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Evolving Diplomatic Eco-system and Bangladesh Foreign Policy: An Agenda for Action Mr. Humayun Kabir

The foreign policy of a nation is conducted through the institution of diplomacy. Obviously, any evolution in the diplomatic concepts, norms and practices affect the conduct of foreign policy of nations. Bangladesh is no exception to this process. Rather, as a nation which is increasingly coming into global interface, understanding and appreciation of the dynamic's of diplomacy is all the more relevant and urgent. Let us have a look at how the changing global environment is impacting on the evolution of diplomacy in general, and how the formulation and implementation of our foreign policy is affected by this process.

New diplomatic topography

During the last few decades, the topography of the institution of diplomacy has experienced significant transformation. Several factors contributed to this process. Recent intensity of thick globalism has pushed deeper the flow of information, capital, manpower, data, images, goods and services. Such a process has produced a kind of paradigm shift in international relations with corresponding change not only in content but also in the context of international politics and perception. With the emergence of ♦competition state,♦ as articulated by Philip J. Cerny, where transnational powers are achieving salience through the exercise of power by many non-state actors, such a process has gained further momentum. Intense competition has grown to sell one♦s story to the international community. Those who can successfully tell their stories in a credible fashion win the hearts and minds of people, who in turn can become their friends, consumers, investors, tourists and promoters. In the same vein, the concept of national interest is being redefined in the larger context of collaborative framework, as against the traditional setting of conflict and war alone. Continuous process of empowerment of people around the world has added another new complexity to such a process of transformation.

Some scholars argue that as a consequence sovereign States♦ monolithic identity has given way to multiple identities of sovereign people. A nation is now evaluated constantly; government policies are being instantly and constantly reviewed and scrutinized by national and global society with clear impact on its ability to influence the perception. Indeed, the network-based world is not only changing topography of sovereignty but also flattened the capacity of hierarchy based bureaucracy practically in all states.

Proliferation of many new actors in international politics and diplomatic arena has reshaped the global list of ♦Who is Who,♦ and now the list includes NGOs, academics, business leaders, international journalists, social entrepreneurs, foundations, philanthropists, and even celebrities, among others. Internet is extensively used to disseminate messages, initiate dialogue, recruit new allies and friends, build network, and advocate a particular cause or issue. The development of complex international actors and network has affected the international hierarchy of power in a significant way with the spread of huge horizontal contacts all over the world. In a globalised world, public opinion matters more than ever. Being skeptical of the government, people are now demanding greater transparency and are ready to participate in policymaking process, which makes it difficult for the governments to put 'spin' to overcome communication challenges. In January 2007, Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman and founder President of the World Economic Forum observed, ♦We are witnessing everywhere a changing power equation. Power is moving from center to the periphery. Vertical command and control structures are eroding

and are being replaced by horizontal networks of social communities and collaborative platforms.♦

New issues and challenges are also crowding the international agenda. They include issues, such as terrorism, climate change, nuclear proliferation, food security, disaster management, peace-making and peace building, public health, and migration, among others. These emerging challenges have practically dwarfed the capacity of any single state to handle them. Cooperation among nations has thus become necessary.

Several consequences flow from this process of transformation. First, as the global system is becoming more fluid and flexible in nature, and moving from multi-polarity to multi partnership, as articulated recently by the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the urgency to reach out to all components of wider global society, including the traditional state centric power structure in a foreign nation, is being acutely felt. Thus, diplomacy has become a multi layered and multi partner exercise, characterized by the active involvement of multiple actors, namely government, civil society organizations, think tanks, business associations, media, advocacy groups, church and mosques, celebrities, and even private persons with global outreach. Second, with multiplicity of actors participating in the policy process, including various Ministries and Departments of a nation alone, the relations between nations have thus willy nilly evolved from the phase of formal foreign policy interactions to a deeper phase of domestic interconnectedness, as evidenced in the European Union in recent years. Third, everyday concerns of citizens have moved way up the ladder and become priority issues for the foreign policy makers. The role of diplomacy has thus significantly transformed from a distant actor to an active social player and catalyst. The growing role of Diaspora communities has accelerated this trend. Fourth, the process of diplomacy has also become more inclusive. In terms of focus, economic diplomacy or management of resources has occupied the centre stage in diplomatic interactions among practically all nations, including the most developed and powerful ones. Advocacy and activism has given way to diplomatic protocol and formalism. With the threat of extremism and terrorism growing and the possibility of failure of state institutions intensifying in some states, diplomacy has moved from a role of passive observer to an active partner in promoting basic values of justice, democracy, human rights and inclusive development, among others.

The New Hubs

As for Bangladesh, several regional and global developments are noteworthy. The rise of China and India, which is often called ♦Chindia,♦ offers both opportunities and challenges for us. Already, they are our top import sources and could be major export destinations a few years down the line. ASEAN nations are yet another growth hub almost matching Indian growth rate. They could be a good source of future energy, employment and technology for Bangladesh. East Asian nations, including Japan and South Korea are already valuable partners in our economic growth; they could be potential sources of investment, technology and knowledge transfer to Bangladesh. Likewise, the Middle Eastern countries have become the new center of Sovereign Funds and Bangladesh could capitalize on it. Of course, for the foreseeable future they are likely to remain as destinations for our export of manpower. The United States and EU member states are major destinations for our ready-made garment and shrimp products; they could be markets for our potential high value items in the future as well. Russia and other CIS nations could be source of technology and energy, and new export destinations for Bangladeshi products. Latin

America and Africa are still not high on our agenda, but both of these continents offer immense opportunities for Bangladesh; we urgently need to build our diplomatic bridges with them without any further delay. It is important to understand that in a globalized world physical distance matters less than psychological distance. Clearly, in the coming years economic diplomacy will occupy the centre stage in exploring new opportunities around the globe. Now the big question is how do these openings fit into our national priorities?

Bangladesh Priorities and Challenges

As Bangladesh strives to elevate itself to a middle income country, she will have to address several developmental challenges, which are closely interlinked. Let us now have a look at some of the important issues, which will demand constant attention from the policy makers in Bangladesh in the coming years.

- **Strengthen Democracy-** One of major priorities of Bangladesh in the coming years would be to strengthen democratic norms and practices. Being a socially driven nation, a careful nurturing of democracy would be required in Bangladesh to meet the ever growing expectations of the people for good governance, justice, fairness, decency and accountability in public life on a sustained manner. Indeed, the people of Bangladesh overwhelmingly conveyed several messages during the 2008 elections, including their forceful rejection of any kind of extremism, in addition to restoring democracy and returning the ♦Mahajot♦ to power. Reading those messages in right context and responding to them with appropriate care, creativity and dignity would perhaps determine the future course of democracy in Bangladesh. In addition, Bangladesh could also project the verdict of 2008 elections and subsequent forceful stand of the present government against religious extremism as a test case of how a Muslim majority nation could embrace democracy and build up a society based on moderation. In any case, a sustained and creative effort would be required to deal with this insidious phenomenon.

- **Alleviation of Poverty and Creation of Jobs-** Currently about 40% of people in Bangladesh live under the poverty line and lifting this huge group out of poverty will pose the largest development challenges in the coming years. The present government has also repeatedly expressed their commitment to fight this menace through variety of programmes. Another related issue involves the creation of jobs for the people. In Bangladesh, about 2.5 million job seekers are joining the work force every year and roughly 1 million jobs are created both domestically and externally. A big gap always exists between the demand and supply of jobs. Needless to say, accelerated creation of jobs could also serve to sanitize the society from all extremist ideas, which often threaten the basic fabric of our society.

- **Infrastructure-** This is a daunting area for Bangladesh to address. Several components could be put in this mix. First, the issue of physical infrastructure, which includes the building of network of physical connectivity, such as road, railways, waterways, airports, seaports, and telecommunications, and IT, among others, deserves attention. In order to accelerate economic growth Bangladesh has not only to significantly upgrade such infrastructure within the country but she must also align them suitably to connect with the larger regional network. Second, Bangladesh will have to build up an energy infrastructure with a view to meeting the growing demand for energy as her economy grows. Government anticipates that Bangladesh economy will grow by 8% by 2013 and by 10% by 2017. We must also not ignore the fact that the demand for energy in both China and India is also growing at an annual rate of 10%, and Bangladesh has to be creative in exploring its domestic sources as well as tapping into the regional matrix, which could perhaps meet the regional demand for energy for many years to come. Third, building up a good managerial infrastructure through upgrading the quality of her human resources infrastructure is also a top priority for Bangladesh. According to many experts Bangladesh cannot aspire to be on a higher growth trajectory without the quality human resources, both at the government and private sector level to back it up. In order to achieve this objective, there is an urgent need to align the education system, particularly the higher education, with global standard, including enabling students to learn several foreign languages and building an IT enabled generation as well as reorienting bureaucracy to serve private sector driven economic growth with adequate knowledge and expertise. Ambassador Farooq Sobhan has rightly called them ♦private sector minded bureaucracy. ♦ Perhaps what we also need is a globally minded bureaucracy, which would be able to effectively facilitate mobilization of private capital, technology, knowledge and knowhow from global sources. Needless to say that Bangladesh cannot overcome the existing challenge on infrastructure without huge infusion of foreign capital, technology and expertise, among other things.

- **Managing shared Resources and Environment-** Like many other countries, Bangladesh shares vital resources with other neighbouring countries. Take the case of our river systems. Out of 200 plus rivers in Bangladesh, 54 rivers flow from India and at least one of them from China. Nepal is also linked in this riverine network. While adequate quantity of water is critical for sustenance and economic growth in Bangladesh, keeping a watch on the quality of water that flows into Bangladesh is also important. Flora and fauna of Bangladesh, and indeed the larger ecosystem in Bangladesh is dependent of maintaining the quantity and quality of water system in Bangladesh. As the demand for water increases with economic progress, Bangladesh has to ensure its due share over this critical source of live and livelihood. Creative options have also to be explored to share this vital resource keeping in view the growing needs of all riparian nations, including Bangladesh. Again, all South Asian nations are more or less affected by the issue of climate change. Their leaders have agreed during the last Thimphu Summit to forge a common position for dealing with this common challenge. Yet, the contribution of each country to carbon emission and the impact which they suffer are different, and as such each nation will have to pursue a nuanced strategy to protect her interests within the larger context of ongoing global negotiations on this issue. Likewise, Bangladesh shares energy resources with both Myanmar and India in the Bay of Bengal. Already Bangladesh is engaged in arbitration with them through the multilateral process. It is most likely that more serious negotiations will ensue soon, and a great deal of creativity will have to be brought to bear in resolving the maritime boundary issue to the satisfaction of all parties, and to share the energy resources available in that region.

- **Raising Competitiveness-** At the same time, Bangladesh badly needs to raise its economic competitiveness. Bangladesh has consistently performed poorly on Global Competitiveness Index, and unfortunately changes in government in recent years have not had any significant impact on improving our economic competitiveness. Perhaps, a fresh and professional look has to be taken by the policy makers on an urgent basis to complement the heroic efforts of private sector in raising our competitiveness. Otherwise, our policy incentives will produce only modest results. On the other hand, an economically competitive Bangladesh will derive multiple benefits. It will open up more space for Bangladesh in global trade; it will also attract foreign investment, which could play a vital role in transferring resources, technology, expertise and management skills.

Agenda for Action

A number of policy options could be explored to energize our foreign policy with a view to supporting our transition to a middle income country and creating space for advancing our vital interests in the region and beyond. Our diplomacy produced good results when the global system was perhaps predictable; we need a new approach now to reach out to new constituency of global actors in the fast changing global context. Some of the elements for the new framework are noted below:

a. **Redesign our Foreign Policy-** Our foreign policy outlook and framework is at best traditional in nature, so are our diplomatic instruments. Dramatic changes, which have occurred in concepts and practices in diplomacy during the last 20 years, are not appropriately absorbed and reflected in our foreign policy. This lag costs Bangladesh in terms of effectiveness of her foreign policy. One example will perhaps suffice. The Embassy of Bangladesh carried out a survey among 1000 Nepalese citizens in four different cities in 2006 to understand their awareness about Bangladesh and her foreign policy achievements. Among other questions, we asked them if they would recall any foreign policy initiative Bangladesh had taken in recent years on a regional scale. A large number of respondents only recalled the role of Bangladesh in the creation of SAARC in 1985. Surprisingly it was 20 years ago by then! Such a response alerted us to the fact that we had fallen far behind in terms of drawing attention of common people with our foreign policy, even within the region and more so in a friendly neighbouring nation like Nepal. Now, with a view to redesigning our foreign policy five areas could be looked at. They include:

- i. Adopting a look around policy, instead of looking in one direction. This would include exploring all options in building relationship with all neighbours on the basis of mutual benefit;
- ii. Articulating a Bilateral plus policy, which is essentially a process of working with multiple partners to achieve major policy objectives, even within the region; Such a policy would essentially complement bilateral relations, not replace it.
- iii. Supporting robust regionalism and sub-regionalism, which could create space for capitalizing on larger opportunities; This could allow Bangladesh to capitalize on its geographical location;
- iv. Pursuing a creative and flexible multilateralism, which demands nimble diplomacy on issues of common concerns;
- v. Engaging in continuous innovations in our diplomacy, including building coalitions with civil society actors to advance shared objectives. After all, as Princeton University scholar Anne-Marie Slaughter has rightly observed, ♦the emerging networked world of the twenty first century exists above the state, below the state, and through the state. In this world, the state with most connections will be the central player, able to set the global agenda and unlock innovation and sustainable growth. ♦ Incidentally, the most networked nations are not the powerful and big states. Singapore, Norway and Costa Rica are the ones, which are most nimble and active in this regard. Is not the message clear for Bangladesh?

b. **Expanding Outreach and Reputation Management through Public Diplomacy-** As policy process attracts new actors, the need for expanding the outreach with a view to incorporating the new actors into policy process and to seek their help to put into effect such policies has grown enormously. This could be done both at home and abroad. Many countries, such as Canada and Norway pursue such a strategy with great effectiveness. This is particularly relevant also for nations, which suffer from reputation deficit, such as Bangladesh. Reputation or image deficit affects Bangladesh at least on three counts: it deprives Bangladesh of the opportunity of getting a suitable context to conduct its diplomacy abroad in an effective manner. British scholar Mark Leonard observed, "Image and reputation of a country are public goods which can create either an enabling or a disenabling environment for individual transactions. Work on particular issue will feed off the general image of the country and reflect back on it in both positive and negative directions. ♦

Second, in the absence of right kind of collective image we tend to either sink into invisibility or portrayed negatively; consequently we do not figure out in the global conversations. Third, a distorted image, which often is the function of others defining us instead of we defining ourselves, affects our business potential as well. For example, in the Middle Eastern countries Bangladesh is a major supplier of workers for the last 25 years; we contributed to their economic growth as well. Yet Bangladesh is regularly associated with supplying only unskilled and low end workers. When the issue of importing semi skilled and skilled workers comes, they tend to prefer other countries in the region, for

example Sri Lanka and India. While emerging nations, such as China and India, which are carefully creating their brand image as a nation, it looks like we are frozen in our old and outdated perception about our inflated self image. Bangladesh needs to wake up from this slumber sooner than later. Experts have suggested a useful tool, namely Public Diplomacy, for articulating a realistic and credible strategy to present the stories of a nation to outside audience. Indeed, many nations, including some developing countries have already integrated public diplomacy in their foreign policy toolkit. Given the growing capacity and potential influence of Bangladeshi Diaspora in many countries around the world, perhaps it is time to articulate a Public Diplomacy programme, which will facilitate their participation in the policy process, among other things. A word of caution would perhaps be in order at this point. Contrary to traditional perception, Public Diplomacy is not about manipulating information to present official version of developments to the foreign audience, nor is it an episodal shot to serve short term political gains either. It is rather a process of engagement with the target audience with a view to building up a relationship of trust. Again, Public Diplomacy it is not a straight jacket affair, one size would not fit all. It has to be calibrated depending on the priorities and sensitivities of local audience. For Bangladesh leveraging Bangladeshi culture and social creativity could form a credible plank of public diplomacy. It is important to note that Public Diplomacy is not an end in itself; it is a support to advance the overall interests of a nation through reaching out to all segments of host societies. These days, some experts also talk about domestic part of Public Diplomacy.

c. The Whole Government Approach- Our current foreign policy approach is highly bureaucratic, vertical and as such fragmented. Foreign Ministry is considered like any other Ministry, while functionally its scope is global in the sense that the Ministry and the Diplomatic Missions protect and promote our vital national interests, spanning over wide range of issues, around the globe. As the process of domestic interconnected has increased resulting in growing interactions among nations on a variety of issues of common concerns, it has become necessary to articulate a whole government approach to deal with issues that have national relevance. Considering the value of horizontal cooperation in dealing with complex problems President Obama had recently advocated such an approach in his National Security Strategy document of 2010. One could argue that the inter-Ministerial consultations, which exist now, could somehow compensate for such a need.

Yet, the value of high level contact cannot be underestimated. One model for consideration for such high level contact could include a Ministerial Coordination Committee comprising a cluster of Ministers, whose Ministries are directly related to issues involving foreign nations. This body could be represented by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister for Finance, Minister for Commerce, Minister for Expatriate Welfare, Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism and Executive Chairman, BOI, among others. A suitable Representative from the Ministry of Defense could also be included on issues relating to peacekeeping and disaster management issues. Needless to say, all these initiatives would bear fruit only when they receive strong commitment from the highest political level. The coordination role should however always remain with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs like the role of a conductor in a symphony.

d. Strengthening MOFA and Missions- Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diplomatic Missions abroad have been given the responsibility to conduct Bangladesh Foreign Policy in the most effective manner, several impediments have diminished their ability to perform at the optimum level. One is the shortage of officers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the existing organogram is outdated by thirty years. It is important to upgrade the same so that the strength of the Ministry could be doubled, as had been suggested by Ambassador Farooq Sobhan. This suggestion is very much in line with what our neighbours are doing in the light of new global reality. India is expanding her Foreign Service cadre, so is being done by China. Nepal is also expanding its Foreign Service cadre with a new law, which would give them the coordinating role on all issues related to foreign affairs. In recent years, United States has added more than 1100 officers to her State Department cadre. Expansion of cadre is dictated by the fact that emerging global issues have to be followed, understood, examined, discussed and negotiated with multiple actors on the global scale, which can only be done by the well groomed diplomats. For Bangladesh, which has to leverage on soft power, it is the diplomats who also constitute the first line of defense! On the other hand, budgetary limitation has also stymied the initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Likewise, Diplomatic Missions have to be re-tooled with new mission to dramatically expand their outreach to all stakeholders and actors, who can have an impact on Bangladesh. Accordingly, it is necessary to support them with research and financial resources. Enhancement in resources must be matched with improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of Bangladesh diplomats. Consideration could be given to holding a kind of Quadrennial Review on Diplomacy to assess the changing global scenario and to evaluate the effectiveness of our diplomacy vis a vis such transformations. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has launched such a Review for US State Department in 2009. A rigorous performance evaluation mechanism should be developed to assess the performance of the Heads of Mission and other diplomats posted in the Missions. Experiences of some of our neighbouring countries in this regard could be helpful. In order to ensure smooth and professional functioning of the diplomatic Missions, the authority of the Heads of Missions should be further strengthened and the entire team should be responsible to him for performance of their duties. For some time, the issue of the appointment of an Inspector General of Missions was on the card; it would be better to implement this suggestion sooner than later. Consideration could be given to form a Foreign Policy Advisory Body with retired and experienced diplomats, who could advise the Ministry on various issues suitably. Many countries maintain such a system of consultations.

Conclusion

Diplomacy has moved from traditional format of Club Model to Crisis Management model, from vertical bureaucratic model to horizontal network model. Now foreign policy has to address two fundamental phenomena, which have characterized the contemporary global scenario: managing change and dealing with regional and global crises arising out of multiple interactions of myriad actors. We therefore need a new orientation in our foreign policy, need more flexible and creative outlook, need new institutional mechanism and need new set of skills to build coalitions with all actors with a view to managing the evolving reality on the ground. Above all, what we need is the attention and understanding of the political leadership to lead this process of change. Reorganizing the diplomatic set up along with aligning other domestic setup to support the creative diplomatic endeavour is no less important. Bangladesh has lot many friends all over the world; it is us how to tap on that goodwill to widen our space for building lasting relationship with the members of international community. Let us not forget the hard reality that our effort to build a democratic, dynamic, decent Bangladesh in the coming years would be as robust and as vibrant as our diplomacy is!

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