
BANGLADESH: BETWEEN COMPETING STRATEGIES AND GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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ABSTRAK

Kawasan Indo-Pasifik (IP) telah bertransformasi menjadi teater penting bagi kompetisi strategis seiring dengan meningkatnya keterlibatan kekuatan-kekuatan besar. Amerika Serikat, India, Jepang, dan Tiongkok secara aktif terlibat di kawasan ini melalui pendekatan yang berbeda-beda. Negara-negara tersebut menghadirkan strategi yang saling bersaing, seperti *Indo-Pacific Strategy* (IPS), *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP), dan *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) guna membendung rival masing-masing. Persaingan geopolitik antar kekuatan besar ini kerap menimbulkan ketidaknyamanan bagi negara-negara lain di kawasan. Bangladesh, sebagai kekuatan ekonomi baru, menghadapi berbagai tantangan dan dilema akibat persaingan strategis tersebut. Posisi Bangladesh di Indo-Pasifik ditentukan oleh lokasi strategisnya serta kepentingan yang saling beradu dari negara-negara besar. Bangladesh menavigasi lanskap geopolitik yang kompleks ini dengan menyeimbangkan hubungannya dengan kekuatan-kekuatan tersebut, menerapkan strategi *circumventing* (penghindaran strategis), serta memprioritaskan kepentingan nasionalnya sendiri. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa Bangladesh tengah mengejar empat tujuan kebijakan luar negeri utama: kemitraan inklusif, perdamaian dan stabilitas kawasan, prioritas pembangunan, serta kerja sama pertahanan.

Katakunci: Geopolitik, Indo-Pasifik, Kompetisi, Penyeimbangan (*Balancing*), Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT

Indo-Pacific (IP) has been turned into a critical theatre for strategic competition with the growing involvement of major powers. The US, India, Japan and China all are engaging in the region but through divergent approaches. They are approaching with competing strategies such as IPS, FOIP, BRI etc. to counter the common rivals. Bangladesh as an emerging economic power has been facing challenges and dilemmas due to the strategic competition among major powers. This article argues that though competing strategies of major powers with divergent interests push Bangladesh to take a side with, the country adopted multilateralism as strategic tool to navigate, balance and prioritise own foreign policy goals. The findings of the paper, based on different secondary sources of information, demonstrate that strategic geographic location of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) region and the presence of competing interests of major powers shape Bangladesh's priorities and foreign policy goals. Moreover, the country adopted multilateralism to navigate the complex geopolitical competition which includes balancing its relationships with major powers, engaging in strategic circumventing, and prioritising its own national interests. The paper focuses on key foreign policy goals that Bangladesh has been pursuing in the Indo-Pacific region under the umbrella of multilateralism including inclusive partnership, regional peace and stability, economic development and cooperation.

KeyWords: Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific, Competition, Balancing, Bangladesh, Multilateralism

INTRODUCTION

The return of the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific (IP) region has turned the region into a theatre of engagement, cooperation and competition. The shift of world's strategic center of gravity from west to east has been transforming the region rapidly (Rachman, 2016). Since the 'Asia Pivot' of Barak Obama administration, the IP region has become a center stage for major powers' involvement and geopolitical contest. All the major powers have crucial stakes in the region. While regional powers like China and India are vying for dominance in the region, global powers for example, the United States (US), Japan etc., are also eyeing on this region as key area of their geostrategic influence.

The US has a major stake against the backdrop of Sino-US competition for attaining dominance or supremacy in this region. Other major powers have their own national interests to get involved in the region for access and prominence. China's economic expansion and strategic revisionism has been appeared as an existential threat for the US's military and economic might and the status quo over the 'US-led regional order'. Axel Berkofsky et. al., argued that China has played a pivotal role in the modern resurgence of the "Indo-Pacific", and the idea is expected to gain traction despite ongoing disagreements among the major participants regarding their respective geostrategic objectives and the ensuing interpretations of the geographical boundary. It would reshape the regional structures through impacting functional cooperation strategy of the countries of the region (Berkofsky and Miracola, 2019). Global opposition to China's military, political, and economic growth in the IP region is growing, with the US, India, Japan, and Australia among the nations opposing it.

This shift has increased the push for new multilateral partnerships outside of China's sphere of influence. These include renewed AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States), IPS (Indo-Pacific Strategy), and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), as well as economic alliances like the India-Japan-Australia supply-chain resilience initiative (Paskal, 2021). Such kind of regional dynamics led to a vivid geopolitical competition among the major powers often creating discomfort and uneasiness for the other countries of the region.

Again, these heightened geopolitical vicissitudes are also juxtaposed to the usual peace and security challenges that exist in the region. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, peace and security challenges more or less remained the same. Geopolitical competitions among the major powers persist and, in some cases, heightened to actually

turn into a conflict. For example, such geopolitical overture is the exhibition of force by the US and China in the South China Sea in June 2020 amidst widespread COVID-19 infections and deaths in these two countries as well as worldwide. The region also witnessed inter and intra-state conflicts recently amidst heightened pandemic situation. Countries get embroiled into age-old border disputes viz., India-China and India-Pakistan border disputes and also to mention Bangladesh-Myanmar border discomforts due to Rohingya influx, in spite of the expectations that nations would focus more on dealing with the pandemic than directing their attention to traditional disputes.

However, power competition and rivalry are engendering volatility in the regional security domain and creating more strategic uncertainty. While the US has been dominating the world order since the fall of bipolar world order after the Cold War, the rise of China as an economic power and the outreach of India in the Indo-Pacific is challenging the hierarchical order and creating strategic uncertainty. Such kinds of uncertainty are creating confusions regarding the future of the region and how regional countries would react and engage with any economic and security enterprise that has been built due to the strategic competition in this region. For instance, still suspicion loaming whether regional powers would prioritise core interests above upholding regional order, forge real deterrent against unnecessary militarisation, and work through coalitions rather than pursuing self-reliance (Tarapore, 2021). Those suspicions, as Zack Cooper argues, make it evident that the future of the region will be very different from the past, but there is still a great deal of uncertainty about how to move forward (Cooper, 2020, p.5).

Bangladesh is in a risky but favourable situation as a result of the Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia and the US-China competition in the Indian Ocean region. Here, the risk is diplomatic complication, if intense competition between the US and China reach to conflicts and push Bangladesh to take a side. It will impact Bangladesh's option and trajectory (Anwar, 2022). But its strategic ambiguity in foreign policy, that is sector-wise engagement of major powers, helps to diffuse tensions and enhance ties (Anwar, 2022; Amin, 2025). However, Bangladesh's foreign policy has been more cautious in its dealings with China and India due to the country's geographical constraints, which make a drastic realignment course unfeasible (Riaz, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that multilateralism can be an effective strategy for Bangladesh to minimise the challenges appearing due to changing geopolitical order in the IP region. Through the constructivist approach, the paper would examine how multilateralism functions within the great power competition and provides

maneuvering capability to the small and emerging middle powers like Bangladesh to attain national interests.

In this paper, constructivism has been applied to see how individual state actors (agents) are influencing the total construct (structure) of the IP region, and are defining their identity in the region and influencing the nature of interactions among the regional countries. In the IP region, identities construct the interests and actions of the states. For instance, it could be argued that a small state is more concerned with ensuring its own survival than a large one is with controlling international political, economic, and military issues (Theys, 2018).

To supplement the argument, the paper will explore the answers of the following three questions: What is the nature of geopolitical order in the IP region? What are the challenges emerging from the geopolitical order in the IP region? Why is Bangladesh promoting multilateralism as a response strategy?

This is a qualitative research based on secondary sources such as newspapers, books, journals, official documents, websites, and reports etc. The latest quantitative data (2024-26) has been retrieved from government and autonomous institutions issued statistics and reports. Besides, contents of the policy briefs and expert opinions has been analysed highlighting words such as geopolitics, competition, multilateralism etc. Moreover, constitution and documents of the MoFA has been consulted to understand the roots of multilateral approach. Again, latest newspaper articles have been consulted to analyse the latest developments in the Indo-Pacific region.

This study is relevant because it could facilitate the researchers and practitioners to understand the challenges emerged in the IP region due to strategic competition among the major powers and make a balanced response strategy on the issues of national interests while the geopolitical competition becomes a matter of concern. There are five sections in this paper. Following the introduction, the second section discusses the analytical framework; the third section addresses Bangladesh's challenges due to shifting geopolitical landscape in the IP region; the fourth section addresses the benefits and drawbacks of multilateralism as a response strategy in the IP region; and the last section concludes the paper.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The idea of multilateralism refers to the set of rules and guidelines that direct and control the actions of states towards one other. But those principles and norms must be agreed collectively. Besides, multilateral institutions follow the principle of 'generalised reciprocity', by which states decide to cooperate and undertake common initiatives. There are four institutional domains that multilateral arrangements address: a) international orders b) international treaty regimes c) international organizations and d) international negotiation process or forum. In those different domains, the behavior of the state is controlled by the multilateral constitutive rules. However, scholars contend that in the liberal world order, there is no single logic, fixed set of values or practice (Hampson, 2002, p.15).

There are debates among the academia regarding the applicability or effectiveness of multilateralism in response to the new realities of geopolitical order. According to Jochen Prantl, preserving peace and stability in Asia will be difficult over the coming decades because significant changes must be made to manage the shift from an order centred on US supremacy to one that takes China's rise to power into account (Prantl, 2015, p.15). Effective multilateralism, according to his suggestions, should comprise both formal and informal processes and institutions that produce the authority to create collective action, impose the outcomes of collective action, and make those outcomes acceptable to audience.

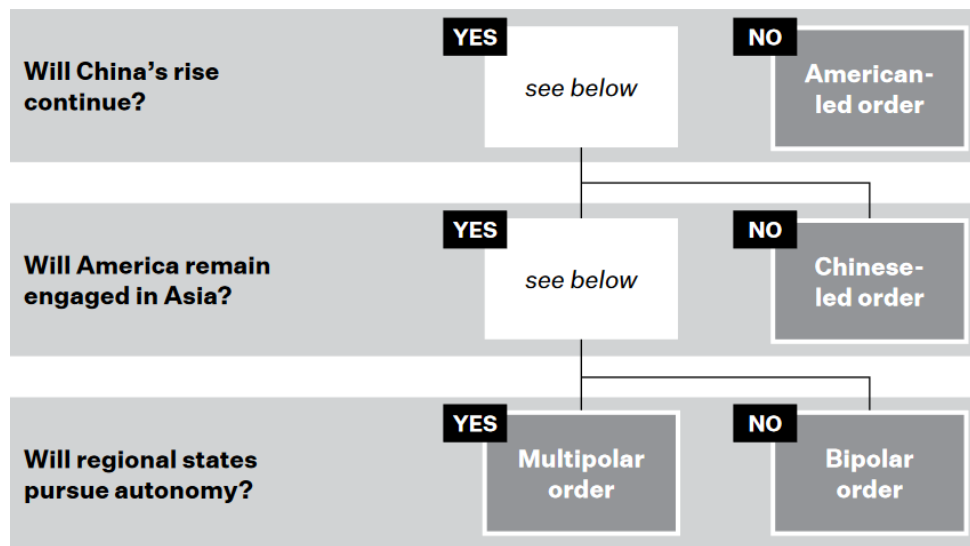
According to Morse and Keohane, contemporary multilateralism is typified by competing coalitions and dynamic institutional arrangements, both formal and informal; additionally, multilateral institutions are put to the test by the use of other multilateral institutions, either in addition to or instead of using unilateralism and bilateralism (Morse and Keohane, 2014). Amitav Acharya argued that other actors, including Australia, Canada, Japan, and ASEAN collectively, now have the chance to offer innovative and enterprising leadership for the growth of multilateral institutions due to the US's declining influence (Acharya, 1997, p.6).

Swaran Singh and Reena Marwah argue that the strategic fabric of the IP region has seen further accelerated in different formats being worked and reworked through minilateral and multilateral engagements. Institutions like the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), QUAD, RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), AUKUS

(Australia, UK, US) and so on have further added to the expansion and inclusivity of the region (Singh and Marwah, 2022, p.10).

Above discussions reveal that there is a growing importance of multilateralism to respond effectively to the shifting geopolitical situation in the IP region. But there remain challenges as well. Major questions remain what would be the dominant narrative of the multilateral grouping and who will design it. Scholars argue that regional order in the IP region can be illustrated through three specific questions (Cooper, 2020, p.5): Firstly, will China’s rise continue? Secondly, will the US continue its involvement in Asia? And third, will states in the region seek autonomy in terms of relationship with the US and China? (see Figure 1)

Figure 1.
Strategic order in the IP region (Cooper, 2020, p.6).



The US will remain as the man in horseback in crafting the regional strategic order if China’s rise halts. China is expected to take over the regional leadership if its rise continues and the US withdraws from Asia. The order will mostly depend on the actions of the regional countries if China’s rise continues and the US remains engaged. A bipolar order will develop if states in the region decide to side with either China or the US. A multipolar system is more likely to exist if regional countries strive for strategic autonomy from these two powers. Nevertheless, since the regional strategic architecture remains elusive and it depends on how regional actors see the order, it hampers the development visions and foreign policy goals of the emerging and small powers in the region. Bangladesh as an emerging economic power, has been facing this dilemma. Therefore, Bangladesh needs effective strategy to respond to the changing strategic

scenarios and navigate the major power rivalry to continue its development agenda further.

Constructivism focuses on states' interactions and the outcomes from the interactions which is based on identity: culture of enmity, rivalry and friendship (Wendt, 1992). Therefore, Indo-Pacific region can be constructed as either rivalry or friendship. Multilateralism facilitates states' interactions and it emerged as a domain such as negotiation platform to construct or translate rivalry into friendship, which is crucial for developing nations to attain socio-economic progress. To design its foreign policy priority, Bangladesh needs to consider both the domestic development impulses and regional strategic environment, and promote multilateralism to create a sphere whether it can push its agenda with common interests in the IP region.

Moreover, since the construction of the identities, interests and actions of the major players in the IP region follows divergent approaches, emerging countries like Bangladesh has to encounter balancing dilemma. On the one hand, the country needs to address the domestic development impulses in line with foreign policy directives. On the other hand, responding to the regional strategic developments and behaviour of the major partners become critical to achieve the foreign policy goals. For example, Bangladesh's bilateral relationship with the US, China and India and mutual relationship among those countries are critical variables for Bangladesh's foreign policy directions. Any changes in the bilateral relationships of those power impact Bangladesh's foreign policy behaviour and determines the foreign policy orientations. Therefore, Bangladesh always faces challenges to balance those evolving trends.

Again, as Cooper mentioned, there is an uncertainty regarding the regional order. The nature of engagement of the major powers and response to regional order determines the engagement behaviour of the small and emerging powers of the region. Moreover, Bangladesh, due to its geographic position, has a little scope to make radical alignment policy to side with any regional or extra-regional powers. Therefore, to address the balancing dilemma, Bangladesh needs such an approach which could ensure its vision for development, help pursuing own priorities and facilitating regional cooperation. Multilateralism can be a strong approach to respond.

In this paper, as mentioned earlier, multilateralism denotes Bangladesh's focus on two domains of arrangements, for example, international organisations and international negotiation or forums. The following section will focus on evolving geopolitical

landscape in the IP region to understand the context of balancing dilemma for Bangladesh and the needs for multilateralism as a response strategy.

GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND THE BALANCING DILEMMA

To understand the evolving strategic scenario in the IP region, the strategic importance of the region, nature of the relationship of the regional and extra-regional powers, competing strategies of the major powers etc. require critical discussions. Besides, how the evolving scenario creates balancing dilemma for emerging countries like Bangladesh should be discussed for the better direction of the strategic maneuver to attain foreign policy goals. This section focuses on these critical discussions.

The IP region has been turned into a strategic hub. The region comprises with more than half of world's total population and around two-thirds of global economy leading sixty percent of global GDP (Light Castle Analytics, 2023). It also comprises with the seven largest military forces of the world. The region is home to a diverse mix of political systems, economic models, religions and culture. Global trade and energy linkages bind the region in a such way, events across the region are strongly interrelated and mutually dependent. However, as the IP region has gained geostrategic, economic, and geopolitical significance as a result of convergence of interests by the regional and global powers through divergent approaches. The IP region is on its way to becoming a critical ground for competition and collaboration.

The vitality of the region could be felt due to presence of maritime chokepoints and major sea routes in the Indo-Pacific region. The Strait of Malacca connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans; the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden; the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial route for Persian Gulf oil; and several other straits surrounding Indonesia (Sunda, Lombok), are among the major maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific region. Huge volumes of energy and goods cross-through those narrow passages making them strategically critical due to the vulnerability to geopolitical risks, piracy or congestions.

In 2023, the Hormuz, Malacca, and Babel Mandeb Straits transported combinedly more than 53 million barrels of oil per day which is nearly more than two-third of the global maritime oil trade. Besides, the Malacca Strait itself is very crucial because more than 23 per cent of world's crude oil supply pass through the Strait of Malacca (see Table 1). If these straits are under any disruptions or face shutdown or under potential risks of conflict, global economy will suffer severely.

Table 1.
Volumes of oil and petroleum liquids transported (million barrels per day) through world chokepoints (EIA, 2024).

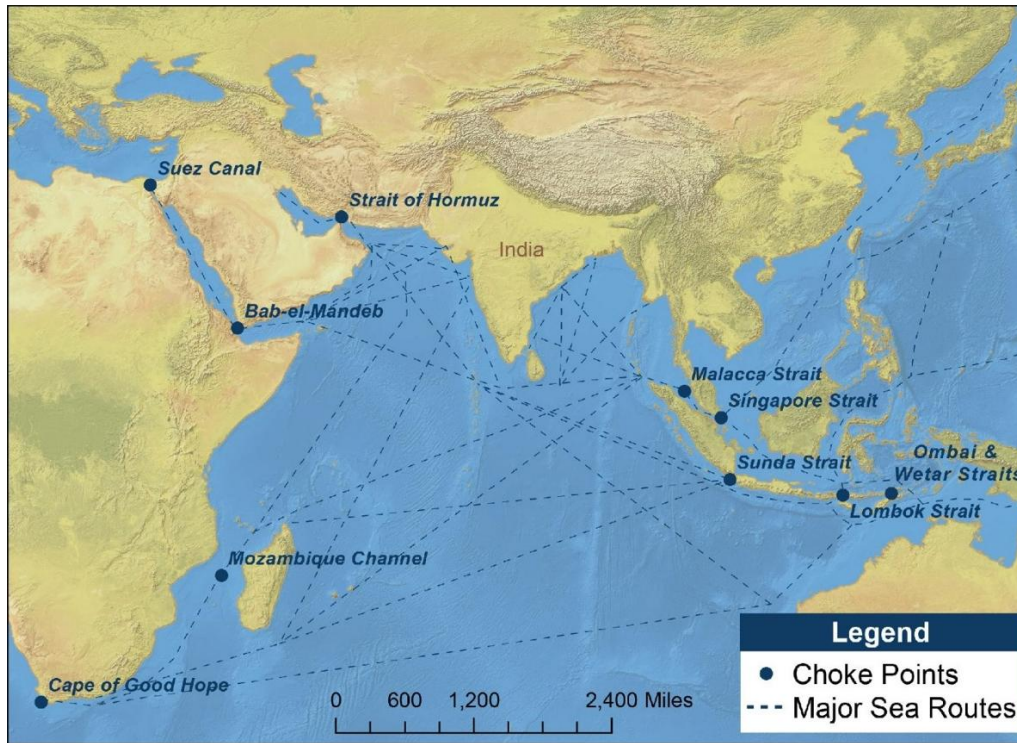
Chokepoints	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Strait of Malacca	23.0	23.1	22.8	21.9	22.9	23.7
Strait of Hormuz	21.4	20.0	18.4	19.0	21.1	20.9
Suez Canal and SUMED Pipeline	6.4	6.2	5.3	5.1	7.3	8.8
Bab el-Mandeb	6.4	6.0	5.2	5.4	7.5	8.6
Danish Straits	3.3	3.4	3.1	3.1	4.2	4.9
Turkish Straits (Dardanelles)	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.2	3.4
Panama Canal	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.8	2.1	2.1
Cape of Good Hope	7.6	7.5	7.7	7.0	5.9	6.0
World maritime oil trade	78.5	78.2	73.0	74.3	76.2	77.5
World total oil supply	100.1	100.9	91.6	97.6	99.9	101.9

One of the important discussions that has been appearing before the regional countries is, what are the converging areas of interests which is driving regional and global powers to engage in the IP region. The key areas of converging interests are ensuring maritime security i.e., tackling piracy, drug and human trafficking, and also infrastructure development; energy cooperation; climate change and disaster management.

The geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean region has grown due to major powers' extensive reliance on sea routes for transporting energy resources and commercial goods. For example, the Strait of Hormuz connects major oil producers, including Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar to the rest of the world (see Figure 1). According to UNCTAD (UN Trade and Development), eighty percent of global trade by volume and seventy percent by value is carried out by sea; within that volume, sixty percent travel through Asia, with the South China Sea accounting for over one-third of all shipping worldwide (Pratson, 2023). The majority of imports into Japan and South Korea, aside from those into China, come from Middle Eastern suppliers and are traded through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. Therefore, cooperation in connectivity, infrastructural development, energy and maritime cooperation is crucial in the IP region for making a secured and prosperous

region. Also, such kind of convergence of interests led to the creation of minilateral approaches like QUAD and AUKUS.

Figure 1.
Key chokepoints in the Indian Ocean (Raina, 2024).



The key dilemma in the IP region is the competing strategies followed by the major powers to engage themselves in the region. In this case, major powers are employing divergent approaches and narratives on engagement. The IPS of the US highlights on freedom of navigation and rule-based order; Indian version of the Indo-Pacific is Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) which is considered as an extension of India's Look East policy; Japan's FOIP seeks to ensure that China and Chinese standards do not dominate the infrastructure networks that connect Asia to Africa. Japan focuses on enhancing connection between the African and Asian continents as well as between the Pacific and Indian Oceans; Australia pledges to work with the democracies in the IP region to advance regional balance that serves their interests. ASEAN's approach to Indo-Pacific regionalism focuses on developing a sense of security through ensuring presence of major powers in the region; and China has its own vision in the IP region reflected within the Belt and Road Initiative and the vision of Maritime Silk Road. Nevertheless, players in the IP region have own interests to cooperate and sometimes, to compete. It

has its groupings or alliances like QUAD and AUKUS to mobilise the partners or neighbours for economic, normative, or geographic connectivity.

Another strategic uncertainty stems from the Sino-US strategic competition (Aryal and Pulami, 2024). An intensified Sino-US rivalry and strategic competition has been the primary catalyst to ignite military buildup in this region. Moreover, growing Sino-Indian competition have created strategic unpredictability in the region. Several major regional flashpoints such as North Korean nuclearisation at the Korean Peninsula, increasing tension among the littoral states over maritime disputes at the South China Sea, renewed hostility over Kashmir between the nuclear neighbors India-Pakistan, Sino-Indian border skirmishes etc. not only played a key role to exacerbate uncertainties, these flashpoints have the potential to trigger military confrontation, undermining the security and destabilising the whole region.

Now, shifting strategic landscape in the IP region has brought quandary for Bangladesh. At the one hand, Bangladesh's thirst for continuing development momentum and dependence on the major stakeholders of the IP region for the development, on the other hand impulse to set own priorities in the region.

Bangladesh has economic partnership with the US, Japan, China and India. But rivalry with each other among those partners drives Bangladesh into precarious positions (Islam, 2023). The US is the top RMG market for Bangladesh, while China ranks as the top most trading partner, Japan is the highest donor and investor while India is the closest neighbor which has historical and cultural legacy of relationships. But the Sino-US and Sino-Indian competition in the region is a major obstacle for Bangladesh to independently decide on the foreign policy goals. Moreover, those countries appeared with divergent strategies and narratives of engagement, for example, the US came up with Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), China with BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), Japan with Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), also India with SAGAR.

The IPS and the IPEF of US is called as the China 'containment strategy' (Hu, 2020) and the US encouraged Bangladesh to be a part of IPS and IPEF (Ahmed, 2023). Therefore, this invitation created dilemma for Bangladesh, pushing towards a binary choice between the US or China. But for the sake of the economic advancement, Bangladesh requires to navigate and avoid the geopolitical rivalry among the major powers who are the key economic partners of the country. Moreover, a stable IP region is crucial for Bangladesh's connectivity purpose, ensuring maritime security and cooperation, and for ensuring energy supply. Hence, Bangladesh needs to maximise its national interests through

navigating the rivalries. The country is focusing on achieving greater strategic autonomy to face such dilemmas. Hence, multilateralism has emerged as an important instrument for Bangladesh to balance the competition and to set Bangladesh's priorities within the strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. Now, the following section will deal with the effectiveness of multilateralism as a response strategy for Bangladesh.

MULTILATERALISM AS A RESPONSE STRATEGY

Bangladesh is an important stakeholder in the IP region. The country ranked ninth in Asia and the second highest economy in terms of GDP in South Asia (ADB, 2025) and preparing itself to graduate from the LDCs (Least Developed Countries) by 2026. Bangladesh desires a peaceful, stable and prosperous IP region to foster its own economic growth and enhance own security and regional peace. Bangladesh has own priority in the region and it has been working to engage the major stakeholders in a constructive way which would benefit all the countries of the region. Before delving into the response strategy of Bangladesh, a brief discussion on Bangladesh's priorities in the region could be helpful.

Bangladesh, one of the key littorals of Bay of Bengal (BoB) region, like many of its neighbours in South Asia, is at the crossroad of its path toward development. It is absolutely crucial for Bangladesh's development centric interest to have a secure, stable and peaceful IP region.

Bangladesh's foreign policy is orientated towards achieving two broad goals: first, ensuring its security and maintaining sovereignty; and second, locating resources to support its growth and economic good. The first one echoes the growing demand to obtain enough strategic autonomy in pursuing foreign policy goals. The second one derives from the desire for material resources such as increase foreign direct investment, remittance, aid and trade as well as enhance export diversification to boost its development ambitions. Bangladesh prioritises multilateralism, engaging countries based on mutual trust and benefits, and fair competition.

Bangladesh envisions such an IP region where the region itself would concentrate on sustainability of development initiatives, engage nations for mutual gains, ensure inclusivity and foster decent competition rather than contentions (MoFA, 2023). Bangladesh aspires to an Indian Ocean that is open, free, peaceful, and inclusive rather than dominated by any one nation or group. Bangladesh also desires regional and global powers to take initiative for the peaceful resolution of problems and minimise the escalation of conflicts, and strengthen the confidence building measures in conflict prone

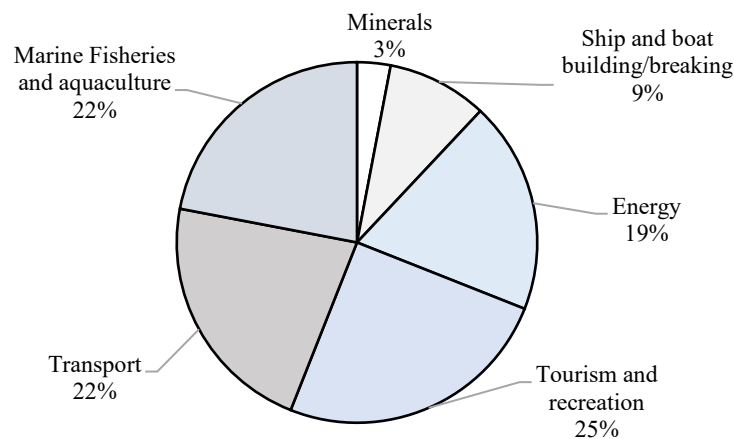
area of the region. Though infrastructure-driven economic development has been the thorn for many of South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh needs to build an efficient infrastructure base, ensure infrastructure investment and FDI inflow to keep up the development momentum for coming days.

Cooperation in climate change and disaster management is one of the key priorities of Bangladesh. Many of the littorals of the region and small island countries are at the threat of sea level rise and climate disasters. The region demands the regional and global powers to cooperate in addressing the climate issue and support the voice of the climate vulnerable countries of the region.

Besides, other key priorities of Bangladesh are enhancing maritime cooperation to tap potentials of blue economy and counter nontraditional security challenges in the maritime space such as human and drug trafficking, IUU fishing, piracy etc.; ensuring supply of energy resources to meet the energy demand (Hossain, 2025: 3); and the peaceful repatriation of the Rohingyas in Myanmar which has become a major security concern. Another priority of Bangladesh is defence cooperation including training and exercises, and trust building among the militaries of the region.

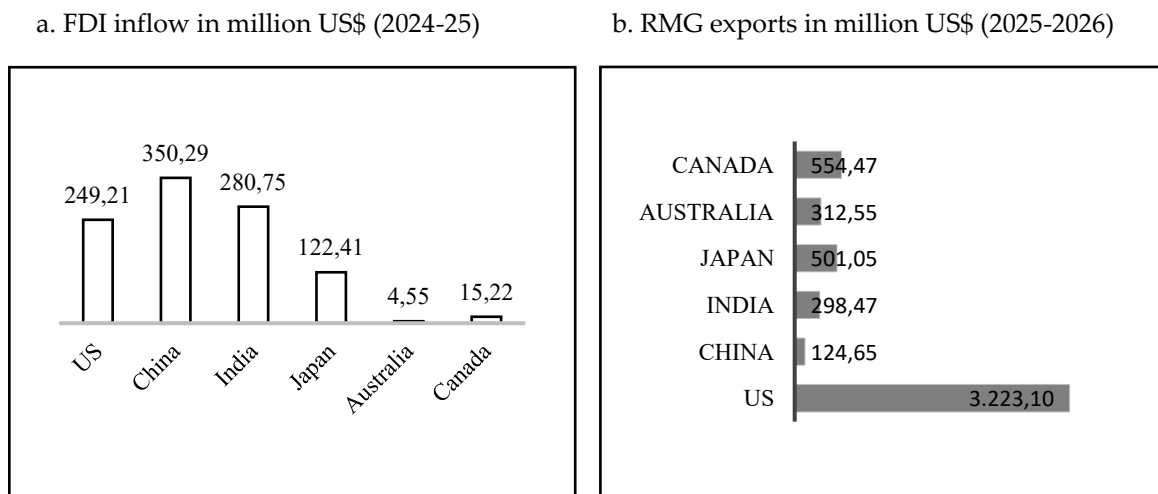
The maritime domain of Indo-Pacific region, particularly the BoB region, is critical for Bangladesh in terms of both economy and security, for example, the oceanic domain assist 90 per cent of Bangladesh's total trade and 100 per cent of its energy transportation (Hossain, 2025: 2). Therefore, a stable Indo-Pacific is significant for Bangladesh's maritime-dependent (see Figure 2) economy and its sustainability.

Figure 2.
Oceanic economy mixes of Bangladesh (Patil et al, 2018)



Moreover, for the exports and infrastructure development, the country needs more economic cooperation with the Indo-Pacific nations including the US and China. Regarding the RMG exports, the US is the largest destination (more than US\$3000 million exported in 2025-2026 fiscal year) while China was the third largest destination of FDI inflow (US\$274.17) in 2025-26 fiscal year (Bangladesh Bank, 2025), particularly in infrastructure development sector and was the top source of imports for Bangladesh (Yeping, 2025). The FDI inflow and RMG exports in the major Indo-Pacific countries (see Figure 3) shows how the Indo-Pacific dynamics is relevant with Bangladesh’s economy.

Figure 3.
Bangladesh’s FDI inflow (Bangladesh Bank, 2025) and RMG exports (BGMEA, 2025) in major Indo-Pacific countries.



Now, as mentioned before, to achieve foreign policy priorities in the Indo-Pacific region, Bangladesh is willing to partner any sort of platform that promotes economic partnership and avoid military or security groupings. Hence, multilateralism can serve this purpose. It is an interaction between states with diverse political systems, philosophies, histories, and cultures come together for common goals, rights, and duties in international affairs. It provides a platform to discuss the issues and find a common ground to solve the common problems. It continues to support measured-collaboration on shared challenges and establish or resurrect forums that facilitate defusing tensions and offering solutions to crisis exits (Moreland, 2019). Building trust among a wide range of international entities, some of whose goals may not align or may be incompatible, is possible through multilateralism.

Multilateralism provides opportunity for the comparatively weaker parties to have their voices heard and their interests taken into consideration and the relatively powerful parties have the chance to use multilateralism to elevate their leadership and make it less invasive of other interests (Ivanov, 2023). Besides, it provides a platform for non-state actors in international politics and the global economy to meaningfully engage in the debate and resolution of pressing problems.

Additionally, multilateralism works as a conduit among the great powers and help small powers to maximise their own interests and it brings the convergence of interests which ultimately generates spill-over effect on the regional peace and security. It provides small and emerging powers including Bangladesh with a platform to discuss and share the concerns over the nontraditional security challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, transnational crimes like arms and drug trafficking etc.

Now, the question is why multilateralism? Since its journey as an independent state, multilateralism has become a bedrock of Bangladesh's foreign relations. This approach has been manifested in three different aspects: constitutional directions, growing tendency of joining multilateral organisations (both regional and extra-regional), and latest documents of Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO).

Firstly, the constitution of Bangladesh manifests the essence of true multilateralism. It depicts the hallmarks of multilateralism: [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... (Article 25 of Bangladesh's constitution)]

This baseline underscores Bangladesh's adherence to the UN Charter and actively participate in different international organisations, promote friendships with other countries with the principles of non-interference and mutual benefits and engage in regional and global multilateral efforts to uphold global causes such as sustainable development goals (SDGs), climate action and human rights etc. All those principles demonstrate Bangladesh's commitment to multilateralism.

Secondly, Bangladesh has become a responsible stakeholder and an active participant in multilateral and minilateral organisations since its independence (see Table 2). Now, there are several motives behind joining multilateral and minilateral arrangements: a) to become a strong voice rather than passive spectator, b) norm-setting

in regional and global system, c) promoting culture of peace, d) voice for global south, e) achieving SDGs etc. (Islam and Molla, 2024, pp.180-186).

Table 2.
Bangladesh’s membership in different international organisations (Islam and Molla, 2022).

Multilateral (Global)		Regional and Minilateral (Sub-regional)	
International Monetary Fund (IMF)	1972	United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)	1974
International Labour Organization (ILO)	1972	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP)	1973
International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)	1972	World Food Programme (WFP)	1974
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)	1972	World Trade Organization (WTO)	1995
International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	1972	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)	1985
World Health Organization (WHO)	1972	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)	1997
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)	1972	D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation (D-8)	1997
International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)	1972	International Organization for Migration (IOM)	1998
International Development Association (IDA)	1972	Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor	1999
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)	1972	Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)	1999
United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)	1972	ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	2005
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	1972	Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative	2015
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	1973	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)	2016
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)	1973	New Development Bank (NDB)	2021
International Telecommunication Union (ITU)	1973		

Thirdly, the most important document that has been published recently is IPO which clearly stated Bangladesh’s stance on multilateralism. After the constitution, the IPO is the sole document which determines the country’s foreign policy directions in the IP region. Innovations in using some specific terms in the document such as rule-based

international 'system' instead of 'order', free and open IP region and 'inclusivity' in the region clearly demonstrates Bangladesh's desire to uphold multilateralism (none to blame or side with). This document bears great testimony of Bangladesh's critical position, vision and priority of its foreign relations in the IP region and beyond.

Now, discussions in the following sections will highlight the approaches through which Bangladesh has been engaging multilateralism to responds the strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region as well as pursue its own goals.

As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh's strong desire for promoting multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region was highly reflected on its Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) declared on April 2023 (MoFA, 2023). In the IPO, Bangladesh envisioned shared prosperity and it focused on inclusivity of all the stakeholders in the journey for the common prosperity. The IPO was a strategic navigation for Bangladesh towards achieving greater strategic autonomy through multilateralism. As Bangladesh has been trying to avoid geopolitical rivalry among the US, China and India (Bangladesh needs friendship with all the three for its development visions), the IPO empowered Bangladesh to strike a balance between the Washington and Beijing.

Moreover, the IPO has demonstrated the commitment to respect for rule-based maritime order, political independence and principle of non-interference, and promoting dialogues to solve regional problems. This replicates Bangladesh's non-aligned position. It signifies that Bangladesh bought none of the Indo-Pacific constructs or narratives by the major powers, rather avoided to be a party to bloc politics and remained standing as a regional leader (Yasmin, 2023). Again, the use of the term 'inclusive' in the IPO document denotes commitment to regional stability, plurality and desire for connectivity. While Bangladesh has adopted an inclusive stance, the West has an anti-China component to its Indo-Pacific policy. Bangladesh is thus, concentrating on increased regional collaboration and stability (Islam, 2023).

Additionally, as Bangladesh has been focusing on multilateralism and collective engagement: ranging from economic to energy to climate change, it has been promoting and partnering different minilateral platforms to push its development priorities and regional security agenda. For example, Bangladesh is an active partner of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) etc. The IORA is a vital forum for promoting collaboration in the Indian Ocean region where Bangladesh partners this platform with other countries. With 23 members and 10 discussion partners,

IORA focuses on Disaster Risk Management (DRM) and Science, Technology, and Innovation in the IP region in order to enhance capability in this sector. Moreover, Bangladesh has proposed to include climate change as a cross-cutting issue of IORA (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). This platform has also been focusing on 'blue resilience' (Yasmin and So, 2023) to achieve sustainable blue economy which is an important priority of Bangladesh.

Again, BIMSTEC, another regional platform has emerged as a crucial connectivity platform both in the BoB and IP region. BIMSTEC connects BoB with larger maritime domain (Indian Ocean), and it becomes a crucial platform to connect BoB littorals with strategic discourses of Indo-Pacific (Gupta, 2022). The establishment of transport linkages with seamless interconnectivity in BIMSTEC facilitates cross-border trade and integrate the BoB into the larger IP region (Hussain, 2022).

Moreover, Bangladesh has been advocating for the BoB littorals as a "community". Creating such kind of community fosters a sense of oneness among societies, economies, cultures and regional platforms for cooperation in the BoB region (Islam and Molla, 2024, p.61). Establishing a formal association, for example, initiating new platform such as Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation Association (BoBECA), could promote the idea of BoB Community. This concept could be applied to promote social development, trade, and peaceful connectivity. The concept of "BIMSTEC-Plus", intended to support the BoB Community, surfaced in the discussion (Karim, 2020).

Moreover, multilateralism could open more scopes to discuss the Rohingya repatriation issue and ensure a collective engagement to solve this problem and ensure regional peace. Also, multilateralism would help Bangladesh to find options in standard-setting, for example, promoting Indian Ocean as a 'Zone of Peace', and pushing progressive voice and customised needs.

However, there remain some challenges of multilateralism in this region. If the major powers like India and China do not cooperate in the multilateral platforms, effective multilateralism could remain an elusive agenda. Another challenge is bilateralism. India, the biggest neighbor and strong regional power follows bilateralism. Similarly, Myanmar does follow the same principle which creates obstacles to solve common non-traditional security and border issues which are cross-cutting in nature. However, Bangladesh should actively promote its own priority, play a role of standard-setter and work as a conduit between great powers and maximise national interests. However, Bangladesh's approach of sector-wise engagement could work to bring all the

differences of the major powers in a space to discuss and reconcile the differences through shared dialogues and diffuse tensions (Anwar, 2022). For example, economic partnerships through minilateral or multilateral arrangements such as IPEF, RCEP, BIMSTEC, IORA etc. can be a force to bring the US, China and India together, and allow them to share other concerns in the Indo-Pacific region, discuss and find mutual solutions.

CONCLUSION

The IP region has been continuously transforming amid the shifts of world's strategic concentration from the West to the East. Major powers like the US, Japan, Australia and India are trying to contain China's military, political, and economic expansion in the IP region. The need for new multilateral alliances outside of China's sphere of influence has grown as a result of this strategic shift including AUKUS, IPS, and QUAD. Such shifts resulted in a strong geopolitical rivalry between the great powers. Because of the Sino-US competition in the Indian Ocean region and the Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia, Bangladesh is in a dilemma.

However, Bangladesh remained cautious in its dealings with the US, China and India due to its geographical constraints, which make a drastic foreign policy realignment unfeasible. In this context, however, multilateralism can be an effective strategy for Bangladesh to minimise the challenges and maximise the national interests. Multilateralism provides set of rules and guidelines that direct and control the conduct of states. It has emerged as an important tool to respond effectively to the changing geopolitical scenario in the IP region. But there remain challenges as well. Major questions remain what would be the dominant narrative of the multilateral grouping and who will design it.

The IP region became critical due to complex nature of relationship among different powers within the region and beyond, competing strategies of those powers and overlapping partnerships etc. Bangladesh requires to navigate the rivalries in order to promote its national interests.

Bangladesh has been promoting its own priorities through multilateralism, for example, inclusive partnership such as cooperating with other nations in a spirit of mutual trusts, fair competition, and mutual profit; regional peace and stability such as open and inclusive Indian Ocean, peaceful resolution of problems and minimise the escalation of conflicts; development priorities such as building an efficient infrastructure base, ensuring FDI inflow, maritime cooperation, ensuring supply of energy, addressing

climate change issues and natural disasters, peaceful repatriation of the Rohingyas; defence cooperation such as exercise and training, trust building among the militaries of the Indo-Pacific region. Multilateralism has been reflected in its IPO, and its partnership with IORA and BIMSTEC demonstrate its commitment to multilateralism. However, relationship between China and India remained as the critical factor to implement multilateralism. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's approach could be instrumental for the major powers. Engaging all stakeholders through multilateral platforms could pave the way to discuss mutual differences and find a common ground for all to respond to the regional crisis of the Indo-Pacific region.

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