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The dilemmas of Bangladesh as a weak state in South Asia

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Abstract

Purpose – The complex environment of regional and extra-regional politics in South Asia renders the region more susceptible to economically and militarily weaker states. This article investigates the challenges Bangladesh faces due to rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics and global political and economic upheavals.

Design/methodology/approach – This study delves into the dilemmas encountered by Bangladesh as a weak state through literature review, in-depth interviews, media reports and dialogues.

Findings – Four key factors are identified: (a) Bangladesh's significance to major powers has increased; (b) it confronts many obstacles hindering its pursuit of a purely non-aligned foreign policy due to its strategic importance to these powers; (c) its internal factors including political turbulence, corruption, and fragile external relations, have been detrimental; and (d) the intensification of key powers' influence has constrained its autonomy.

Originality/value – This study underscores that weak institutions, least regional integration, and limited cooperation among states have compromised the autonomy of weak states like Bangladesh in South Asia. There is a need for unity and collaboration among these nations to address dilemmas in the interest of their national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regional stability.

Keywords Bangladesh, Dilemmas, Foreign policy, International politics, South Asia, Regional politics, Weak states

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Weak states constitute the largest number in the world, including but not limited to those in South Asia; however, these states are facing complex and harsh realities that limit their material capabilities compared to hegemonic powers, both regionally and globally (Hall, 2022; Plagemann, 2022). The vast disparities in geography, culture, population, economy, and military power among these states have heightened the region's vulnerability (Buzan and Weaver, 2003). South Asia grapples with inter-state and intra-state conflicts, harsh geopolitical realities, least regional integration and cooperation, weak institutions, and numerous security and development hurdles (Ganguly and O'Donnell, 2022), with weak states bearing the burden of these challenges (Manoharan, 2024).

International politics have pervaded South Asia since the Cold War era, with the U.S. and Russia vying for hegemonic influence in the region through local powers such as India and Pakistan. The ever-growing presence of China has further reshaped the region's political, economic, and security dynamics, leading to intensified competition among both regional and extra-regional powers (Ganguly and O'Donnell, 2022; Riaz, 2022; Hossain and Islam, 2021), especially influencing weak states in South Asia (Paul, 2019). As the Cold War powers deemed it inappropriate to solely view the region through the lens of India and Pakistan, the hegemonic powers have increasingly directed their attention towards individual states. In comparison, China's strategies and policies towards South Asia worked much better than

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those of other powers, resulting in a radical change in their foreign policy towards the region (Wagner, 2016; Ranjan and Guo, 2022). The competition among foreign officials visiting several countries, such as Bangladesh, in recent years is an obvious example.

This study investigates how regional political dynamics and foreign influences constrain South Asia's prosperity, and how weak states become the primary victims. The existing research on South Asian weak states basically focuses on major powers' rivalries and competition and how these rivalries benefit them, especially in economic development. There has been little focus on comprehensive analyses of the challenges weak states have persistently faced in navigating major power competition, particularly, how do these weak states respond to the growing geopolitical competition in the region? Do weak states like Bangladesh feel secure in a political landscape where great powers dominate? What strategies does Bangladesh employ to safeguard its national sovereignty and interests? How can this issue in South Asia be contextualized? This paper aims to address these questions in a comprehensive manner.

To address the research questions, this study employs a historical-geographic approach, integrates key international relations theories, and utilises qualitative methods to analyse regional dynamics in South Asia. It begins with a conceptual and theoretical examination of weak state' behaviour in international relations, focusing on South Asian nations. The findings indicate that weak states often navigate great power rivalries by aligning with stronger nations, like Bhutan seeking protection, or maintaining neutrality, as seen with Bangladesh, to avoid entanglement in power struggles. Second, the study highlights disparities among South Asian states, particularly the dominance of India due to its material superiority over all except Pakistan. However, India's influence is waning as China's foreign policies and investments in the region gain traction, alongside the U.S. and Russia's shifting perspectives that do not solely focus on India and Pakistan.

The empirical section draws on in-depth interviews, fieldwork, and media reports to examine Bangladesh's challenges amid rising regional power competition and its strategic significance to major powers. The study concludes by summarising the findings and offering recommendations for Bangladesh to enhance its leverage in both regional and global politics.

A conceptual and theoretical framework

In international politics and relations, the concept of "weak state" is highly contentious, particularly regarding its definition, characteristics, and determinants. Generally, weak states are understood as nations with limited political, economic, and military power compared to more developed countries. Jackson (2000) argues that a weak state is not necessarily synonymous with being underdeveloped, undemocratic, or ravaged by international conflict; rather, it stems from political failures. He emphasises that weak states often struggle to maintain essential civic conditions for their populations, including domestic peace, law and order, and effective governance. Consequently, these states may experience deteriorating infrastructure, widespread corruption, unregulated borders, and rampant crime (Krasner, 2004). These states typically struggle with ineffective governance, lack the capacity to meet the basic needs of their citizens, and are vulnerable to internal and external influences and threats. They also face challenges in asserting their national interests on regional and global stages (Stewart, 2011).

Weak states face material and structural disadvantages that influence their behaviour in regional and international politics. Their military and economic weaknesses lead them to seek a peaceful environment regionally and globally, or at the very least, meaningful security assurances (Plagemann, 2022). In South Asia, weak states often rely on foreign aid and investments, limiting their bargaining power with larger economies. This is evident in the growing trade deficits between weak and powerful nations in the region. Furthermore,

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political instability in these weak states restricts their influence in both regional and extra-regional forums.

From a theoretical point of view, weak states are often defined by their limited power and influence within the global system, as explored through the lenses of mainstream IR theories: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Realism posits that weak states frequently become pawns in the power struggles of stronger nations (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2018). To enhance their security, these states may seek to balance power through alliances with peer nations or by aligning themselves with more powerful states for protection (Morgenthau, 1948). For instance, in South Asia, countries like Bangladesh grapple with security concerns stemming from hegemonic regional powers, facing increasing pressure to align with one of them.

In contrast, liberalism offers a more optimistic view. Scholars like Keohane and Nye (1977) and Ikenberry (2020) argue that weak states can leverage international organisations and diplomatic channels to advocate for their interests and safeguard their sovereignty within the liberal international order. South Asian states have, for example, utilised platforms like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC) to address disputes with neighbouring countries and mitigate direct conflicts. Nonetheless, challenges remain evident, such as Bangladesh's ongoing water disputes with India and the Rohingya crisis involving Myanmar.

Constructivism emphasises the significance of identity and norms in shaping state behaviour. Weak states may strive to assert their unique identities amid intense power rivalries (Wendt, 1999) and may form alliances based on shared values and norms (Acharya, 2017). In South Asia, the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of these weak nations complicate efforts to unite against major powers. Instead, their cooperation tends to focus on common interests like regional integration, economic collaboration, and strengthening regional institutions. Although there have been some advances toward regional cooperation, it is essential for leaders of these states to prioritise practical implementation over mere rhetoric.

Research methodology

This study utilised qualitative research methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the literature on smaller and weaker states and to conduct a comparative analysis of major power politics in South Asia concerning these weaker states. The primary objective was to investigate the foreign policy approaches of major powers towards weak states in South Asia, as well as the responses of these states to such approaches.

To address the complexities of the South Asian political landscape and its implications for weak states, a triangulated qualitative approach was adopted. This approach comprised three methodological components: a literature review, in-depth interviews, and content analysis. A thorough examination of both scholarly and non-scholarly literature, including media sources and online information, was conducted to evaluate key issues and fundamental questions related to the topic.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted during a one-and-a-half month fieldwork trip in Bangladesh. These interviews aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of experts in the region. The study sought to deepen the understanding of the challenges faced by weak states, particularly Bangladesh, and to analyse how the nation navigates these complexities. A total of twenty-five experts were selected for this study based on their extensive knowledge and expertise regarding Bangladesh and the region as a whole. This group included seven academicians, four diplomats, five government officials, five politicians, and four journalists, all of whom have played (and continue to play) significant roles in the decision-making processes related to Bangladesh and South Asian

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affairs. Invitations to participate in interviews were distributed via email and social media platforms (LinkedIn and WhatsApp). Each invitation outlined the purpose of the study and included a brief overview of potential questions.

Before conducting the interviews, interviewees were briefed on the study's objectives, potential risks and benefits, and verbal informed consents were obtained regarding the use of their names and identities in the study. The semi-structured interviews featured open-ended questions that focused on the challenges faced by weak states due to intense power competition in the region, coping strategies employed by these states, and recommendations for vulnerable countries. All interviews were conducted through video calls using Zoom, with participants' consent obtained for recording some sessions for transcription and analysis. The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours.

The data obtained from the in-depth interviews were analysed using content analysis to identify key themes and patterns from the experts' responses. Notably, variations in perceptions among experts were observed, particularly between politicians and government officials. These differing perspectives provided valuable insights that encouraged a re-evaluation of South Asian political dynamics from a fresh viewpoint.

South Asian regional politics and weak states

Geo-structure of South Asian nations

The geographical positioning of a nation or region holds significant sway over both regional and global politics and has long been recognised as a pivotal determinant of foreign policy (Jha, 2011). Geography fundamentally determines whether a state has easier access to neighbouring and extra-regional entities for enhanced cooperation. However, the geo-structure of South Asian nations presents challenges that impede seamless cooperation. There exists a substantial imbalance among these states in terms of their geographical expanse. India, for example, encompasses approximately 63 percent of the total area, leaving the remaining countries with only 37 percent (Table 1), including the Maldives, which accounts for less than 0.1 percent. Moreover, India shares borders with all other states except Afghanistan. Nepal and Bhutan are landlocked by India, rendering them heavily reliant on it for trade and access to the sea, while Bangladesh has limited access via the Bay of Bengal, with two major ports serving to reduce excessive dependency on India. Furthermore, apart from Afghanistan and Pakistan, no other countries have direct borders with each other, preventing smooth cooperation among them.

Countries	*Area (%)*	*Population (%)*	*GDP (%)*	*State Language*	*State Religion*	*Political System*
Afghanistan	12.5	2.2	1.7	Pashto & Dari	Islam	Islamic Emirate
Bangladesh	2.8	9.0	9.1	Bengali	Islam	Democracy
Bhutan	0.7	0.0*	0.2	Dzongkha	Buddhism	Monarchy
India	63.0	73.4	72.8	Hindi & English	Hindu	Democracy
Maldives	0.0*	0.0*	0.1	Maldivian	Islam	Democracy
Nepal	2.8	1.6	0.8	Nepali	Hindu	Democracy
Pakistan	16.9	12.6	6.9	Urdu & English	Islam	Democracy
Sri Lanka	1.3	1.1	8.3	Sinhala & Tamil	Buddhism	Democracy

Note: 0.0* - Less than 0.1%
Sources: Worldometer (2023), The World Bank (2023), and Statista (2024).

Table 1. Diversities and disparities among South Asian countries

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South Asian states share several major rivers, which have become sources of major concerns among some weaker nations (Jayaram and Sethi, 2022). Bangladesh has long-standing disputes over water sharing and boundaries with India, given the shared ownership of 54 rivers. Despite assurances from previous and current Indian leaders, some of these disputes remain unresolved, leading to doubts among the people of Bangladesh regarding their goodwill and fostering an anti-Indian sentiment. Similarly, Nepal and Pakistan also face water-sharing disputes with India, straining relations among states and impeding efforts to deepen regional integration and cooperation (Suhail, 2023).

Power asymmetries among South Asian states

South Asia is characterised by conflict and competition, marked by significant power and resource disparities among its constituent states (Hall, 2022). The distribution of power within the region holds critical importance in realist analysis, as it influences the decisions of both regional and external actors. India, with 73.4 percent of its population and 72.8 percent of its GDP, dominates the region's economy (Table 1). This substantial imbalance in resources and capabilities gives India significant leverage in regional affairs (Rajagopalan, 2022). Pakistan is the only country that attempts to rival India, but in terms of military strength, New Delhi far exceeds Islamabad. Pakistan's nuclear capabilities may match India's, but both countries' economic growth and military expenditures indicate that this equilibrium may not hold in the near future.

Furthermore, cultural and language differences, as well as political systems in South Asian states, play a critical role in shaping regional political dynamics and provide significant leverage for a single state.

Domestic capacity of weak states

The significant imbalance of power among South Asian nations has a profound impact on weak states. Firstly, because they lack the domestic capacity to compete with or counterbalance India, these countries consistently harbour security apprehensions towards New Delhi (Manoharan, 2024). In every comparison, except for Pakistan, no single state can counteract India. While both India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons, weak states do not even have secondary-category armaments, severely constraining their choices and actions.

Secondly, the major challenge for weak states lies in their domestic political volatility and the politicisation of key institutions and government sectors, coupled with widespread corruption and money laundering. Consequently, leaders of these states struggle to unify themselves, even on a single issue, in the best interests of their own states and citizens. This creates an opening for external powers to establish strong footholds in weak states through various means.

Lastly, the influence of hegemonic powers in the domestic politics of these states is a primary factor exacerbating the erosion of democratic principles. It is noteworthy that dominant powers support specific political parties to ascend to power, impeding the people's ability to elect their government independently. Consequently, many prominent political parties primarily rely on foreign sources to gain and maintain power, prioritising their regime over the national interests and wielding significant domestic leverage. This has curtailed the domestic capacity of weak nations to wield influence in their foreign relations, thereby perpetuating their dependency on external sources.

Regional institutions in South Asia

In international relations, liberals argue that both domestic and international institutions play crucial roles in shaping the behaviour of states by constraining their options, altering

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their incentives, and providing platforms for diplomatic interactions. Governmental regulations hinder the efficacy of domestic institutions in South Asia, while regional institutions fall short of those in other regions like ASEAN and the EU. Despite its establishment in 1985 with the ambitious goal of fostering a robust and prosperous South Asia akin to the EU (Chakma, 2020), SAARC has failed to significantly impact international relations in the region (Sahasrabuddhe, 2024). While ASEAN member countries trade with one another at a rate exceeding 25 percent, SAARC members have a meagre trade volume of less than 5 percent (Nayak, 2024). As against this, intra-regional trade accounts for nearly 50 percent of the total trade in the East Asia and Pacific region and 22 percent of the total trade in the Sub-Saharan African region (The World Bank, 2024).

SAARC has been largely ineffective in mitigating tensions among nations, particularly between India and Pakistan, and mistrust and suspicion towards each other make South Asia one of the least economically integrated regions (Paul, 2020). Consequently, some countries have taken the initiative to form alternative multilateral associations with their regional allies (Nayak, 2024). While New Delhi has shown a preference for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, Islamabad has opted to strengthen its economic ties with Beijing through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a significant component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) have endeavoured to enhance road connectivity and facilitate electricity trade in recent years.

It is notable that South Asian nations have not coalesced to strengthen SAARC. One can see the limited success of inclusive regional institutions in South Asia as indicative of underlying hostilities among nations. Furthermore, these states have failed to alleviate tensions between India and Pakistan, which is a primary factor contributing to instability in the region (Mamchur and Vanda, 2022). This situation has created an opportunity for external powers to exert influence over their internal affairs.

South Asian international politics and weak states

Amidst the Cold War epoch

During the Cold War era, the pervasive involvement of global powers in South Asian numerous affairs is undeniable. Since then, the two superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, endeavoured to enlist the support of the regional heavyweights, India and Pakistan, for their respective causes (Loftus, 2023). In most cases, India aligned with Soviet Russia, while Pakistan maintained a closer relationship with the U.S. Both superpowers attempted to involve the two in international affairs, but encountered challenges when it came to resolving conflicts between them. Similarly, both rivals repeatedly exploited the global bipolar competition to advance their own interests (Rajagopalan, 2022). Notable examples include the 1954 U.S.-Pakistan mutual defence agreement, the 1962 Sino-Indian war, the 1965 India-Pakistan war, and the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war. In each of these conflicts, the U.S. and Soviet Union stood at opposing ends, offering support to either Islamabad or New Delhi. During the birth of Bangladesh, both global powers diverged in their support, with the U.S. backing Pakistan and the Soviet Union favouring Bangladesh (and India).

The Post-Cold War era

In the post-Cold War period, the U.S. emerged as the sole global superpower, prompting both India and Pakistan to vie for its favour. Nevertheless, the influence of New Delhi and Islamabad across the region remained apparent, largely due to the U.S.'s policy of viewing South Asia through the lens of India and Pakistan. Consequently, both local powers,

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particularly India, wielded greater influence over weak states and regional forums, thereby effectively safeguarding their own interests. However, China's expanded presence in the region through its Belt and Road initiative has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of regional and international politics in South Asia (Raju and Srinivasan, 2024). China's ascent as an economic powerhouse has led to heightened engagements in infrastructure development, connectivity, trade, and investments with regional countries, particularly with weak states through its connectivity investment policy.

China's remarkable ascent poses formidable challenges not only to the U.S.'s global leadership but also to India's dominance in South Asia (Sumit *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, Washington seeks collaboration with New Delhi, while India requires support from the U.S. and its allies to counterbalance China's growing presence.

New emerging powers and greater attention to weak states

The ascendance of new regional powers around the world and their engagement with weak nations are shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the post-Cold War era. Amid these power dynamics, it is critical to shift attention toward Asia's two emerging powers, China and India, and their relationships with smaller and less powerful states that lack material capacity. Beijing's effective engagement in weak countries in South Asia has compelled other regional and global powers to reassess their strategies and policies in order to gain the favour of these states. Ambassador Kelly Keiderling, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state overseeing South and Central Asia, has confirmed that the Biden administration has modified their foreign policy approach, with a special focus on individual countries, towards South Asia (Molla, 2023). Notably, high-level visits to several South Asian countries underscore this shift in the U.S. foreign policy paradigm.

It is anticipated that a new systematic bipolar or multipolar competition will scrutinise these weak nations more closely. Paul (2019) has already noted a trend in this direction. China has demonstrated a keen interest in engaging with weaker South Asian states, as evidenced by its recent involvement in the domestic politics and economy of the region. Notably, China's bilateral agreement with Bangladesh, amounting to over 26 billion US dollars, represents the highest level of financial engagement between Bangladesh and any foreign country.

While China's ascent presents both opportunities and challenges for all states in the international system, its growing power and sway have significant implications for the weak states. China's expanding influence is reshaping the regional geopolitical landscape and creating a new order in South Asia, prompting some weaker states to view this shift with opportunities, challenges, scepticism, and fear.

Dilemmas towards Bangladesh as a weak state

Security concerns

Bangladesh, despite being a South Asian nation, serves as a natural link between South and Southeast Asia and holds a significant position at the Bay of Bengal, a crucial path for regional and international trade (Houda, 2020). Consequently, both regional and global powers are keen on bolstering their presence in Bangladesh. Due to its multi-dimensional bilateral and multilateral relationships with great powers, Dhaka is focusing on hedging its foreign policy towards them. However, Bangladesh has not been immune to foreign interference in its domestic and foreign policymaking affairs.

Bangladesh faces security challenges from both internal and external sources (Karim and Uddin, 2016). The country shares borders with India and Myanmar, which have historically been sources of tension and conflict. This vulnerability exposes Bangladesh to cross-border killings, terrorism, illegal trafficking, and other security threats. While border killings have

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significantly decreased in recent years, unresolved water-sharing disputes between Bangladesh and India have had a detrimental impact on Bangladesh's economy. Similarly, the Myanmar army's genocide against the Rohingyas has heightened tensions along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, driving millions to flee to Bangladesh (Trapa, 2023). Currently, the country hosts over a million Rohingya refugees, with no signs of their return to Myanmar despite the ICC's verdict. In a recent interview, Nasir Uddin, a prominent migration and refugee expert and professor at the Department of Anthropology at Chittagong University, Bangladesh, noted that illegal drug trade, cross-border terrorism, and human trafficking through the borders have become common issues, ensnaring Bangladesh in a multi-dimensional security trap.

The roles of great powers in addressing the Rohingya crisis remain a perplexing puzzle (Datta, 2021). While each power assures Dhaka of assistance in resolving the issue, most notably two regional giants, China and India, are not visibly exerting enough pressure on the Myanmar authorities (Nuruzzaman, 2023). This raises questions about how Myanmar, a smaller state, can evade the ICC's verdict. Nasir Uddin claimed that insufficient pressure from regional and global powers allows this, as their strong bilateral ties with Myanmar hinder action against it. During an interview, Ali Riaz, a distinguished professor at the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University, the U.S., highlighted that India, China, and Russia's interests in Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal hinder their active engagement in resolving the Rohingya crisis.

Several recent literatures on migration studies indicates that China's interests in Myanmar are much greater than in Bangladesh, considering its access to the Bay of Bengal, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and broader Indian Ocean access through the country (Mishra, 2022; Shahriar and Luong, 2023; Nuruzzaman, 2023; Halim, 2023). On the other hand, India sees no alternative but to draw closer to Myanmar to undermine Chinese influence and continues to collaborate on various projects, such as the Kaladan project with Naypyidaw (Kuchhal, 2022). Russia, the Cold War power, has maintained deep military cooperation with Myanmar for years and has been one of Naypyidaw's largest suppliers of weapons and military equipment.

Political instability

Bangladesh has a turbulent political history characterised by frequent government changes and deep polarisation (Rahman and Rashid, 2018). In the last one and a half decade, it has faced unprecedented political turmoil, with key public sectors like the judiciary and intelligence becoming increasingly politicised. Experts, including Ali Riaz, argue that influential global powers have exacerbated political polarisation by openly supporting specific factions. Former ambassador Humayun Kabir highlights the clear evidence of both direct and indirect foreign intervention in national elections, a sentiment echoed by many in the political and international community.

According to Nurul Kabir, editor of "New Age", Bangladesh has experienced its most severe political upheaval to date, with foreign powers attempting to mediate among parties while simultaneously deepening the crisis through partisan support. The last few elections, coupled with external influences, raised concerns about the likelihood of a peaceful democratic process in the near future.

This ongoing political instability has severely impacted Bangladesh's economy (Jahangir, 2016). Prominent economist Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya points out that uncertainty has deterred investors and hindered economic progress. The World Bank has projected lower-than-expected growth for 2024, and dwindling foreign reserves may further discourage investment. Abu Saeed Khan, advisory editor of "Samakal" warns that if the political crisis remains unresolved, particularly regarding economic issues, Bangladesh's future could be at risk.

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Regional power dynamics

The shifting power dynamics in South Asia have significantly impacted weaker states, particularly Bangladesh (Hussain and Khan, 2023). Historically, India dominated the region, but China's growing influence has altered this balance. Sumit *et al.* (2023) noted a widening power gap between Beijing and New Delhi, prompting Indian policymakers to view China as their primary rival, while Beijing perceives Washington as a greater threat than New Delhi. This has led Indian elites to express concerns about China's presence in the region.

As emerging Asian powers compete for influence, Bangladesh is pressured to align with one or the other, resulting in an unstable equilibrium rather than regional solidarity (Bhatta, 2018). Bangladesh's ongoing economic growth has increased its need for significant foreign investments, with China being the only country willing to meet those demands. As a result, Dhaka is compelled to strengthen ties with Beijing to fund large-scale development projects, as noted by former foreign secretary of Bangladesh, Towhid Hossen. However, this engagement raises concerns for India, which views it as a threat due to Bangladesh's strategic location and ongoing tensions related to China's support for groups in India's Northeast. This situation sends a clear message to Bangladesh, "While we may not meet your needs, you cannot turn to our rivals", as stated by Dr. Md Saidul Islam, Associate Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Consequently, Bangladesh faces complex challenges in managing its relationships with both regional giants, India and China.

Foreign relations

Non-alignment has been a cornerstone of Bangladesh foreign policy since its inception (Yasmin, 2022). Additionally, Dhaka is committed to fostering cooperative and amicable relationships with all nations worldwide, as stated by Kamal Hossen, the former foreign minister of Bangladesh, at the United Nations general assembly on September 17, 1974, on the occasion of its first entry to the United Nations. Over time, Bangladesh's foreign policy has evolved through three key phases: diplomacy of recognition, economic diplomacy, and hedging relations. However, as Ali Riaz notes, Dhaka has struggled to maintain its non-alignment stance due to domestic political crises, fragile external relations, and the challenges of managing various situations.

The intricate geopolitical landscape in the region has necessitated Bangladesh to pursue a hedging foreign policy in recent years. Despite striving to uphold balanced external relations with dominant global powers, New Delhi continues to exert considerable influence over Dhaka's decision-making processes (Riaz, 2022). Bangladesh demonstrated this by abstaining from a 2016 SAARC summit in Pakistan, aligning itself with India's stance amidst the latter's strained relations with Islamabad (Hossain and Islam, 2021). Another example was Bangladesh's acquisition of two Chinese submarines, which raised eyebrows among Indian leaders and experts, prompting questions about the necessity of such military assets for Bangladesh. Furthermore, Dhaka's withdrawal from the Chinese-funded Matarbari project in response to objections from New Delhi underscores the significant impact of regional dynamics on Bangladesh's foreign policy.

Bangladesh's delicate handling of geopolitical alliances further accentuates the complexities of its external relations. For instance, when the U.S. and its allies, including India, asked Bangladesh to join the QUAD, the Chinese ambassador in Bangladesh openly suggested that Dhaka should not join the so-called 'anti-Chinese' bloc, as doing so would deteriorate the relationship between Dhaka and Beijing (Hasan, 2024). Similarly, Bangladesh's refusal to allow a Russian ship to dock in its port, prompted by objections from the U.S. in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, led to a temporary chill in relations between Bangladesh and Russia.

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While the 12th general election in Bangladesh, along with the involvement of major powers, was set to significantly influence its future foreign relations (Muhammad, 2024), the role of the current interim government will be crucial in shaping these relationships. Bangladesh faces economic challenges, as 70 percent of its exports go to Western nations, with only 20 percent directed to the U.S. Additionally, a significant trade deficit persists due to reliance on imports from regional powers like China and India. Under the Hasina regime, Bangladesh has moved towards autocratic governance and strained ties with the West (Riaz, 2024). The interim government's actions will be pivotal in restoring democratic norms, and stability in relationships with nations that supported Hasina's government remains uncertain, as noted by Dr. M. Sakhawat Hossain, a former election commissioner.

In light of the above, it is obvious that Bangladesh's foreign relations have faced significant obstacles in recent times. These challenges stem from domestic political uncertainty, self-serving political tendencies, and its geostrategic importance, which invites interference from major powers in both internal and external affairs.

Findings

The analysis of South Asian regional and international politics, particularly concerning weak states like Bangladesh, has led to several key findings:

First, the South Asian region is characterised by intense rivalries, conflicts, and competition, marked by significant asymmetries in geography, resources, and material power among its nations. The longstanding tensions between India and Pakistan contribute to South Asia being one of the least economically integrated and cooperative regions globally. Additionally, the enduring influence of Cold War powers, namely the U.S. and Russia, continues to shape South Asian politics.

Second, weak states have inherent material and structural disadvantages that significantly influence their behaviour in both regional and international contexts. Due to their military and economic vulnerabilities, these states often seek a peaceful environment and meaningful security assurances at both regional and global levels. However, their limited domestic capacities to balance or compete with dominant powers have resulted in increased foreign influence over their internal affairs.

Third, although many view India as a regional power, a closer examination reveals that China has established a more advantageous position in various aspects. Many South Asian countries resonate with China's economic appeal, prompting regional and extra-regional powers to engage with these weaker states by offering similar opportunities. Nevertheless, no single power can effectively counter China's ascent in the region, leading to the formation of alliances such as the India-US-led QUAD. The weak states of South Asia are increasingly concerned that the intensifying competition among major powers may compel them to align with one side or the other, creating an unstable equilibrium marked by uneasy coexistence.

Finally, Bangladesh finds itself in a particularly vulnerable position due to its geographical location and strategic importance to major powers. Hegemonic influences have consistently shaped its domestic politics, economy, and security landscape, impeding policymakers' efforts to pursue an independent and sustainable foreign policy. This situation undermines Bangladesh's ability to effectively leverage its position in order to safeguard its national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and interests on both regional and global stages.

Conclusion

The intricate dynamics of South Asia pose significant challenges to achieving stability, peace, and cooperation among nations, where weak states often find themselves compelled to prioritise their national interests and territorial integrity at the expense of broader regional collaboration.

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The strategic significance of South Asia's geography to both regional and extra-regional powers has further complicated the situation, leaving these nations struggling to navigate conflicts effectively. This study reveals the pervasive influence exerted on weaker nations, particularly Bangladesh, by both local and global hegemonic forces. As a result, Bangladesh has become increasingly reliant on major powers in political, financial, and security matters.

The shifting geopolitical landscape presents unique obstacles for Bangladesh as it seeks to assert its autonomy amidst powerful external influences. While its strategic importance has grown, its capacity to maintain a non-aligned foreign policy is increasingly challenged by external pressures and internal weaknesses, such as political instability and corruption. The findings underscore that these interrelated factors not only threaten Bangladesh's sovereignty but also highlight a broader regional concern: the fragility of institutions and the lack of cooperation among South Asian states.

To navigate these complexities effectively, it is essential for Bangladesh to cultivate strong diplomatic relationships with its nearest neighbours and other regional and global powers. While this approach may provide short-term benefits, the rapidly changing political landscape suggests that such a strategy may not be sustainable in the long run. Therefore, there is an urgent need for greater unity and collaboration among South Asian states. By strengthening ties and enhancing regional integration, these weak nations can collectively confront their challenges, paving the way for a more stable and prosperous future in South Asia.

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