



BETWEEN GIANTS AND TIDES: BANGLADESH'S STRUGGLE FOR SPACE IN THE BAY OF BENGAL AND INDO-PACIFIC POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Bangladesh navigates its foreign policy and security interests within an increasingly contested maritime space shaped by the rivalries of China, India, the United States (US) and other regional actors. Amid the strengthening of planned competition in the Indo-Pacific, the Bay of Bengal is now acting as a critical geopolitical arena because Bangladesh sits at that intersection of regional and also global power dynamics. The study examines all of Bangladesh's efforts towards balancing economic partnerships with calculated autonomy for regional cooperation. Geopolitical analysis and policy review inform its actions amid infrastructure diplomacy, military posturing, and shifting alliances. National sovereignty and maritime security with sustainable development are implications highlighted in this article. It claims that Bangladesh's geopolitical trouble comes not just from location, but also from Indo-Pacific political shifts where smaller nations should use careful tact to protect their own goals.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific politics, Bay of Bengal, geopolitical strategy, Bangladesh foreign policy, small state diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as being a dynamic and contested geopolitical region because it reshapes customary understandings of maritime and planned space. The Bay of Bengal now forms the centre of renewed interest between global and regional powers. These dynamics unfold inside a wider geopolitical architecture dominated by major powers that have tended to dismiss the Bay of Bengal as peripheral. The strategic repositioning of the Bay is driven by its location at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, with its critical sea lanes for global commerce and its untapped potential for energy exploration and economic connectivity (Brewster 2014; Mohan 2021). For Bangladesh, a mid-sized South Asian state with a vulnerable coastal geography and a rising economic profile, this evolving geopolitical landscape presents both unprecedented opportunities and profound challenges (Bose 2024).

Bangladesh's maritime frontier in the Bay of Bengal grants it access to vital trade routes and energy reserves, particularly in light of its successful settlement of maritime boundary disputes with India and Myanmar through international legal mechanisms (Hosen 2024). These legal victories have strengthened the country's sovereign claim over large portions of maritime territory, expanding its blue economy ambitions. However, the broader regional security environment is increasingly defined by competing strategic visions. The United States (US) promotes a "free and open Indo-Pacific" to counterbalance China's growing influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its maritime expansionism, while India seeks to project itself as a net security provider in the region under its Act East and Neighbourhood First policies (Roy 2020; Plagemann 2022). Japan and Australia have also deepened engagement through infrastructure development and strategic dialogue. In this crowded strategic theatre, Bangladesh faces the delicate task of manoeuvring among overlapping economic and security interests, while safeguarding its sovereignty and developmental priorities.

The intensification of great power competition in the Indo-Pacific heightens the strategic vulnerability of small and middle powers. Bangladesh, like many such states, finds itself caught in the middle, dependent on external actors for trade, investment, and infrastructure, yet wary of alignment that may compromise its foreign policy independence (Hasan 2024). As a country that has traditionally pursued a "friendship to all, malice towards none" policy, Bangladesh must navigate a complex balancing act: engaging with China as a key investor and infrastructure partner, maintaining cordial relations with India as a regional hegemon and neighbour, and strengthening its strategic ties with the US and Japan in areas of security and trade (Akbar and Khan 2017: 55–70).

This article seeks to critically examine Bangladesh's geopolitical positioning in the Bay of Bengal within the wider Indo-Pacific discourse. It interrogates how Dhaka responds to the pressures of strategic alignment, the allure of economic diplomacy, and the imperative of national security. In doing so, it contributes to the broader literature on small state diplomacy, regional geopolitics, and maritime strategy. By analysing policy documents, regional agreements, and scholarly debates, the article argues that Bangladesh's geopolitical agency lies in its ability to pursue a nuanced, multidirectional diplomacy that safeguards both its strategic autonomy and developmental aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Indo-Pacific as a strategic construct has generated considerable academic debate over the past decade. As depicted by researchers such as Medcalf (2020) and Mohan (2021), the word encapsulates the changes that have occurred in the global balance of power with the Pacific and Indian Oceans finds themselves being perceived as a single geostrategic theatre due to the aggression being exhibited by China, expansion by the Asian economy, and the strategic repositioning of the US and their partners and allies. In this larger context, the Bay of Bengal is no longer a geopolitical periphery but rather an essential maritime region for energy infrastructure, naval foothold, and economic integration (Brewster 2014). According to Anwar (2022: 147), the Bay is becoming an Indo-Pacific geopolitical "strategic hinge" that mainly links South and Southeast Asia, giving the region the connectivity it needs for power struggles. These evolving dynamics reposition the Bay of Bengal not merely as a passive geopolitical space, but as a historically embedded and environmentally vulnerable maritime theatre. This reconceptualisation reinforces Bangladesh's strategic agency in navigating the dual imperatives of great power competition and ecological stewardship positioning it as an actor, rather than an object, within the shifting Indo-Pacific order.

A large amount of literature on small and middle powers torn between rival hegemonies has also been sparked by the Indo-Pacific's increasing significance. Small states frequently use tactics like hedging, balancing, or bandwagoning to deal with outside pressures while preserving their sovereignty, claim Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017). Additionally, recent analyses have highlighted Bangladesh's growing regional recognition and foreign policy recalibration in response to Indo-Pacific transformations. For instance, Datta (2022) emphasises Dhaka's transition from geopolitical periphery to a strategic middle power engaging with competing blocs. Likewise, (Khan 2025) traces how Bangladesh's evolving diplomatic posture is shaped by maritime geography, rising economic ambitions, and a desire to assert regional agency. According to scholars like Amin (2025) and Hussain (2024), Bangladesh is a prime example of the balancing act of small state diplomacy in the South Asian context, interacting with several partners without explicitly siding with any of them. India's historical connections and close proximity to Bangladesh remain crucial to its regional strategy, even though China's BRI offers Bangladesh substantial infrastructure investments. Concurrently, Dhaka has demonstrated a desire for varied engagement by strengthening ties with the US, Japan, and ASEAN nations (Islam 2023). Recent contributions have also emphasised how Bangladesh is actively embracing its maritime geography to pursue multidirectional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific (Salam et al. 2024).

The literature emphasises how Bangladesh's strategic outlook has been redefined by its access to the Bay of Bengal in terms of maritime security and the blue economy. Scholars warn that ownership by itself does not guarantee security or sustainable exploitation, despite the fact that the settlement of maritime disputes with India and Myanmar through international legal forums is generally acclaimed as a diplomatic success (Hosen 2024). Bangladesh's ability to protect its maritime interests without getting caught up in power struggles has come under scrutiny due to the Bay's militarisation through naval drills, strategic port development, and great power posturing (Karim 2023).

However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding Bangladesh's agency in shaping the Indo-Pacific discourse, beyond reacting to external pressures. Much of the existing work either frames Bangladesh as a passive recipient of great power influence or focuses narrowly on economic dependencies. There is limited exploration of how Bangladesh crafts its own strategic vision, manages diplomatic contradictions, and contributes to multilateral cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. By examining Bangladesh's diplomatic actions, economic calculations, and shifting security priorities in the Indo-Pacific, this article seeks to reassess and better understand its geopolitical positioning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the foreign policy behaviour of Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific is analysed using a multi-theoretical approach that incorporates three schools of thought, namely small state realism, hedging strategy, and constructivist approach. With this synthesis, it is possible to make a subtle analysis of how structural constraints, i.e., power asymmetry and systemic pressures, and normative preferences, i.e., autonomy, non-alignment, and development orientation, interact to inform the strategic decisions of small powers.

Small state realism is an extension of the assumptions of classical and neorealist thought to the circumstances of minor powers. Traditional realism, which is presented by Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979), is based on the idea that the international system is anarchic and power-driven, which forces states to focus on their survival. Continuing on this, small state realism (Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017) recognises that states that have fewer material capabilities are unable to equal power in traditional military senses. Rather, they seek adaptive realist

approaches, such as diplomatic dexterity, multilateralism, and norm-related participation to lessen susceptibility. In the case of Bangladesh, this has been in the form of protection of sovereignty by means of diversified partnerships, international institutions interaction and compliance to constitutional peace and non-alignment principles.

This realist base is complemented by the hedging framework which explains the behaviour of small powers in the face of systemic uncertainty. Hedging, as it is theorised by Kuik (2008) entails pursuing seemingly conflicting policies, namely, by involving opposing powers at the same time to prevent the overdependence and achieve the highest possible level of security and economic gains. In the case of Bangladesh, this behaviour can be traced in its multilateral engagement in China's BRI, strategic partnership with India and the increasing economic and security links with the US and Japan. This controlled ambiguity helps Bangladesh to resist the structural pressures, even as it maintains the autonomy of decision-making.

Nevertheless, the material limitations are not the sole cause of the foreign policy orientation of Bangladesh. In this case, constructivism knowledge is needed. Constructivism emphasises the effects of state identity, historical experience, and normative preferences on strategic behaviour (Wendt 1999). The diplomatic decisions of Bangladesh are shaped by both the peripheral structural positioning as well as the self-perception of being a peace-oriented, development-oriented, and regionally responsible nation. Its membership of platforms such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the South-South Cooperation programmes of the United Nations demonstrates a normative approach to the principles of inclusive regionalism and sustainable development, based on its liberation history and developmental ethos.

In the process of synthesising these views, this article holds that the foreign policy of Bangladesh is the result of interaction between structural constraints and normative preferences. The structural constraints, which are based on its geopolitical positioning between the great powers, create strategic weakness, whereas normative commitments to sovereignty, peace, and development offer guidelines that steer the coping with those pressures. The outcome is a practical hybridity: a strategic stance that incorporates both realist prudence and normative desire. The diplomacy of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal and the greater Indo-Pacific is therefore a two-fold logic balancing its sovereignty under constraint and normative leadership by multilateralism and sustainability (Centre for Public Policy Research – Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom 2025).

METHODS

The geopolitical study and the foreign policy approach quantify the methodology applicable in this study through a qualitative and interpretive study. The approach privileges discursive interpretation, contextual reading of state behaviour and document reading over a hypothesis-based empirical inquiry because it deals with the strategic behaviour of Bangladesh in a dynamic and contested regional environment. It aims to understand the ways Bangladesh addresses the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific through its conceptualisation and execution of the foreign policy, particularly in terms of the Bay of Bengal.

Examples of primary sources of data on foreign policy of Bangladesh include foreign policy statements, strategic partnership agreements and maritime boundary settlements by Bangladesh and speeches made by key policymakers particularly those involved with the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Armed Forces Division. To assess the role of the country in multilateral diplomacy, the statements of regional regimes are also considered, including the BIMSTEC and IORA.

Sources of secondary data include peer reviewed scholarly articles, policy briefs, think tank reports, and newspaper analyses of reputable international and regional sources. Special attention is given to analytical works from South Asian strategic scholars and Indo-Pacific security experts to contextualise the geopolitical imperatives Bangladesh faces. The selection of literature is guided by relevance, scholarly credibility, and regional specificity.

The analytical framework is structured around the theoretical lenses outlined earlier, namely, small state realism and hedging theory to interpret Bangladesh’s diplomatic and strategic choices. These theories guide the identification and categorisation of key themes, including alliance diversification, maritime diplomacy, strategic ambiguity, and economic dependency management.

The period of analysis spans roughly from 2013 to 2024, beginning with Bangladesh’s maritime boundary resolution (2012–2014) and extending through the evolution of major Indo-Pacific strategies and their growing impact on the Bay of Bengal. This timeframe allows for tracing policy continuity and changes across different governments and geopolitical shifts. Given the geopolitical nature of the topic, the methodology acknowledges the limitations of access to classified or sensitive strategic documents. However, triangulation from multiple public sources along with expert commentary and secondary policy analyses enhances the robustness and reliability of the findings. Rather than making predictive claims, this study offers a contextual and interpretive account of Bangladesh’s positioning and evolving strategic behaviour in the Indo-Pacific.

BANGLADESH’S STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Bangladesh’s strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly shaped by shifting geopolitical dynamics, economic aspirations, and regional security concerns. Positioned at the nexus of South and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh finds itself in a critical location within the broader Indo-Pacific strategy pursued by major powers such as the US, China, India, and Japan (Rakib 2025). This positioning produces a persistent dilemma for Dhaka: how to pursue prosperity while preserving strategic autonomy. Table 1 summarises this tension across key external partners.

Table 1: The dilemma: Prosperity vs. autonomy

Country	Issues
China’s embrace	BRI projects like the Payra deep-sea port promise growth but risk debt traps.
India’s shadow	As Dhaka’s largest neighbour, India demands strategic deference, yet Bangladesh resists becoming a satellite state.
US’s offer	The US dangles security partnerships, but alignment could antagonise Beijing.

Source: Rahman and Bhattacharya (2022)

As the Indo-Pacific becomes a contested space for influence, trade routes, and maritime security, Bangladesh must navigate a complex strategic landscape. The country seeks to balance its long-standing policy of “friendship to all, malice towards none” while enhancing its connectivity, trade, and infrastructure development through initiatives like China’s BRI and Japan’s Big-B initiative (Khatun 2019: 7). At the same time, Dhaka is increasingly aware of the need to protect its maritime interests in the Bay of Bengal and maintain autonomy in its foreign policy decisions. Bangladesh’s active participation in regional forums and its recently announced Indo-Pacific Outlook highlight its intent to engage constructively in the evolving regional order without becoming entangled in great power rivalries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). This balancing act

increasingly requires Dhaka to safeguard not only its geopolitical autonomy but also its maritime ecology, as environmental vulnerabilities in the Bay of Bengal ranging from sea-level rise to ecosystem degradation pose parallel threats to national sovereignty and long-term security.

THE BAY OF BENGAL AS A STRATEGIC MARITIME THEATRE

The Bay of Bengal has emerged as a pivotal strategic maritime theatre in the twenty-first-century Indo-Pacific geopolitics due to its geographical centrality, rich natural resources, and significance for global sea lines of communication. Bordered by South and Southeast Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, the Bay functions as a maritime crossroads linking the broader Indian Ocean Region with East Asia (Brewster 2014). To contextualise this discussion, Figure 1 illustrates the geographical extent and strategic location of the Bay of Bengal.



Figure 1: Map of the Bay of Bengal.

Source: Wikimedia Commons (2005)

The Bay of Bengal has long functioned as a vital conduit for trans regional navigation, colonial trade routes, and imperial port infrastructures linking coastal cities such as Chittagong, Calcutta, and Yangon to expansive global networks of commerce and empire (Chaudhuri 1985; Amrith 2013). This deep historical embeddedness in maritime exchange continues to inform the Bay's contemporary geopolitical relevance, shaping how regional actors perceive and engage with its strategic space.

In recent years, nations bordering the Bay of Bengal have increasingly turned their attention to the blue economy as a pathway to sustainable growth. They are investing in and exploring diverse marine sectors ranging from fisheries, offshore energy, and maritime trade to coastal tourism, seabed resource extraction, and other ocean-based industries aiming to harness the region's vast maritime potential while promoting environmental stewardship and economic resilience (Ranjan and Attanayake 2024). Today, the Bay's significance is further amplified by the intensifying naval presence of regional and extra-regional powers including India, China, and the US each seeking to secure strategic interests in trade, energy corridors, and maritime security (Scott 2018). For Bangladesh, the Bay represents more than an economic lifeline through its ports and fisheries; it is also a contested domain of sovereignty, ecological vulnerability, and

strategic negotiation (Samaranayake 2019). With rising investments in maritime connectivity, port infrastructure, and naval modernisation, the Bay of Bengal has decisively moved from the margins to the centre of the evolving Indo-Pacific strategic order.

Case Study 1: Bangladesh's Strategic Hedging (2013–2016)

The 2013–2016 timeframe is a transitional stage in the hedging policy of Bangladesh as it tries to manoeuvre in a more challenging side of the Indo-Pacific region with the emergence of China and the re-assertiveness of India in the region. It was a structural pivot point in Asia when China initiated BRI in 2013, a project that projected huge infrastructural and financial impacts of the Indo-Pacific (Cai 2018), and India, under a newly elected government of Modi, in 2014, accelerated its policies of the Neighbourhood First and Act East (Kesavan 2020). In the case of a small state such as Bangladesh which was geographically placed between those two regional giants, the issue was to achieve economic development and connectivity without engaging too much on either side. This was the geopolitical arrangement that formed the structure constraint that influenced the foreign policies of Bangladesh.

The urgency in Bangladesh was the development one. As a lower-middle-income country that is still struggling to sustain high growth rates, the (former) government of Sheikh Hasina has been making attempts to attract foreign investments and infrastructural financing to reach the development goals of the Vision 2021. The new prospects of funding the projects, particularly in transport, energy, and manufacturing, were brought forth by the BRI offered by China (Lowy Institute 2019). However, Dhaka was in high alertness of the strategic soundness of India on the Chinese action in South Asia. It is this contradiction that required diplomacy, a mechanism of offsetting structural forces and normative restraint to sovereignty and regional peace. Such a BRI-related suspicious attitude of Bangladesh is manifested in its desire to fund Padma Bridge unilaterally after the World Bank withdrew its funds and is a symptom of independence and nationalism (Rahman 2025). Padma Bridge was thus a representative of policy autonomy, a normative tendency to self-sufficiency in foreign financial temptations.

Simultaneously, Dhaka strengthened sub-regional involvement with India via the BIMSTEC and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) model. The 2015 Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) was an enormous diplomatic victory as it harmonised a long-standing boundary dispute and reiterated the willingness of Dhaka to institutional diplomacy and the stability of the region (Jayarama 2025). This did not exclude collaboration with China although this strengthened the relationship with India. Meanwhile, Bangladesh signed multiple energy, transport, and port infrastructure memoranda with Beijing, such as the Payra deep-sea port, and coal-fired power plants in Chittagong and Patuakhali (Jahan and Hossain 2024). This two-track diplomacy, which was the need to be at the same time engaged with both powers, was the rationality of the strategic hedge reducing the vulnerability by hedging and flexibility of the policies.

The foreign policy of Bangladesh, geoeconomically, was limited by its geopolitical and geoeconomics dependence, especially its dependence on Indian transit routes and foreign direct investment. In any normative sense the state was still supported on its constitutional principle of friendliness to everyone and malice towards none (Government of Bangladesh 1972). This pre-eminently long commitment to non-alignment and peaceful coexistence offered the moral and diplomatic rationale of hedging behaviour. It enabled Dhaka to frame its concurrent relations with Beijing and New Delhi, not only as a contradiction but as extension of the same developmentalist and peace oriented national identity. The combination of these structural pressures with normative orientations resulted in a peculiar pragmatic diplomacy, which struck the balance between realist reservations and moral circumspection.

It was also at this stage that Bangladesh was able to handle its relations with the extra-regional players. In the model of the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC), the US started to reposition South Asia as an important bridge section between Southwest Asia. Bangladesh became cautious about accepting US interest in maritime connectivity, but this did not alter the non-aligned stance of Bangladesh due to the fear of offending China. At the same time, more and more substantial investment by Japan, particularly in the Matarbari deep-sea port and Dhaka metro projects, was promoted as a strategy in Dhaka diversification (Sakaki 2019). These interactions show that Bangladesh has been able to convert structural vulnerabilities into opportunities due to selective engagement and diversification of partnerships.

Reflectively, 2013–2016 was the core period of hedging of Bangladesh, in which there was convergence of systemic constraints and normative preferences to impact the strategic behaviour of Bangladesh. Bangladesh was not associated with them in terms of the struggle to keep up with the competing structural forces of China and India and instead, it applied strategic flexibility to achieve its developmental objectives without losing its autonomy. This combination was the foundation of further policies of Dhaka in the Indo-Pacific where hedging became a more radical strategic policy. The case thus illustrates the way in which foreign policy of a small power can be constructed out of the encounter of structural necessity and normative obligation that forms a fine line between sovereignty and interdependence, realism and restraint.

Case Study 2: Realignment in Great Power Rivalries (2017–2024)

In response to China's assertive Indo-Pacific posture and the US' growing strategic engagement in the region, Bangladesh has intensified its foreign policy diversification. The adoption of the 2023 Indo-Pacific Outlook, participation in BIMSTEC naval dialogues, and sustained collaboration under the BRI collectively signal Dhaka's intent to maintain equidistance from competing power blocs. Bangladesh has managed sensitive episodes such as tensions arising from US sanctions and Chinese assertiveness in port infrastructure without overt alignment to any major power. These manoeuvres demonstrate a mature hedging strategy underpinned by sovereignty considerations, heightened maritime awareness, and economic pragmatism.

This recalibrated posture aligns with what Islam and Molla (2024: 12) describe as Bangladesh's pursuit of "strategic autonomy", whereby the state selectively engages with multiple actors while institutionalising safeguards to protect its economic and legal sovereignty.

Beyond these strategic variations, Bangladesh's changing foreign policy is also a product of its increasing recognition of the significance of the Indo-Pacific as an important area for economic and security partnership. Dhaka intends to explore prospects in marine business, infrastructure building and blue economy ventures as it steps up partnerships with regional players including Japan, India a leading country around the Bay of Bengal between Southeast Asia and the sub-continent and members of ASEAN. This multi direction engagement is reflective of its pragmatist approach in trying to diversify economic dependence, while retaining its historical policy of non-alignment (Motaher and Khaled 2022).

Moreover, Bangladesh's calibrated diplomacy demonstrates an emerging confidence in transforming its geopolitical position into strategic advantage. Located at the juncture of South and Southeast Asia, the country increasingly presents itself as a conduit between continental and maritime Asia advocating for inclusive regionalism, sustainable connectivity, and a rules-based maritime order. These efforts not only bolster its diplomatic resilience but also enhance its credibility as a responsible stakeholder amid the strategic contests shaping the Indo-Pacific (Kolmaš et al. 2024).

BANGLADESH'S DIPLOMATIC STRATEGIES: BETWEEN ALIGNMENT AND AUTONOMY

Bangladesh's foreign policy reflects a nuanced balancing act between strategic alignment with major powers and the preservation of diplomatic autonomy. Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has adhered to the principle of “friendship to all, malice towards none”, which continues to underpin its pursuit of multi-vector diplomacy. In the evolving Indo-Pacific order, Bangladesh increasingly finds itself navigating competing interests, particularly those of China, India, the US, and Japan (Rashid et al. 2023). While infrastructure investments and economic partnerships with China have deepened through the BRI, Dhaka has simultaneously sought to reinforce its ties with India and the US to avoid over-dependence and maintain strategic flexibility (Pandey 2021). This approach is evident in Bangladesh's 2023 Indo-Pacific Outlook, which emphasises principles of sovereignty, inclusivity, and regional cooperation signalling an effort to stay engaged without overtly siding with any power bloc (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

Although the Indo-Pacific Outlook does not explicitly foreground environmental issues, its emphasis on inclusive and cooperative regionalism implicitly supports sustainable maritime governance. Bangladesh's participation in regional forums such as BIMSTEC and the IORA reflects its recognition that environmental resilience especially in the Bay of Bengal is inseparable from broader goals of peace, development, and strategic autonomy.

Nonetheless, the tightrope between alignment and autonomy is increasingly difficult to walk amid intensifying geopolitical rivalries. Critics argue that excessive economic entanglements, especially with China, may erode Bangladesh's strategic independence over time (Mercator Institute for China Studies 2022). Nevertheless, Bangladesh's diplomatic posture exemplifies the complex choices small and medium powers must make in a contested multipolar world, where pragmatism often trumps ideological consistency.

CHALLENGES AND POLICY DILEMMAS

As Bangladesh becomes increasingly enmeshed in the strategic calculus of the Indo-Pacific, it confronts a set of complex challenges and policy dilemmas that test its diplomatic agility, economic priorities, and security imperatives. Foremost among these is the intensifying rivalry between China and the US, which exerts pressure on Dhaka to adopt clearer alignments despite its long-standing commitment to strategic non-alignment. China's BRI has delivered substantial infrastructure investments and economic benefits, exemplified by projects such as the Padma Bridge rail link and the Payra deep-sea port (Dieterich 2024). Yet these engagements have also sparked concerns over potential overdependence, debt sustainability, and erosion of policy autonomy concerns amplified by Western calls for greater transparency and governance safeguards (Rahman and Bhattacharya 2022). Moreover, the Bay of Bengal's fragmented maritime security architecture, further complicated by great-power naval competition, creates significant coordination challenges for smaller coastal states like Bangladesh (Islam 2019; Mahmud 2022). To illustrate how these dynamics materialise through differing investment patterns, Table 2 compares major foreign investments in Bangladesh and the strategic concerns attached to each.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of foreign investments in Bangladesh (2015–2023)

Investor country	Total foreign direct investment (USD billion)	Key projects	Strategic concerns
China	12.4	Payra Port and Padma Bridge Rail Link	Debt dependency and BRI influence
India	3.8	Mongla Port and cross-border pipelines	Security ties and regional hegemony
US	2.1	Indo-Pacific partnerships and energy deals	Alignment pressure and human rights scrutiny
Japan	4.6	Matarbari deep-sea port and metro rail	Infrastructure diplomacy and soft power

Source: Bangladesh Bank (2023)

At the same time, Bangladesh wants to strengthen its connections with the US, Japan, and India, especially through programmes like the BIMSTEC and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). A diplomatic conundrum arises when these relationships are balanced because strengthening ties with one power runs the risk of offending others, which could jeopardise Bangladesh's security and trade diversification interests. Furthermore, the ability to develop and carry out cogent foreign policy strategies is hampered by internal governance issues like political polarisation, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inadequate institutional capacity.

Challenges also emerge at the intersection of maritime security and environmental sustainability. Bangladesh must carefully avoid provoking regional tensions through militarisation, while simultaneously safeguarding its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) from ecological degradation and external encroachment. This task is further complicated by rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and the looming threat of climate-induced displacement, all of which intensify the complexity of its maritime security calculus. The convergence of ecological fragility and geopolitical tension underscores the imperative for a diplomatic strategy that protects both territorial sovereignty and environmental resilience. Added to this is the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis, which necessitates pragmatic engagement with Myanmar, even as Bangladesh navigates mounting international pressure from human rights organisations and other global actors (Howlader et al. 2025).

Furthermore, domestic political influences and the opinion of the people are influencing foreign policy decisions more and thus limits the range of the government. In building its Indo-Pacific strategy, Dhaka must find a balance between the role of connectivity and economic development while keeping its autonomy and avoiding great power politics and involvements. Hence, how to operationalise a form of principled neutrality that is not passive as in accommodative, not active as in provocation, is the policy puzzle.

CONCLUSION

The events that took place in Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific region can be used as an example of the complications and difficulties that accompany the multidirectional tense relations. However, as opposed to being viewed as a small, weak state, Bangladesh has proved to be an important agency by innovating policies, maintaining strategic balance, and adhering to maritime politics. This will continue to be a feature in Dhaka foreign policy particularly as the Bay of Bengal continues to become a centre of power projection and the capital city continues to be autonomous since it is able to self-isolate. Probable questions about the ways in which countries

such as Bangladesh can develop regional structures rather than just responding to the impacts of the super powers should be investigated.

This study indicates that the foreign policy behaviour of Bangladesh cannot be appropriately explained using a single theoretical approach. A synthesising strategy that includes small state realism, hedging theory and constructivism demonstrates a complicated interaction amid the needs of structure and the aspirations of norms. Bangladesh structurally is at a dangerous position or asymmetrical power position, geostrategic vulnerability, normatively the country is also guided by a substantive commitment to peace, non-alignment and regionalism with the intention of developing the country. Its analytical ambiguity, chosen selectivity of engagement, and diversification as a strategic stance are embodied in a subtle adjustment of realist survival tactics in a normative context of cooperative diplomacy. This hearing enables Bangladesh to present independence without causing confrontation and thus strengthening the point of view that, though small states have structural limitations, they can still exercise ample policy latitude.

At a larger level, the predicament in Bangladesh is part of the changing discussion on the concept of small-state strategies in the Indo-Pacific. It demonstrates that agency within the framework of power imbalances in the world can be reactive but it is frequently related and creative. By means of a defensive and developmental hedging strategy, Bangladesh redefines the role of strategic flexibility which turns geopolitical weaknesses into an opportunity to be exploited diplomatically. By promoting maritime governance, connectivity and environmental sustainability, the country is a positive actor in the new paradigm of Indo-Pacific. The historical experience of Bangladesh provides an interesting source of both scholars and policymakers on the attractiveness of middle and smaller states in multipolar regional politics in the view of strategic strategies, value-driven pragmatics and the use of norms to strategic purposes.

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NOTES

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