bangladesh's dependence on aid and gradual engagement to a search for robust collaboration. For Bangladesh, while the global systemic pressures, coming from the Cold War era geopolitical completion and post-Cold War challenges to US hegemony have acted as independent variables, the role of

domestic political elites, strategic community, and various interest groups have ultimately shaped the outcome of Dhaka's bilateral relationships.

Notes

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