



Developmental Multialignment: Bangladesh's Pragmatic Statecraft in a Multipolar World, 1971–2026

By

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Abstract

In an era of intensifying great-power competition, small states in the Global South are often portrayed as vulnerable to coercion and pressure to align with one power or another. Challenging this deterministic view, this paper argues that Bangladesh exemplifies a distinct foreign policy strategy: developmental multialignment. Moving beyond traditional frameworks of hedging and non-alignment, which prioritize risk mitigation and security, developmental multialignment is a proactive strategy where external partnerships are orchestrated primarily to advance economic growth, infrastructure development, and domestic regime legitimacy. Through a qualitative case study using process tracing, primary-document analysis, and ten expert interviews conducted in 2025, this paper charts the evolution of Bangladesh's foreign policy from its post-independence posture through the political transitions of 2024–2026 and its continuing engagement with a diverse set of partners, including China, India, the United States, Japan, Pakistan, and the Gulf states. The findings show that Bangladesh leverages its geostrategic location in the Bay of Bengal, its role as a top UN peacekeeper, and its economic potential to extract concessions and diversify dependencies, turning structural vulnerabilities into sources of agency. The paper contributes to the literature on small-state diplomacy by foregrounding development—rather than mere survival—as a central driver of alignment strategy, and by offering a nuanced model for how states in the Global South can navigate multipolarity while safeguarding their autonomy. The conclusion identifies institutional coherence, strategic foresight, and robust risk management as critical imperatives for sustaining this strategy amid escalating Indo-Pacific rivalries. The post-2024 political transition provides an important test of the argument: although the relative emphasis attached to particular partners has changed, Bangladesh's broader strategy of diversified external engagement has persisted. The paper therefore conceptualizes developmental multialignment as a contingent strategy rather than a fixed alignment.

Introduction

In an era of intensifying multipolar rivalry, Bangladesh faces a critical foreign policy challenge: navigating the competing pressures of China, India, the United States, Japan, and the Gulf states. This dynamic raises a central research question: how does Bangladesh balance these competing external influences while safeguarding its autonomy and advancing its development goals?

This article argues that Bangladesh practices a form of pragmatic multialignment, which differs from classical non-alignment or strategic hedging. Rather than being a passive or

reactive posture, Bangladesh's foreign policy demonstrates a deliberate exercise of agency in leveraging multiple external partnerships. This approach reflects the reality that small states often pursue innovative strategies to maximize benefits while mitigating vulnerabilities (Bailes et al., 2016; Hey, 2003). Bangladesh's multialignment thus emerges as a distinct form of small state diplomacy, balancing structural constraints with proactive choices.

This study contributes to the literature on small-state diplomacy by emphasizing that development imperatives, rather than purely security concerns, shape small states' alignment strategies. As scholarship increasingly recognizes,

small states are not merely vulnerable actors but can actively exploit their geostrategic location, economic priorities, and normative roles to negotiate space in global politics (Cooper & Shaw, 2009; Thorhallsson, 2012). Bangladesh exemplifies this dynamic by leveraging its location in the Bay of Bengal, its participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, and a development-driven foreign policy to diversify its external relationships.

The temporal scope of this analysis matters because Bangladesh's external relations have undergone significant political recalibration since 2024. The fall of the Awami League government in August 2024, the subsequent interim government, and the formation of a BNP-led government in February 2026 offer an opportunity to examine whether developmental multialignment was tied to a particular ruling coalition or reflects a broader pattern of statecraft. Rather than treating these political changes as evidence of a complete foreign-policy realignment, this study examines whether diversification across major powers has persisted while the relative emphasis placed on individual relationships has changed.

Scholars note that developing states often rely on "issue-specific alignments" to pursue trade, aid, or security partnerships without committing to rigid alliances (Ingebritsen et al., 2012; Kevin Rudd, 2023). Bangladesh's trajectory demonstrates how small states in the Global South can craft adaptive strategies distinct from the Eurocentric experiences that dominate much of the small state diplomacy literature. This flexibility resonates with Bangladesh's selective engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific Strategy, and Gulf labor markets. In this way, Dhaka embodies small-state agency that capitalizes on multipolarity to broaden its maneuvering room (Steinsson, 2017).

Bangladesh's multialignment highlights the importance of institutional and domestic political contexts. Studies show that regime type, ruling-party strategies, and bureaucratic capacity shape how small states operationalize diplomacy (Keohane et al., 1969; Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006). In Bangladesh, foreign policy choices are shaped not only by structural pressures but also by domestic imperatives, including regime legitimacy, economic promises, and partisan contestation. Understanding these linkages is crucial to understanding how Dhaka turns vulnerabilities into opportunities.

Methodology

The analysis draws on policy documents, government speeches, and secondary sources, including scholarly works and think tank reports. Insights will be triangulated with elite interviews with policymakers and diplomats, thereby combining textual analysis with practitioners' perspectives. This multi-source approach enhances the study's empirical richness and interpretive validity (George & Bennett, 2005). Secondary sources, such as scholarly analyses, think tank reports, and media coverage, provide contextualization and critical evaluation of Bangladesh's external relations (Ahamed, 2004; Hasan, 2024).

This study employs a case study approach, focusing on Bangladesh as a paradigmatic small state in South Asia. Here, 'small state' is used in relative rather than demographic terms, referring to Bangladesh's material and strategic capabilities in relation to the major powers with which it interacts.

The case study design is particularly suitable for examining how small states navigate structural constraints and exercise agency, as it allows for an in-depth, contextually grounded analysis of foreign policy behavior (Yin, 2017; Gerring, 2007). By focusing on Bangladesh, the study contributes to both empirical knowledge of South Asian diplomacy and theoretical debates on small-state strategies.

The analysis adopts process tracing to examine the historical trajectory of Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions. Process tracing is a qualitative method that identifies causal mechanisms by linking critical events, policy choices, and outcomes across time (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; George & Bennett, 2005). This method is well suited to tracing how Bangladesh shifted from its early post-independence commitment to non-alignment to its current pragmatic multialignment strategy.

The analysis draws on policy documents, government statements, bilateral communiqués, scholarly literature, think-tank reports, and selected contemporary sources. These materials are triangulated with ten Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with foreign-policy experts and practitioners in Bangladesh in August–September 2025. The documentary analysis was subsequently extended to cover developments through August 2026. The KIIs therefore provide evidence of expert perceptions during the 2025 political transition, while the 2026 documentary evidence assesses subsequent policy developments. These interviews provide insider perspectives that enrich textual analysis and help capture the informal dimensions of decision-making often absent from official documentation (Dexter, 2006; Tansey, 2007). To ensure candid responses and protect professional confidentiality, all interviewees remain anonymous. Their insights provide a granular, practitioner perspective that enriches the paper's central thesis on Bangladesh's developmental multialignment.

The KIIs followed a purposive sampling strategy, selecting individuals based on their professional experience and relevance to Bangladesh's foreign policy decision-making processes. Participants included retired ambassadors, senior advisors, policymakers, and academic specialists with demonstrated expertise in South Asian diplomacy. This purposive selection ensured diverse perspectives across diplomatic, bureaucratic, security, and scholarly domains (Tansey, 2007). The guiding principle was relevance to policy practice rather than representativeness, consistent with established approaches to elite interviewing in international relations (Dexter, 2006).

To strengthen analytical rigor, the interviews underwent thematic coding. After transcription, responses were reviewed and categorized into key themes, including developmental pragmatism, compartmentalization of partnerships, management of asymmetry with India, and strategic

diversification, which were iteratively refined by comparison with existing literature. This process resembles a grounded thematic analysis, in which categories are inductively derived from the data while also informed by theoretical debates (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation was achieved by comparing KII insights with documentary evidence, thereby strengthening validity through convergence of multiple sources (George & Bennett, 2005).

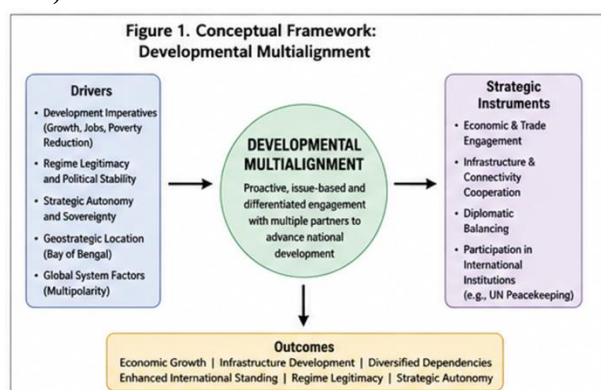
Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

Theories of Small State Diplomacy

The study of small-state diplomacy has traditionally focused on strategies such as bandwagoning, balancing, hedging, and non-alignment. Bandwagoning involves aligning with stronger powers for protection or material benefits (Walt, 1990), while balancing emphasizes resisting dominance by building counter-alliances (Waltz, 2010). Hedging, by contrast, refers to pursuing contradictory policies simultaneously to reduce risks and maximize gains in uncertain environments (Kuik, 2008). Non-alignment, particularly during the Cold War, was characterized by neutrality and a refusal to engage in bloc politics (Mital, 2016).

Another central debate in small-state literature is the agency-versus-vulnerability dilemma. Early scholarship portrayed small states as structurally constrained and dependent (Vital, 1971). More recent perspectives, however, stress that small states can exercise agency by leveraging geostrategic positions, economic diplomacy, and soft power instruments (Thorhallsson, 2012; Cooper & Shaw, 2009).

Building on this evolution, scholars argue that small states often adopt multidimensional strategies that combine security, economic, and normative tools rather than neatly fitting into single categories such as balancing or bandwagoning (Ingebritsen et al., 2012; Wivel, 2016). The concept of "shelter theory" emphasizes how small states seek protection through political, economic, and societal ties with larger powers, without necessarily surrendering autonomy (Bailes et al., 2016). Similarly, the concept of "smart state strategies" emphasizes how small states use niches—such as mediation, peacekeeping, or specialized economic roles—to punch above their weight in global politics (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017).



Comparative studies also reveal variation across regions. For example, Singapore's proactive hedging and network diplomacy demonstrate how small states leverage global interdependence to secure resilience (Chong & Maass, 2010), while Nordic countries emphasize norm entrepreneurship and multilateralism as pathways to influence (Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006). These cases show that small states are not passive actors; instead, they actively craft strategies that blend vulnerability management with opportunity maximization.

Limitations of Existing Frameworks

Despite their utility, these frameworks exhibit limitations in explaining Bangladesh's foreign policy behavior. Hedging, while helpful in capturing risk and spreading it, tends to overemphasize uncertainty management and understate development imperatives (Kuik, 2020). Non-alignment, by contrast, remains rooted in Cold War dynamics and does not capture the proactive economic diplomacy of post-Cold War small states (Mital, 2016). These models do not adequately address the blend of pragmatism and developmentalism that characterizes Bangladesh's external engagement.

Classical frameworks such as balancing and bandwagoning often focus too narrowly on security-driven motivations and military alignments, neglecting the growing salience of economic statecraft and trade-driven partnerships in small-state strategies (Ravenhill, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2001). Bangladesh's pursuit of mega-infrastructure financing, labor migration markets, and preferential trade access illustrates that development imperatives frequently outweigh traditional security concerns.

The agency-versus-vulnerability debate remains under-theorized in relation to Global South states. Much of the small state literature has historically focused on European or Nordic cases, creating a bias that overlooks how postcolonial small states—such as Bangladesh—navigate asymmetric power structures while advancing domestic development goals (Bailes et al., 2016; Ingebritsen et al., 2012). This Eurocentric tilt constrains the explanatory power of existing models when applied to South Asia.

Concepts like "soft balancing" or "shelter" capture aspects of Bangladesh's diplomacy but still fall short in accounting for the integration of developmental multialignment—the fusion of growth-oriented objectives with strategic flexibility. Scholars argue that new frameworks are needed to better integrate trade, remittances, infrastructure connectivity, and multilateral peacekeeping into analyses of small-state strategies (Chong & Maass, 2010; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). Existing models must be supplemented with development-centered approaches that more fully capture Bangladesh's unique foreign policy trajectory.

Introducing Multialignment

This paper introduces developmental multialignment as a conceptual lens for analyzing Bangladesh's foreign policy. Multialignment refers to simultaneously engaging multiple powers for differentiated purposes, including economic growth, security, connectivity, market access, and diplomatic autonomy (Bailes et al., 2016). Developmental

multialignment differs from conventional hedging in placing development and economic resilience at the center of strategic choice. It can be identified through four observable features: (1) diversification across multiple external partners; (2) development-centered evaluation of external relationships; (3) compartmentalization of partnerships across different issue areas; and (4) efforts to preserve policy autonomy by avoiding excessive dependence on any single external power. The concept therefore emphasizes not simply the number of Bangladesh's external relationships, but the strategic use of differentiated partnerships to pursue developmental objectives while maintaining diplomatic room for maneuver.

The concept resonates with the growing literature highlighting how small and middle states engage in "multi-vector" or "omnidirectional" diplomacy to diversify their options and extract economic and strategic benefits (Chong & Maass, 2010; Raghavan, 2017). Unlike Cold War non-alignment, multialignment involves proactive engagement with competing powers, often to pursue overlapping economic and security gains (Mohan, 2003).

In the South Asian context, scholars note that countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal have struggled to balance major power rivalries, often becoming vulnerable to overdependence or entrapment (Dash, 2008; Misra, 2004; Gangte, 2020; Kevin Rudd, 2023; Mohsin, Ashraf, et al., 2024). Bangladesh has sought to avoid such pitfalls by deliberately cultivating diversified relationships that link economic development with strategic flexibility. This aligns with insights from the small-state diplomacy literature, which emphasizes that agency can emerge by leveraging geography, trade networks, and soft-power assets to negotiate autonomy (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Cooper & Shaw, 2009).

"Developmental multialignment" expands the theoretical debate by foregrounding how growth imperatives, infrastructure financing, and labor migration shape the foreign policy choices of small states in the Global South (Ravenhill, 2014; Brooks et al., 2012). It underscores that Bangladesh's strategy is not a reactive adaptation but a calculated form of agency that integrates economic statecraft with diplomatic maneuvering in the Indo-Pacific order.

Strategy	Core Logic	Primary Drivers	Typical Practices	Limitations	Bangladesh's Distinction
Hedging	Minimize risks in uncertain environments	Fear of overdependence; geopolitical volatility	Simultaneous engagement and balancing of rival powers	Emphasizes uncertainty management, underplays proactive economic goals (Kuik, 2008, 2020)	Bangladesh's approach is less about risk avoidance and more about development opportunity maximization
Omnidirectional / Multi-vector Diplomacy	Maintain multiple partnerships across ideological and regional divides	Diversification, autonomy, flexibility	Pursuit of wide-ranging partnerships; issue-specific coalitions	Broad and descriptive; does not explain prioritization of development imperatives (Chong & Maass, 2010; Raghavan, 2017)	Bangladesh aligns broadly, but evaluates ties primarily through Vision 2041 and growth imperatives
Developmental Multialignment (Bangladesh)	Maximize developmental opportunities while safeguarding autonomy	Economic growth, infrastructure, labor migration, and regime legitimacy	Leveraging competing powers for infrastructure, trade, remittances, and recognition; compartmentalization of politics and economics	Still exposed to debt, rivalry, entrapment, and domestic politicization	A deliberate strategy where development is the central axis of alignment, transforming multipolar rivalry into a marketplace of opportunities (Yasmin, 2022; Rahman, 2023)

Comparative Insight

Bangladesh's experience fits within broader patterns of small-state diplomacy. Singapore, for instance, has pursued multi-vectorial engagement by aligning strategically with the United States while deepening trade and infrastructure ties with China (Leifer, 2013). Vietnam balances between China and the United States through both hedging and diversified partnerships (Thayer, 2017). Sri Lanka's entanglement in Chinese debt and India's regional dominance illustrate both the opportunities and perils of external dependence

(Ramachandran, 2022). Nepal similarly maneuvers between India and China, highlighting the fragile autonomy of small Himalayan states (Baral, 2025). Bangladesh stands out for framing its multialignment primarily in terms of developmental imperatives, offering a distinctive case for comparative study of small-state diplomacy.

Scholarship highlights that small states often employ "omnidirectional diplomacy" or "multi-vector foreign policy" to navigate great-power competition, particularly when their economic survival depends on a diversified set of partnerships

(Chong & Maass, 2010; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). Qatar has leveraged energy exports and niche diplomacy to sustain its autonomy amidst Gulf rivalries (Ulrichsen, 2014), while Kazakhstan has pursued multivectoral strategies to balance its relations with Russia, China, and the West (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015). These cases underscore that small states are not merely reactive but actively craft strategies that combine economic, security, and soft power dimensions.

Unlike Sri Lanka or Nepal, Bangladesh has so far avoided deep entrapment in debt dependency or overtly asymmetric alignments by emphasizing developmental outcomes such as infrastructure financing, labor migration markets, and export diversification (Mahmud, 2023; Abdullah, 2025). Its multialignment strategy is more comparable to developmentalist models of small-state diplomacy in East and Southeast Asia, where trade and growth imperatives outweigh traditional geopolitical concerns (Ravenhill, 2014; Beeson & Lee-Brown, 2017).

Bangladesh's multialignment reflects both similarities and divergences when compared to its regional peers, particularly in its approach to managing developmental risks. Unlike Sri Lanka, which fell into a debt crisis after accumulating

unsustainable sovereign debt for non-revenue-generating infrastructure projects, such as the Hambantota Port (Dhaka Tribune, 2022), Bangladesh has mitigated this specific risk through more prudent macroeconomic management. Bangladesh has prioritized borrowing for productive, revenue-generating sectors, such as energy and export-oriented manufacturing, while maintaining higher foreign exchange reserves relative to its import needs. The country has also demonstrated a stronger record of domestic revenue mobilization (Siddique, 2022). This disciplined approach to finance, a core tenet of its developmental multialignment, has so far insulated it from a similar debt trap. In contrast to Nepal's precarious geopolitical balancing act between India and China, which often forces abrupt policy shifts, Bangladesh has engaged with both giants with clearer developmental benchmarks, ensuring that partnerships with either power deliver tangible economic dividends without forcing a binary choice (Muni, 2016). Unlike Singapore, which practices global hedging by positioning itself as a neutral hub for finance and security (Acharya, 2007), Bangladesh's orientation is more regionally embedded and explicitly developmentally oriented, leveraging its geographic position for connectivity while focusing its foreign policy squarely on achieving middle-income status.

State	Strategy	Key Risks	Outcomes	Distinctiveness vs Bangladesh
Bangladesh	Developmental multialignment — leveraging diverse partners (China, India, U.S., Japan, Gulf) to advance Vision 2041	Debt exposure; risk of entrapment in U.S.-China or India-China rivalry; domestic politicization (Yasmin, 2022; Saqlain Rizve, 2025)	Sustained growth; diversified financing sources; relative autonomy; enhanced soft power via UN peacekeeping	Developmental imperatives explicitly drive alignments; proactive, not just defensive; compartmentalization of economic and political relations.
Sri Lanka	Strategic bandwagoning with China through BRI projects (e.g., Hambantota Port)	Debt distress; loss of sovereignty via 99-year lease of Hambantota; domestic backlash (Gangte, 2020; Ramachandran, 2022)	Entrapment in Chinese financing, weakened bargaining autonomy, and reliance on the IMF.	Bangladesh avoided Sri Lanka's pitfalls by prioritizing revenue-generating projects and maintaining diversified sources (Karim et al., 2023)
Nepal	Balancing/hedging between India and China	Vulnerability to Indian blockades; overdependence on neighbors; frequent policy reversals (Muni, 2016; Baral, 2025)	Fragile autonomy; abrupt shifts in external alignments; internal polarization	Bangladesh demonstrates more structured benchmarks in engaging both India and China, reducing sudden shifts.
Singapore	Omnidirectional/global hedging — aligning security with the U.S. while pursuing economic ties with China	Exposure to U.S.-China tensions; reliance on external security guarantees (Acharya, 2007; Leifer, 2013)	Sustained hub status; high resilience; global reputation as neutral connector	Unlike Singapore's global hedging, Bangladesh is regionally embedded and development-focused, rather than primarily a financial/security hub.

Historical Evolution of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy

1971–1975: Mujib's Emphasis on Non-Alignment and the Indo-Soviet Tilt

After independence in 1971, Sheik Mujibur Rahman adopted a policy framework grounded in non-alignment while leaning toward the Soviet Union for diplomatic and security support. The Soviet role in post-war reconstruction and its backing in the United Nations were crucial for Bangladesh's international recognition (Yasmin, 2022; Ahamed, 2004). Although Bangladesh joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1973, its orientation reflected pragmatic reliance on Moscow, given tensions with Washington and Beijing, both of which were aligned with Pakistan at the time (Maniruzzaman, 1976).

Scholars argue that this alignment was less ideological than strategic, as Mujib sought external "shelter" from the Soviet bloc to counterbalance hostility from the United States and China (Guhatkakurta et al., 2015; Syed Andaleeb, 2021). The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation of 1971 established a geopolitical framework that indirectly shaped Dhaka's early diplomatic behavior, as India served as Bangladesh's primary security guarantor during its fragile formative years (Sisson & Rose, 1990).

Also, Mujib emphasized NAM membership to maintain legitimacy within the broader Global South and avoid being branded as part of a Soviet sphere of influence (Aliyeva, 2023; Mohsin, 1997). Bangladesh's participation in NAM's Algiers Summit (1973) exemplified its attempt to balance great-power dependencies with solidarity among postcolonial states. As scholars note, the country's early external posture revealed a pattern of "pragmatic non-alignment," in which survival imperatives and recognition politics often outweighed strict neutrality (BarthwalDatta & Basu, 2017; Murshid, 2013).

1975–1990: Authoritarian Era, Cold War Diplomacy, and Regional Constraints

After the 1975 military coup, Bangladesh's foreign policy shifted significantly under successive governments. During this period, Dhaka sought to normalize relations with the United States and China, shifting away from earlier Soviet influence (Yasmin, 2022). The Cold War context and regional dynamics—particularly India's dominance in South Asia—constrained Bangladesh's external maneuverability. Engagement with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Gulf states during this period expanded labor migration and remittance flows, laying the groundwork for a new form of economic diplomacy (Sobhan, 1982; Sobhan, 1993).

Zia's regime emphasized ties with China and the United States, which were recalibrating their South Asia policies following the Sino-U.S. rapprochement of the 1970s (Mannan, 2014). Meanwhile, Bangladesh joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1974, using Islamic solidarity to secure aid and labor migration opportunities in the Middle East (Uddin, 2006). This period also emphasized regional diplomacy, culminating in the founding of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985, a project Dhaka strongly promoted to reduce regional asymmetry and foster multilateralism (Dash, 2008).

While these strategies diversified Bangladesh's alignments, they also reflected structural constraints, as Dhaka could not escape India's regional dominance or the global polarization of the Cold War. The tension between seeking autonomy and operating within asymmetric regional and global orders remained a defining feature of this era (Jahan, 2005; Fair & Oldmixon, n.d.; Wolf, 2022).

1990s–2000s: Post-Democratization Turn and the Rise of UN Peacekeeping

After restoring parliamentary democracy in 1991, Bangladesh became more open to globalization and economic liberalization (Zafarullah, 2003). Successive governments prioritized market access, foreign investment, and integration into global trade. The 1990s also marked Bangladesh's rise as a leading contributor to United Nations peacekeeping missions, which became an important instrument of foreign policy, enhancing its international visibility and diplomatic capital (Diplomats, 2024; Albrecht et al., 2024; Kathman & Melin, 2016).

The democratic transition of the early 1990s coincided with the end of the Cold War, marking a new phase in Bangladesh's foreign policy. With the collapse of bipolar rivalry, Dhaka recalibrated its diplomacy to focus on economic liberalization, trade expansion, and integration into global markets (Mahmud, 2023). Successive governments promoted export-led growth, most notably through the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, while courting investment from the United States, European Union, Japan, and emerging Asian partners (Ashrafi, 2021).

A defining feature of this era was the rise of United Nations peacekeeping as a central pillar of Bangladesh's external engagement. Since the late 1980s, Dhaka has increasingly deployed troops to UN missions, which not only generated financial resources but also enhanced Bangladesh's global visibility and soft power (Biswas, 2024; Hossain, 2021). This peacekeeping diplomacy was framed as a contribution to global security while also serving as a strategic tool for cultivating favor with major powers in multilateral settings.

Regionally, Bangladesh navigated persistent disputes with India over water sharing (notably the Ganges Treaty of 1996), trade barriers, and security concerns, even as it engaged in growing connectivity initiatives (Crow et al., 1995; Riaz, 2016). Dhaka avoided entanglement in Indo-Pakistani rivalry, seeking instead to maintain a low-profile balancing posture in South Asia.

This period thus consolidated a model of pragmatic external engagement that emphasized trade, migration, and multilateralism, laying the foundation for the developmental turn of the 2000s and beyond (Sattar, 2025).

2009–2024: Consolidation of Pragmatic, Development-Driven Multialignment

Since 2009, Bangladesh's foreign policy has evolved into a pragmatic multialignment strategy. Dhaka has strengthened infrastructure and defense cooperation with China, maintained critical security and connectivity ties with India, and engaged

with the United States on trade and governance issues, despite occasional tensions (Yasmin, 2022). Partnerships with Japan and Gulf states have further diversified Bangladesh's external engagements. This era marks a decisive shift toward development-driven multialignment, where foreign policy is explicitly framed around Vision 2041, economic growth, and aspirations for middle-income status (Ahamed, 2004; MOEF, 2021).

The period from 2009 onward marked a significant consolidation of Bangladesh's multilateral alignment strategy. Unlike earlier periods dominated by Cold War polarization or post-liberalization adjustment, this phase has been characterized by the deliberate pursuit of diversified partnerships to maximize developmental opportunities (Majumder, 2025).

China emerged as a critical partner, particularly after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with Bangladesh securing large-scale infrastructure financing, energy projects, and defense procurement (Hosain et al., 2024). Dhaka deepened its strategic and economic ties with India, focusing on connectivity, transit agreements, and counterterrorism cooperation, while managing ongoing disputes over water and trade (Pattanaik, 2015). Relations with the United States remained significant, anchored in trade—especially the RMG sector—and complicated by Washington's emphasis on labor rights and governance (Hossain, 2023). Japan also expanded its footprint, most notably through the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B), providing an alternative source of quality infrastructure investment (Dutta, 2016).

Beyond great powers, remittances from Gulf states and Bangladesh's sustained role in UN peacekeeping have provided vital resources, reinforcing its developmental orientation (Mahmud, 2023). This multialignment has also exposed Bangladesh to new vulnerabilities, including debt burdens, intensifying U.S.-China competition in the Indo-Pacific, and the politicization of foreign alignments in domestic politics (Riaz, 2022; Yasmin, 2022).

Since 2009, Bangladesh has shifted from survivalist diplomacy to a proactive form of "developmental multialignment," leveraging its geostrategic position in the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific to maximize aid, investment, and diplomatic recognition while cautiously managing great-power rivalries (Rahman, 2023).

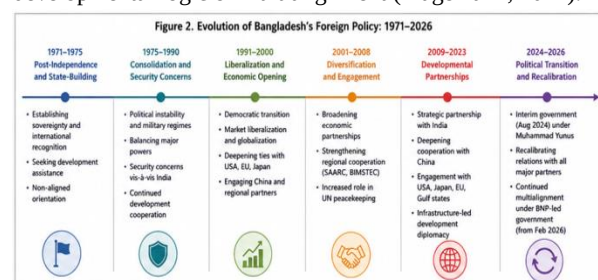
2024–2026: Political Transition and Recalibration of Multialignment

The political transition of August 2024 created an important test for Bangladesh's developmental multialignment. The fall of the Awami League government and the establishment of an interim government under Muhammad Yunus altered the domestic political context within which external relationships were managed. The post-Hasina government sought a broader recalibration of Bangladesh's foreign relations, including greater engagement with China, Pakistan, Japan, the United States, and other partners, while relations with India became increasingly politically contentious (Bhattacharya, 2025; Bukhari et al., 2025; Muntasir & Mostofa, 2024). These

developments suggest that the post-Hasina period should be understood less as a complete abandonment of multialignment than as a recalibration of partner priorities and diplomatic narratives.

China remained an important component of this diversified strategy. Muhammad Yunus's visit to China in March 2025 reinforced the Bangladesh–China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership and demonstrated the continuing importance of Chinese economic, infrastructure, and connectivity cooperation to Bangladesh's development strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, 2025; Rahman, 2024). At the same time, Bangladesh continued to engage the United States and Japan economically while expanding diplomatic contact with Pakistan (Bukhari et al., 2025). The emerging pattern therefore retained a central feature identified in this paper: differentiated engagement with multiple external actors rather than exclusive dependence on one power.

The February 2026 general election and the formation of the BNP-led government further test this continuity. The new government has continued to pursue diversified external relationships rather than replacing one strategic orientation with another. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's June 2026 visit to China emphasized market access, infrastructure, connectivity, and economic cooperation, while Bangladesh's February 2026 Agreement on Reciprocal Trade with the United States strengthened the economic dimension of the bilateral relationship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, 2026; United States Trade Representative, 2026). The Bangladesh–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, signed in February 2026, further expanded the country's opportunities for trade and investment diversification (Embassy of Bangladesh in Tokyo, 2026). Taken together, these developments suggest that political change has altered the configuration and political meaning of Bangladesh's partnerships without eliminating the underlying developmental logic of multialignment (Plagemann, 2021).



Contemporary Multialignment in Practice China

China has become one of Bangladesh's most significant partners through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has financed large-scale infrastructure projects, including ports, bridges, and energy facilities (MOEF, 2021). Defense procurement, including naval vessels and aircraft, has also deepened military ties (Rossiter et al., 2025). While cooperation with Beijing is extensive, Dhaka has approached the relationship with strategic caution, wary of

overdependence and balancing against Indian sensitivities (Yasmin, 2022).

BRI in Bangladesh reflects Beijing's broader attempt to secure strategic footholds in the Bay of Bengal while promoting regional connectivity (Hosain et al., 2024; Blanchard & Flint, 2017). Bangladesh has benefited from Chinese financing in projects such as the Padma Bridge rail link, Payra Port development, and power generation facilities, but concerns about debt sustainability and geopolitical entanglement remain salient (Rahman, 2021; Mallick, 2025).

From a security perspective, China has become Bangladesh's largest supplier of military hardware, including submarines and advanced frigates, helping modernize Dhaka's armed forces (Baruah, 2022; Samaranayake, 2024). Dhaka's caution is visible in its parallel strengthening of ties with India, Japan, and the United States, which scholars describe as a deliberate form of "calibrated multialignment" designed to maximize developmental gains without sacrificing strategic autonomy (Shams, 2022; Abdullah, 2025). The Bangladesh–China relationship exemplifies both the opportunities of infrastructure-driven growth and the risks associated with navigating great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific (Kagaz, 2020).

The China relationship remained resilient through the political transition after 2024. Muhammad Yunus's March 2025 visit to China reaffirmed the China–Bangladesh Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership and emphasized cooperation in infrastructure, investment, trade, industrialization, and connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, 2025; Rahman, 2024). Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's June 2026 visit subsequently placed particular emphasis on expanding Bangladeshi exports, reducing the bilateral trade imbalance, accelerating infrastructure projects, and strengthening connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, 2026; Reuters, 2026). The continuity of high-level engagement and development-oriented cooperation across two different political administrations strengthens the argument that China constitutes a structural component of Bangladesh's developmental multialignment: a partnership pursued for differentiated economic, infrastructural, connectivity, and strategic purposes rather than merely as an instrument of one government's foreign-policy orientation.

India

Bangladesh's relationship with India remains shaped by asymmetry and interdependence. On the one hand, the two countries engage in close security cooperation, counterterrorism initiatives, and connectivity projects, such as regional transit corridors (Baruah, 2018). On the other hand, unresolved water-sharing disputes, particularly over the Teesta River, remain contentious (ORF, 2016). Dhaka thus seeks to maximize economic benefits from Indian engagement while carefully managing political asymmetry.

India views Bangladesh as critical to its "Neighborhood First" and "Act East" policies, with Dhaka serving as a strategic bridge to Southeast Asia (Aryal & Bharti, 2023; Palit, 2016).

Economically, bilateral trade has expanded significantly, with India becoming one of Bangladesh's largest trading partners, though the balance remains heavily tilted in India's favor (Asian Confluence, 2018). India has also provided multiple lines of credit for infrastructure, connectivity, and energy projects, including cross-border power trade that integrates Bangladesh into regional electricity grids (Bose, 2024). Scholars argue that this asymmetrical economic relationship generates mixed perceptions in Bangladesh, where Indian projects are often scrutinized for political influence and unequal benefits (Datta, 2023; Ali, 2023).

Security cooperation has strengthened, with joint counterterrorism operations and border management initiatives reducing cross-border militancy (Hossain, 2019). However, long-standing irritants—including border killings, migration-related concerns, and India's domestic policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC)—have complicated bilateral ties by further fueling anti-Indian sentiment within Bangladesh (Mazumder, 2024; Upadhyay, 2020). These dynamics underscore the dual character of the relationship: while India is indispensable to Bangladesh's connectivity and security, managing the perception of asymmetry remains a constant diplomatic challenge (Roy et al., 2024; Mahmud, 2025).

The political relationship nevertheless became substantially more difficult after August 2024. India's hosting of Sheikh Hasina, disagreements concerning her possible return to Bangladesh, unresolved border and water-sharing issues, and increasingly negative public sentiment toward India complicated bilateral relations during the interim-government period (Bhattacharya, 2025; Ranjan, 2025). Yet India's geographic centrality, economic importance, connectivity, energy interdependence, and security relevance make sustained engagement unavoidable (Bhattacharya, 2025; Bose, 2025). The post-2024 experience therefore illustrates an important limitation of developmental multialignment: diversification can create alternatives, but it cannot remove structural interdependence with a geographically dominant neighbor.

Pakistan

Pakistan acquired renewed diplomatic relevance following the 2024 political transition. Bangladesh expanded high-level contact and explored opportunities for greater trade, connectivity, and diplomatic engagement with Islamabad (Abid, 2025; Bukhari et al., 2025). Although historical legacies associated with 1971 continue to constrain the relationship, renewed engagement has created additional diplomatic and economic options for Bangladesh within South Asia (Abid, 2025). Pakistan should therefore be understood as a supplementary component of Bangladesh's multialignment rather than as an alternative strategic anchor to India or China.

United States

The United States is Bangladesh's single largest export destination, particularly for the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which underpins Dhaka's economic diplomacy (Swazan & Das, 2022). Relations have been strained,

including sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) over human rights concerns and pressure from Washington for labor-rights reforms (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Strategically, the U.S. frames Bangladesh within its Indo-Pacific Strategy, viewing Dhaka as a potential partner in regional stability (Saimum, 2023).

U.S.-Bangladesh relations are shaped by a mixture of economic interdependence and normative contestation. While Washington has consistently emphasized labor rights, democracy, and governance issues, Dhaka has prioritized trade access and development financing (Patro & Abbas, 2023; Chowdhury, 2023). The suspension of Bangladesh's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) privileges in 2013, following the Rana Plaza tragedy, highlighted the interconnection between economic ties and human rights and labor compliance (Kumar, 2022).

The U.S. views Bangladesh as vital to maintaining a "free and open Indo-Pacific," particularly given its location on the Bay of Bengal and proximity to key maritime routes (Anwar, 2022; Gurjar, 2024). Dhaka has sought to avoid overt alignment with Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy to avoid antagonizing China, underscoring its commitment to multialignment (Observatory Indo-Pacific, 2022). Scholars describe this as a calibrated balancing act: embracing U.S. trade and security partnerships while resisting strategic commitments that may compromise autonomy (Mahmood, 2023; Rakib, 2025).

The U.S.-Bangladesh relationship illustrates the interplay between economic opportunity and normative pressure, with Dhaka leveraging trade dependence while managing political frictions arising from Washington's democracy and rights agenda (Mazumder, 2023; Sai, 2025).

Japan

Japan is a crucial development partner, offering "quality infrastructure" investments through initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B), including the Matarbari deep-sea port and metro projects (JICA, 2021). Unlike China, Japan frames its assistance as sustainable and high-standard, providing Dhaka with an alternative source of capital and technology (Khatun et al., 2023).

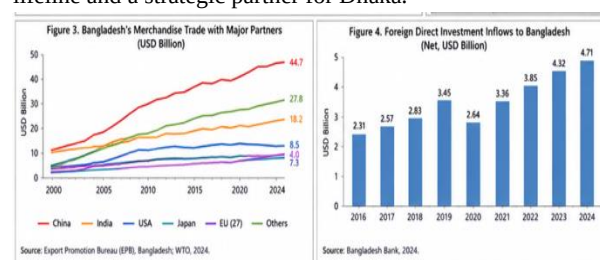
Beyond infrastructure, scholars highlight that Japan's engagement with Bangladesh reflects a broader strategic vision to maintain influence in the Bay of Bengal and to support regional connectivity, aligning with Tokyo's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy (Taufiq & Mahzabeen, 2021; Md Jahangir Alam & Md. Saifullah Akon, 2023). Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) has consistently emphasized long-term capacity building, governance standards, and environmental sustainability, in contrast to concerns about debt dependency in Chinese-financed projects (Farsim, 2025). Bangladesh views Japan's investment as a stabilizing factor that diversifies its economic partnerships and mitigates the risk of overreliance on any single external actor (Shazzad, 2022). Tokyo's role extends beyond aid, embedding Bangladesh into a broader strategic and economic architecture of regional resilience.

The February 2026 Bangladesh-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement further illustrates this diversification logic by extending the relationship beyond development assistance and infrastructure toward trade, investment, and rules-based economic cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA Japan], 2026). Japan consequently represents an important source of alternative investment, technology-related cooperation, standards, and market access within Bangladesh's broader external portfolio.

Gulf States

The Gulf region plays a vital role in Bangladesh's foreign policy through labor migration, remittances, and energy ties. Millions of Bangladeshi workers reside in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, generating significant remittance inflows that sustain the national economy (Islam, 2025; Rahman, 2012). Gulf states also maintain cultural and religious ties, which Bangladesh carefully manages in its diplomatic narrative (Ahamed, 2004).

Bangladesh's strategic engagement with Gulf countries increasingly centers on energy security and investment cooperation. Recent scholarship notes that Bangladesh relies heavily on Gulf-based liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports and petroleum products to meet growing domestic energy demand, making the region indispensable to its energy diversification strategy (LightCastle Analytics, 2025; Amir, 2025). Gulf sovereign wealth funds, particularly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have expressed interest in financing infrastructure and energy projects in Bangladesh, linking migrant labor flows to broader patterns of economic diplomacy (Islam, 2024). This multi-layered engagement illustrates how labor, energy, and investment dimensions intertwine, consolidating the Gulf's role as both an economic lifeline and a strategic partner for Dhaka.



United Nations

Bangladesh has positioned itself as one of the world's top contributors to United Nations peacekeeping operations, leveraging peacekeeping as a tool for international visibility and bargaining capital (Albrecht et al., 2024; Yesmin, 2013). This role not only enhances Dhaka's global profile but also reinforces its image as a responsible small state contributing to international security.

Bangladesh's peacekeeping diplomacy serves multiple domestic and international purposes beyond prestige. Economically, participation generates significant financial inflows through UN reimbursements, benefiting both the state and individual peacekeepers (TBS, 2024). Politically, peacekeeping reinforces Bangladesh's credibility in

multilateral forums, allowing Dhaka to build coalitions and strengthen its normative appeal as a proponent of global peace and stability (Krishnasamy, 2003). Policymakers have strategically framed peacekeeping as a soft-power tool that offsets asymmetries in Bangladesh's regional security environment, particularly vis-à-vis India and China (Press Xpress, 2024). These dynamics show that peacekeeping is not merely symbolic but part of a broader strategy to leverage international institutions for security, development, and diplomatic recognition.

Table 1. Key External Partners and Bangladesh's Core Interests			
Partner	Nature of Relationship	Core Areas of Cooperation	Bangladesh's Primary Interests
China	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	Trade, Investment, Infrastructure, Connectivity (BRI), Defense Cooperation	Infrastructure Development, Industrialization, Export Markets, Strategic Balancing
India	Neighbour and Development Partner	Trade, Energy, Transit, Connectivity (Teesta, BBIN), Security Cooperation	Market Access, Transit Routes, Energy Security, Water Sharing
United States	Strategic & Economic Partner	Trade & Investment, RMG Market Access, Security Dialogue, Development Assistance	Market Access (GSP/Trade Agreements), Investment, Technology, Good Governance
Japan	Development Partner	Infrastructure, ODA, Trade, Human Resource Development	Quality Infrastructure, Technology Transfer, Investment, EPA Benefits
Pakistan	Emerging Engagement	Trade, Connectivity, Political Dialogue	Market Diversification, Regional Balance, Transit & Connectivity
Gulf States	Economic & Labour Partner	Remittances, Investment, Energy Cooperation	Remittance Flows, Investment, Energy Security, Employment Opportunities

Drivers of Multialignment

Economic Development

The imperative shapes Bangladesh's foreign policy to sustain high economic growth, reduce poverty, and achieve the goals of Vision 2041, which aims to transform the country into a developed economy (MOEF, 2021). Developmental diplomacy has become increasingly central to securing infrastructure financing, expanding export markets, and ensuring energy security (MOEF, 2021). Thus, multialignment is less about traditional security balancing and more about attracting diverse partners to support long-term growth (Yasmin, 2022).

Scholars argue that Bangladesh's emphasis on economic diplomacy reflects the evolution of small state strategies in the Global South, where development imperatives often outweigh security concerns. By strategically mobilizing bilateral and multilateral partnerships, Dhaka positions itself as both a recipient and negotiator of international capital flows, aid, and trade benefits (Muhaymin, 2024). This aligns with emerging literature that views development-focused foreign policy as a form of statecraft, whereby states use diplomacy to advance industrial upgrading, technological transfer, and human capital development (Gray & Gills, 2016). For Bangladesh, this approach is evident in its ability to attract investment from China, Japan, India, and Western partners simultaneously, while framing these engagements as essential to achieving the socioeconomic transformation envisioned in Vision 2041 (Kabira et al., 2022).

Domestic Politics, Legitimacy, and Foreign-Policy Recalibration

The relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy became particularly visible after 2024. External partnerships that had previously been presented as evidence of development and diplomatic success became politically contested following the fall of the Awami League government. Conversely, relationships with partners

previously regarded as secondary acquired renewed political significance. This demonstrates that the developmental logic of multialignment is mediated by domestic political coalitions and narratives, rather than operating independently of regime change.

Foreign alignments also matter for domestic political survival. Successive governments have used ties with external partners to bolster legitimacy at home, whether through visible development projects, aid packages, or symbolic recognition (Fair, 2018). For the ruling regime, partnerships with China, India, the U.S., and Gulf states provide resources that reinforce authority and project stability to domestic constituencies (Hossain, 2025).

Beyond material benefits, foreign policy alignments often become embedded in the narratives of regime legitimacy and political contestation. Scholars note that ruling elites strategically frame international partnerships as endorsements of their governance capacity, presenting foreign investments or diplomatic recognition as evidence of national progress (Riaz, 2023). Conversely, opposition parties frequently portray such alignments as symbols of dependency or authoritarian consolidation, fueling domestic polarization (BIPSS, 2025). This dynamic underscores that external relations are not only about geopolitical balancing but also about managing domestic legitimacy, in which foreign alignments serve as tools of political symbolism and electoral rhetoric in Bangladesh's competitive yet constrained democratic environment (Lewis, 2025/2011).

Geostrategic Location

Bangladesh's strategic position on the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indo-Pacific region is a crucial driver of its multilateral alignment strategy. The country serves as a potential transit hub connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2018). This location makes Dhaka valuable to competing powers—India for regional connectivity, China through the BRI, and the U.S. under its Indo-Pacific Strategy (Kugelman, 2023). Strategic geography thus provides Bangladesh with leverage to extract economic and political gains while avoiding overcommitment.

Bangladesh's maritime domain in the Bay of Bengal has gained renewed significance because of energy exploration, shipping routes, and regional security architectures. The successful resolution of maritime boundary disputes with India and Myanmar has enhanced Dhaka's legal and diplomatic standing, allowing it to position itself as a stable actor in a contested maritime space (Carnegie Endowment, 2017; Farhad, 2024). Scholars argue that the Bay of Bengal's transformation into a strategic theater of competition among India, China, and extra-regional powers has elevated Bangladesh's geopolitical value, enabling it to leverage its geostrategic location as both a bargaining chip and a buffer (Brewster, 2014). This maritime centrality underscores how geography not only constrains but also empowers small states like Bangladesh in shaping multialignment strategies.

Peacekeeping and Soft Power

Bangladesh has emerged as one of the world's top contributors to United Nations peacekeeping missions, a role that generates global visibility and soft power (Yesmin, 2013). Peacekeeping not only contributes financially to the national budget through remittances but also enhances Bangladesh's reputation as a responsible international actor (Diplomats, 2024). By leveraging this soft power, Dhaka gains bargaining capital in its relations with larger states, thereby reinforcing its multilateral alignment posture.

Bangladesh has strategically used its peacekeeping contributions to strengthen its voice in multilateral forums and secure diplomatic support from influential UN member states. Scholars argue that active participation in peacekeeping operations has enabled Dhaka to develop a normative identity as a "security provider," an unusual role for a small state, thereby enhancing its international standing (A.P. Mahiga, 2018). Peacekeeping offers Bangladesh opportunities for defense modernization through international training and interoperability exercises, indirectly reinforcing its security capacity at home (Zaman & Biswas, 2014). This dual role of peacekeeping—enhancing both external bargaining power and internal capacity—illustrates how soft power tools can be integrated into multialignment strategies.

Domestic Political Economy of Foreign Policy

Bangladesh's foreign policy choices cannot be understood solely through external pressures or structural constraints; they are deeply rooted in domestic political economy. Successive governments have strategically leveraged external alignments to reinforce regime legitimacy, showcase development successes, and consolidate political authority (Fair, 2018; Riaz, 2023). Major infrastructure projects financed by external partners—such as the Padma Bridge or energy sector investments—are frequently presented in political discourse as symbols of national progress, serving both developmental and electoral purposes (Lewis, 2011/2025).

This instrumentalization of foreign policy for domestic legitimacy has several implications. First, partnerships with external powers often become part of partisan competition. The ruling Awami League has framed its diversified multialignment as proof of visionary leadership and international recognition, while opposition parties portray such alignments—particularly with India or China—as evidence of dependency or elite capture (BIPSS, 2025; Hossain, 2025). External relations are politicized in ways that reflect broader struggles over governance, democratic accountability, and regime stability.

Bangladesh's economic diplomacy is closely tied to domestic imperatives: sustaining export-led growth and securing remittance flows, both of which underpin the country's political economy. The ruling regime's emphasis on Vision 2041 has led it to evaluate foreign alignments primarily by their capacity to deliver development dividends—jobs, industrial upgrading, and technological transfer (Kabira et al., 2022). Foreign policy is closely intertwined with domestic economic strategies aimed at maintaining high growth and

reducing poverty, thereby ensuring political survival through robust economic performance.

Bureaucratic institutions and policy-making capacity play a critical mediating role. Studies have highlighted that small states' diplomatic strategies often depend on the coherence and autonomy of their foreign ministries and economic planning bodies (Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006). In Bangladesh, institutional fragmentation and overlapping jurisdictions can both enable flexibility and create vulnerabilities to external influence. Foreign alignments are shaped not only by geostrategic necessity but also by partisan contestation, bureaucratic capacity, and developmental imperatives.

Opportunities and Risks

Opportunities

Bangladesh's multialignment strategy provides a diversified set of partnerships that reduce dependence on any single power. By engaging simultaneously with China, India, the United States, Japan, and Gulf partners, Dhaka gains flexibility and avoids over-reliance on a single source of aid or security support (Yasmin, 2022). Competition among great powers has also generated increased aid and investment inflows, particularly in infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing (Dietrich et al., 2018). This diversification enhances Bangladesh's bargaining leverage in both South Asia and broader multilateral forums, allowing it to secure favorable terms in trade, connectivity, and security arrangements (Baruah, 2018; MOEF, 2021).

Multialignment creates space for Bangladesh to exercise what scholars term "strategic autonomy," in which small states use overlapping partnerships not only for material benefits but also to maintain policy independence (Acharya, 2014). By securing investments from China, deepening defense cooperation with the United States, and sustaining historical ties with India, Bangladesh shows that diversified partnerships can turn structural vulnerability into agency (NIICE, 2025). This multidirectional engagement has further strengthened Dhaka's negotiating position within regional initiatives such as BIMSTEC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, thereby embedding itself in multiple institutional architectures that reinforce its relevance in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific (CSEP, 2023).

The 2024–2026 political transition provides preliminary evidence that the diversification of external partnerships can survive a change in government, although the relative weight assigned to individual partners may change.

Risks

Despite the above benefits, multialignment carries notable risks. Bangladesh faces debt exposure, particularly from large-scale Chinese infrastructure financing under the Belt and Road Initiative (Wolf, 2019). At the geopolitical level, Dhaka risks entrapment in U.S.-China or India-China rivalry, where external pressures could limit policy autonomy or trigger economic sanctions (Kugelman, 2023). Foreign alignments are subject to domestic politicization, as rival political parties frame external ties to legitimize or discredit

ruling governments (Fair, 2018; Hossain, 2025). This internal contestation makes foreign policy a terrain of partisan struggle, adding volatility to Bangladesh's external engagements.

The post-2024 deterioration in Bangladesh–India relations also demonstrates that political conflict with a major partner can impose costs even when economic and geographic interdependence remains substantial. Multialignment therefore does not eliminate vulnerability; rather, its success depends on whether diversification creates meaningful alternatives without undermining essential relationships.

KII Insights

The interviews revealed a strong consensus that Bangladesh's foreign policy is a deliberate, calculated exercise in "developmental pragmatism." A former ambassador with deep experience in Sino-Bangladeshi relations framed it as "a strategy of necessity and opportunity." He elaborated, "Our core national project is Vision 2041. Because these interviews were conducted in August–September 2025, they should not be interpreted as direct evidence of the preferences of the government formed after the February 2026 election. Rather, they provide evidence of expert perceptions during the late interim-government period and are used alongside documentary evidence from 2026 to assess the continuity and recalibration of Bangladesh's multialignment strategy.

Every relationship—be it with China, India, or the US—is evaluated through a simple filter: does it help us build infrastructure, create jobs, or enhance our technological capacity? We are not ideologically aligned; we are developmentally aligned."

This developmental focus was consistently cited as the primary defense against the risks of over-dependence. A senior economic advisor to the government contrasted Bangladesh's approach with that of Sri Lanka: "The key difference is in the debt and the projects. We have been acutely aware of directing Chinese BRI financing primarily into power and energy projects, as well as physical connectivity projects such as the Padma Bridge, which have direct or indirect returns. The Hambantota model of building a port in a location with questionable commercial viability was a lesson we learned from afar." Another expert, a retired military official involved in defense procurement, noted, "Our diversification is our insurance. When we take submarines from China, we also pursue defense dialogues and training with the US and UK. This prevents any single partner from having a veto over our sovereignty."

The management of the relationship with India was described as the most complex and constant balancing act. A Dhaka-based strategic affairs analyst observed, "The asymmetry with India is a permanent feature of our geopolitical landscape. Our strategy is not to balance it away, but to manage it by creating interdependencies—in power trade, connectivity corridors, and security cooperation. However, unresolved issues like the Teesta and the political fallout from India's CAA act as persistent irritants that anti-India factions can exploit domestically.

Regarding the United States, interviewees highlighted a clear compartmentalization. A former foreign secretary stated, "We have successfully firewalled our robust economic relationship, especially in the RMG sector, from our political differences on governance and human rights. Washington needs a stable, progressive partner in the Bay of Bengal, and we need their market. There is a mutual, if sometimes unspoken, understanding that allows this bifurcated relationship to function."

Experts pointed to institutional memory and growing national confidence as key enablers. A senior academic summarized, "Over the last 15 years, a strategic culture has coalesced around the Awami League government that is assertive about Bangladesh's interests. There is a clear narrative: we are no longer a struggling new state but an emerging economic story. This confidence allows our diplomats to negotiate from a position of strength, presenting Bangladesh not as a client state, but as a valuable developmental partner."

Analysis of KII Insights

Insights from key foreign policy experts substantiate and refine this paper's core argument. The practitioner view confirms that Bangladesh's multialignment is neither accidental nor reactive, but a consciously managed strategy rooted in a developmental pragmatism that prioritizes economic gains above all else. The KIIs underscore that policymakers explicitly understand the much-discussed diversification of partnerships as a form of "insurance" against the vulnerabilities of over-reliance, a lesson keenly observed from the experiences of regional peers, such as Sri Lanka.

These elite perspectives reveal the nuanced compartmentalization at the heart of Bangladesh's diplomacy—the ability to maintain deep economic and infrastructure ties with China while engaging in strategic security dialogues with the United States, and to leverage connectivity with India while firmly managing political asymmetries. This is not seen as contradictory but as a necessary and skillful navigation of a multipolar world.

The interviews point to an undercurrent of growing national agency. Bangladesh's success in maintaining this complex balancing act is bolstered by its economic trajectory and demographic heft, which have fostered a strategic confidence. This allows Dhaka to engage with major powers not as a supplicant, but as a partner offering stability, a growing market, and a pivotal location. Looking ahead, the central challenge, as both the literature and practitioners identify, will be to maintain this delicate equilibrium amid intensifying great-power rivalry. This will require not just diplomatic dexterity but also vigilant economic stewardship to ensure that development debts do not, in the long run, compromise the very sovereignty the multialignment strategy seeks to preserve.

This study has three principal limitations. First, the ten KIIs were purposively selected expert interviews and are therefore analytically informative but not statistically representative. Second, process tracing within a single-country case involves interpretive judgments and cannot establish that

developmental considerations explain every foreign-policy decision. Third, the 2024–2026 political transition remains recent, meaning that the paper can identify emerging patterns of continuity and recalibration but cannot yet establish their long-term durability. These limitations suggest that developmental multialignment should be treated as a contingent, testable framework rather than a permanent characteristic of Bangladesh's foreign policy.

Discussion: Bangladesh as an Exemplar of Small State Multialignment

The 2024–2026 period strengthens the conceptual distinction that if multialignment were simply a function of one governing coalition's geopolitical preferences, the change of government should have produced a fundamental reorientation of Bangladesh's external partnerships. Instead, the evidence suggests considerable continuity in pursuing Chinese investment and infrastructure, U.S. market access, Japanese economic cooperation, Indian connectivity, Gulf labor markets, and multilateral diplomatic capital. What changed was not the existence of multiple partnerships but their political framing, relative priority, and immediate strategic use. This supports the interpretation of developmental multialignment as a statecraft logic that can survive political turnover while remaining politically contingent.

Theoretical Contribution

Bangladesh's foreign policy illustrates a form of "developmental multialignment", where external partnerships are pursued primarily to advance economic growth, infrastructure development, and regime legitimacy rather than traditional military balancing. This approach extends small state diplomacy theory beyond the established frameworks of hedging or non-alignment, showing how development priorities can constitute the central axis of alignment strategy (Yasmin, 2022; Chong & Maass, 2010).



Source: Illustration created by author

This developmental focus fundamentally reorients alignment from risk mitigation to opportunity maximization. Whereas hedging seeks to avoid loss and non-alignment aims for neutrality, developmental multialignment is an offensive strategy designed to actively accumulate capital, technology, and market access. It leverages multipolarity not as a threat to be managed, but as a marketplace of potential patrons and partners, each offering distinct resources—Chinese infrastructure financing, Indian market connectivity, Japanese quality investment, and Gulf capital and remittances—to be harnessed in the singular pursuit of national economic

transformation. This transforms foreign policy into a direct instrument of domestic economic policy, where diplomatic success is measured less by security guarantees and more by kilometers of rail laid, megawatts of power generated, and billions of dollars in exports secured.

Comparative Insight

Compared with other small states, Bangladesh's multialignment reflects both similarities and divergences. Unlike Sri Lanka, which faced the risk of a debt trap from unsustainable Chinese loans (Gangte, 2020), Bangladesh has sought to maintain a more diversified set of financing partners. Unlike Nepal's precarious balancing act between India and China (Muni, 2016), Bangladesh has engaged with both powers, albeit with clearer developmental benchmarks. Finally, unlike Singapore, which practices global hedging by positioning itself as a hub for finance, security, and diplomacy (Acharya, 2007), Bangladesh's orientation is more regionally embedded and developmentally oriented.

This strategic distinction is further evidenced by Bangladesh's calibrated approach to major power competition. While Sri Lanka's engagement with China was marked by concentrated risk, Nepal's balancing act is often reactive to pressure from its neighbors. In contrast, Bangladesh proactively negotiates with competing powers by leveraging its demographic and economic scale. It positions itself not as a neutral hub like Singapore, but as a significant emerging market and a pivotal maritime connector in the Bay of Bengal. This grants Dhaka a unique form of bargaining power, enabling it to secure more favorable terms and insist on a "project-first" rather than "partner-first" logic, thereby ensuring its developmental benchmarks remain the primary driver of its international engagements.

Bangladesh has so far avoided the specific form of concentrated sovereign debt vulnerability Sri Lanka experienced, although this does not imply an absence of external economic dependence or financial risk.

Policy Implications

To sustain this strategy, Bangladesh must meet three imperatives. First, ensuring institutional coherence across ministries and agencies is crucial for managing complex partnerships. Second, cultivating strategic foresight will help anticipate risks from intensifying great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific (Kugelman, 2023). Enhanced risk management mechanisms, particularly in debt sustainability and labor migration governance, will be crucial in preventing vulnerabilities from undermining the benefits of multialignment (MOEF, 2021). These measures would strengthen Bangladesh's capacity to remain a practical exemplar of small state multialignment in a multipolar era.

Underpinning these imperatives is the increasingly critical task of managing diplomatic narratives. As Bangladesh navigates this complex web of partnerships, it must proactively articulate its developmental multialignment strategy to both domestic and international audiences to preempt misperceptions. For major powers like the U.S., India, and China, clear and consistent communication is

essential to reassure each that engagement with the others is not a zero-sum alignment but a necessity for its economic survival and growth. Domestically, a coherent narrative is required to insulate foreign policy from partisan fragmentation and build a national consensus that views these diversified ties as a cornerstone of the country's continued development, rather than as a political liability for the ruling party.

The 2026 context suggests three additional priorities. First, Bangladesh should pursue greater export-market diversification so that access to any single major market does not become a source of strategic vulnerability. Second, major infrastructure partnerships should be assessed through transparent cost-benefit, debt-sustainability, and technology-transfer criteria rather than through geopolitical preference alone. Third, relations with India should be insulated as far as possible from short-term political tensions because geographic and economic interdependence makes the relationship structurally important to Bangladesh's long-term development.

Conclusion

This study argues that Bangladesh's foreign policy reflects a deliberate, calculated multialignment rather than a reactive response to external pressures. Far from being trapped in structural dependency, Dhaka pursued diversified partnerships with China, India, the U.S., Japan, the Gulf states, and multilateral institutions to advance its developmental imperatives.

Bangladesh exemplifies how small states can exercise agency by prioritizing economic development and regime legitimacy as the core drivers of external alignment. This contrasts with traditional small-state strategies, such as Cold War-era non-alignment or contemporary hedging, which primarily emphasize security considerations (Chong & Maass, 2010). Bangladesh demonstrates a model of developmental multialignment, enriching the literature on small-state diplomacy by situating development, rather than survival alone, at the center of strategic choice (Acharya, 2007; Yasmin, 2022).

The policy outlook suggests both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, Bangladesh's strategic location at the Bay of Bengal and its growing global economic footprint create room for enhanced leverage in an era of multipolar rivalry (Baruah, 2018). Intensifying Indo-Pacific rivalries, particularly between the U.S. and China, and between India and China, may constrain Dhaka's flexibility. Safeguarding policy autonomy while advancing development goals will therefore require institutional coherence, prudent debt management, and forward-looking diplomacy (Kugelman, 2023; Gangte, 2020).

Bangladesh's trajectory underscores how small states can transform structural constraints into sources of agency. By aligning its foreign policy with developmental priorities, Bangladesh has become a compelling example of small-state multialignment in the 21st century.

Bangladesh's trajectory demonstrates that, for small states in the 21st century, development is key to security. Its

experience offers a useful analytical model for understanding how small and medium states in the Global South may seek to convert multipolar competition into developmental opportunity while preserving policy autonomy.

The sustainability of Bangladesh's developmental multialignment strategy hinges on its ability to navigate the inherent risks that could become its Achilles' heel. Chief among these is the danger that the very engines of its growth—large-scale infrastructure financing—could be undermined by unsustainable debt, particularly from Belt and Road Initiative projects, jeopardizing long-term economic sovereignty. The strategy faces the fundamental risk that the geopolitical tensions it seeks to balance—especially between the U.S. and China—could escalate, disrupting the critical trade, investment, and energy flows upon which its development model relies. The domestic politicization of foreign policy poses a constant threat, as partisan struggles over external partnerships can destabilize the consistent, coherent diplomacy required for such a complex balancing act. Safeguarding the gains of multialignment will therefore require not just diplomatic skill but also strong institutional coherence, prudent debt management, and forward-looking risk mitigation to ensure that the pursuit of development does not inadvertently create new vulnerabilities.

While this study has outlined Bangladesh's practice of developmental multialignment, important avenues for further research remain. One key question is replicability: to what extent can Bangladesh's model be applied to other small states in the Global South? Countries such as Vietnam, Ethiopia, or Kenya also navigate multiple great-power partnerships, but their political economies, geographic positions, and institutional capacities vary significantly. Future studies could compare Bangladesh with other emerging economies to identify which structural and domestic conditions enable effective developmental multialignment (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Riaz, 2023).

A second frontier lies in developing metrics of success for multialignment strategies. Traditional small state diplomacy has often been evaluated in terms of survival, autonomy, or regime security (Vital, 1971; Bailes et al., 2016). For developmental multialignment, indicators must also capture economic transformation—such as diversification of financing partners, debt sustainability ratios, growth in export markets, remittance stability, and institutional resilience in managing external alignments. The events of 2024–2026 demonstrate both the resilience and the limits of this strategy. Bangladesh's political transition did not produce a wholesale abandonment of diversified external engagement; instead, it altered the political framing and relative emphasis of relationships with China, India, the United States, Japan, Pakistan, and other partners. This continuity suggests that developmental multialignment has become embedded in Bangladesh's broader statecraft. However, its future effectiveness will depend on institutional capacity, economic resilience, and the ability to manage asymmetric relationships. Establishing such metrics would enable scholars and policymakers to systematically assess whether multialignment

delivers not only autonomy but also sustained developmental dividends over time (Gray & Gills, 2016).

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Statements and declarations

Not applicable.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the integrity of the research process and the rights and well-being of all participants. All interviews conducted as part of the research were voluntary and conducted beforehand. All personal and identifying information has been anonymized to protect participants' privacy, and the study maintained data confidentiality throughout.

This paper draws on KIIs conducted with academics and academic-practitioners in Bangladesh. This study did not require formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, as the interviews were professional expert consultations rather than human subjects research involving personal, sensitive, or clinical data. We approached participants in their professional capacity to share perspectives on institutional research culture, publication practices, and knowledge translation—topics related to their professional roles rather than private or personal matters. All participants took part voluntarily, were informed of the study's purpose, and provided verbal informed consent before the interview. We collected no identifying information, vulnerable populations, or sensitive personal data, and we anonymized all responses in reporting to protect participant confidentiality.

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Data availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

AI Use Disclosure

To enhance the clarity, coherence, and academic rigor of this work, the lead author utilized Grammarly, an AI-powered writing assistant. Its function was strictly limited to editorial tasks, such as refining punctuation, fixing syntax, improving sentence structure for better flow, and correcting grammatical errors to ensure the prose is clear and precise. The tool helped align the language with established academic conventions by suggesting more formal vocabulary, adjusting tone for consistency, and strengthening the logical flow of the sentences—thereby supporting the precision and intellectual seriousness expected in scholarly writing. All intellectual

contributions, research, analysis, and substantive ideas contained herein are our own.

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