

## **Bangladesh vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific Strategy: Exploring the Country's Priorities and Prospects**

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**[Abstract:** The Indo-Pacific region is an area of contention and critical debate between two of the biggest global powers; the United States and China in their relentless efforts to exert influence in the region. The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) is the creation of the United States of America, which envisions itself having a substantially germane presence in the region by strengthening ties with the countries of this part of the world. The strengthening process for includes economic partnerships, cross-border collaborations, regional data localization, environmental cooperation and so on. IPS has been seen as the US's undisputable ambition to replace the overpowering dominance of China's presence and influence in the region. As observed, the Asian Giant's presence in the form of financial investments in the Indo-Pacific area concretely binds the countries to China, and strengthens bilateral partnerships between the formers and the latter. Bangladesh, being an important actor in the region has garnered much interest for the Indo-Pacific allies (i.e. Australia, France, Japan etc.) to integrate the country into the Strategy and embolden their regional influence to a greater extent. This paper focuses on the prospects of the Indo-Pacific Strategy in relation to Bangladesh. Despite not being a founding member of the IPS, Bangladesh is still a country of great importance to the United States for their strategic aspirations. The paper notes that Bangladesh itself is studying the prospects of joining the Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, the strategy, coupled with its economic framework, the IPEF, strategizes a position of "seeming antithesis" to China. This strategy flagrantly contravenes Bangladesh's tenet of "Friendship with All Countries". The

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paper then discusses Bangladesh's own agendas and primary priorities; most notably the Rohingya refugee crisis, infrastructural development, trade security, implementing green energy to address Climate Change and so on. The paper explores whether or not the Indo-Pacific Strategy goes against Bangladesh's foreign policy principles of neutrality in global contentions. Upon analyzing a substantial number of data, the conclusion signifies that Bangladesh should adhere to its traditional approach for maintaining its strategic autonomy in foreign policy, and as well make a realistic assessment of the benefits and risks that the IPS may portend for it.]

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific Strategy, IPS, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, IPEF, Indo-Pacific Outlook, IPO, Bangladesh, USA, China, Foreign Policy of Bangladesh, Bangladesh-US Relations, Bangladesh-China Relations.

## 1 Introduction

The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) is an initiative taken by the US along with allied nations such as Australia, Britain, India, and Japan to expand their influence in the region further and to curb any existing influence, if exercised by China. In a nutshell, the Indo-Pacific Strategy defines United States' strategic ends of replacing Chinese prominence in the region through the means of prominence of its own. In every other dialogue, the US seems to hint at a "growing Asian threat" to the West-led rules-based maritime order, which might encroach upon the sovereign characteristics of nations within the region (Basnyat, 2022). The US Agenda of portraying itself the flagbearer of democracy and liberal-democratic practices vilifies any opposing ideologies, be it the Soviet Union during the Cold War or its present competitor, China.

Bangladesh, a country in the Indo-Pacific region, has maintained positive diplomatic relations with all states according to its avowed foreign policy principle of "Friendship towards all, malice towards none", architected by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, in the immediate aftermath of the country's independence in 1971 (The Business Standard, 2022). Such principles have allowed Bangladesh to maintain sustainable and close relations with the US, China and Russia, countries which do not quite see eye-to-eye in most cases (Sarker, 2022a; Sarker, 2022b; Morgulov, 2022), exemplifying stupendous foreign policy practice. Such deft foreign policies have made Bangladesh quite relevant to the Indo-Pacific aspirations of the United States.

Despite not yet being a member, much importance is now being placed upon Bangladesh for joining the IPS. Although the Strategy does offer valuable incentives to Bangladesh, it has its own priorities to be met; most notably the Rohingya Crisis, infrastructural development, high commodity prices and climate change. This research seeks to find out whether or not the Indo-Pacific

Strategy would be beneficial for Bangladesh on any count, or that no benefits at all. It, therefore, behooves one to delve into an in-depth research analysis regarding the IPS to expand discussions about the changing nature of politics in the Indo-Pacific region, and determine the outcomes of this coalition solely from the perspective of Bangladesh. In other words, what the country could achieve from joining the pact, or even by abstaining from it?

### **1.1 Research Objective and Questions:**

The primary objective of this research is to explore the probability of Bangladesh joining the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The research also explores the effectiveness of Bangladesh' strategic autonomy in international politics, and how and to what extent, such foreign policy practices benefit Bangladesh.

The primary question of this research is; Should Bangladesh join the Indo-Pacific Strategy or Not? This research also addresses the following auxiliary questions with pertinence to the primary question.

- I. Why is the Indo-Pacific Strategy so important to the US?
  - a. Why is Bangladesh important to the US' IPS?
- II. How relevant is the Indo-Pacific Strategy to Bangladesh?
- III. What are the Primary Priorities of Bangladesh?
  - a. Will the IPS alone be able to fulfill those priorities?
  - b. How important is the role of China play in addressing Bangladesh' national priorities?
  - c. What are the roles of other nations antithetical to the US and the IPS to meet Bangladesh' priorities?
  - d. Who might play a greater role in assisting Bangladesh in meeting its goals? the US or China?

### **1.2 Research Methodology:**

The research was conducted through the application of the "Desk Study" based qualitative abductive approach using the "Text Analysis Method" to impartially derive data, predominantly from secondary sources. For gathering qualitative data, secondary sources like books, scholarly publications, reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations, policy briefs, and newspaper articles have been utilized. Given the contemporary nature of the research topic, much emphasis was put on recent newspaper articles and opinion publications by political commentators and experts. Upon collecting the data, an exhaustive, in-depth and comprehensive analysis was undertaken which enabled the researchers to arrive at an impartial and solid conclusion at the end.

### **1.3 Literature Review:**

Despite the fact that Indo-Pacific Strategy has been in practice under different names since more than a decade, the literature on the theme is scarce. The dearth

is also felt in availability of recent documents, in particular, the ones specified by President Joe Biden on the subject.

Hu & Meng (2020) had explained the attitudes and ambitions of successive US governments in favor of their own presence in the Indo-Pacific, while throwing diatribes towards Chinese presence in the same region. According to their paper, the successive US governments had shown strong and direct intentions towards establishing a powerful presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Whether it is through the "Pivot to Asia" strategy by former President Barack Obama, or the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" principle by former President Donald Trump during their presidency respectively. The paper describes how the US governments viewed China as the single greatest threat to regional security in the Indo-Pacific region, to the practice of sovereignty and respect to independence in the Asian region adjacent to the Indian Ocean. The paper also describes the reaction of China in response to the US' attitude and policies in opposition to Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific, as well as China's reaction to the collective emergence of the Quadrilateral Dialogue. Overall, the paper elaborates as to how two of the world's leading superpowers engage in their cross-border relations and diplomacy, where presence seemed to be in contradiction to one another, with diplomatic mudslinging between two of the world's leading countries increasing over time.

Paskal (2021) shared a more detailed and elaborate study of six different individual countries in their perceptions and prospects of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The author portrayed six systematic country reports on countries such as the US, the UK, India, as well as Japan to analyze the perceptions of the Policy and Strategic communities of each country to figure out the perception each country had in relation to the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The research further explored the potential for the countries to work together to curb the special threat of China in the region, and maintain regional peace and stability. The literature broadly analyzed how each country's politically affiliated thinkers perceived regional integration strategies such as the IPS in respect to increasing their own overall power, but also recognized how China might be a threat to regional stability of the Indo-Pacific. Further, the research explained how the perception of China in these countries varied in pre and post Covid-19 time, with relations and faith deteriorating further after the Pandemic's onslaught.

Jung et al. (2021) put the focus on other emerging non-QUAD countries in the Indo-Pacific region; Vietnam, Indonesia and South Korea. The paper seeks to focus on these emerging countries of the region and their perceptions of both the US and China. The research also elaborates whether or not these countries are joining the Indo-Pacific Strategy, or even the QUAD. The research finds out that none of these countries is eager to join one camp or the other, out of fear of radical and retaliatory responses from the adversary party; be it the US or China. The research finds out that the core principle these Asian countries favored is to

maintain stable, and sustainable relationships with both the powerful countries, to maintain regional concord, while trying to muster integration between themselves. Furthermore, these countries are found to be in favor of championing regional organizations and institutions such as ASEAN which bears an authentic Asian identity, and to improve the power-wielding capabilities of such institutions. Their ultimate goal is to create a situation where no overarching power could enter and astride over the Indo-Pacific.

#### **1.4 Structure of the Paper:**

The corpus of the paper consists of seven (7) chapters, organized in a logical and sequential manner. **Section 1** of the paper includes the Introduction, as well as research objectives, methodology and literature review. **Section 2** discusses the Indo-Pacific Strategy with its definition and Genesis along with the history of the US' Indo-Pacific aspirations. It also discusses the Economic Framework of the IPS. **Section 3** deliberates on the importance of the Indo-Pacific Strategy to some of its advocate countries, namely India, Japan, Australia and the European Union. **Section 4** explores the possibility of Bangladesh joining the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the prospects and benefits that it may accrue from it. **Section 5** discusses the primary priorities that Bangladesh may attach to the strategy, i.e., a solution to the Rohingya crisis, transitioning to renewable energy and infrastructure development, combating climate change hazards etc. **Section 6** posits the final findings from where to gauge whether or not Bangladesh should join the IPS. The section also explores Bangladesh' relationship with China and Russia, and its desire to determine its own political destiny. Lastly, **Section 7** reaches a conclusion of what would be best for Bangladesh to decide regarding the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

#### **1.5 Research Limitations:**

During the process of the research, it had been discovered that there was an evident lack of academic literature surrounding Bangladesh's prospects of joining the Indo-Pacific Strategy, as well as sufficient academic information on the US' ambitions to incorporate Bangladesh into the IPS, which made research undertaking a difficult task. Since the US' desire for Bangladesh to join the Indo-Pacific Strategy and vice versa, is relatively a recent phenomenon, most of the literatures used are scholarly articles and opinion publications from prominent academic websites and credible newspaper sources.

## **2 Understanding the Genesis and Orchestration of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) by the US**

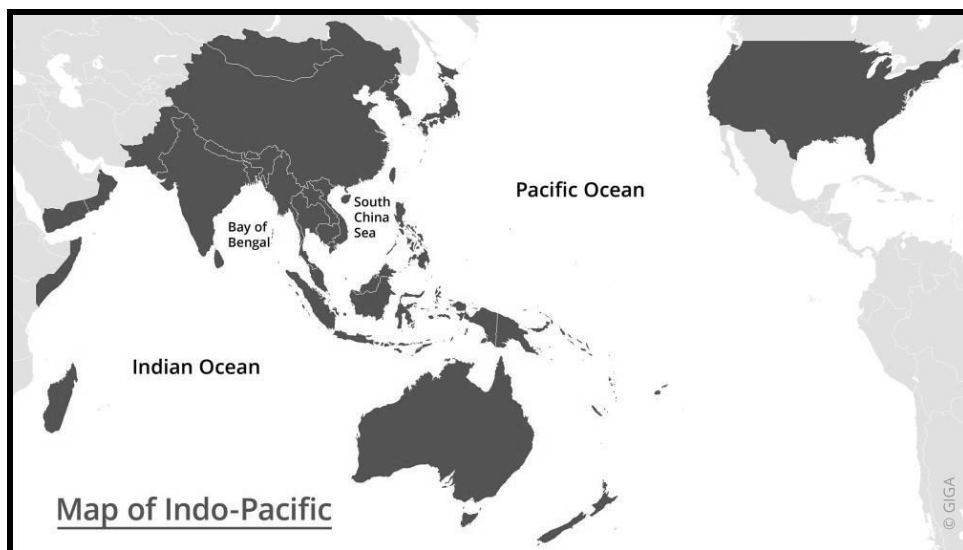
In order to unravel the rationale behind the genesis and manifestation of the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy, a brief discussion on the Indo-Pacific region, its nature and the underlying agenda set forth by the US to bring this region of the world under

its sphere of influence, is a necessary precursor. This section is an attempt in this direction.

### 2.1 Definition of the Indo-Pacific:

The Indo-Pacific region, in general, refers to the meeting point of the Tropical waters of the Indian Ocean and the Western and Central portions of the Pacific Ocean over the general area of Indonesia. It is also often called the "Indo-West" or "Indo-Pacific Asia" (Hu & Meng, 2020). The National Security Strategy of the United States dubs the area as stretching from the West coast of India to the Western shores of the United States (NSS, 2017, p. 46).

**Figure 1:** The Indo-Pacific Region



**Source:** Camroux D & Jeffrelot C, (n.d)).

The above figure shows the indication of the Indo-Pacific Region on a or as part of a World Map. The Indo-Pacific region accommodates nearly 4.3 billion people, which is 54% of the world population. The region accounts for 40% of the world's total GDP. With massive maritime significance, the sea route of the region carries goods worth \$1.9 trillion each year. The region is also one of the top destinations for attracting foreign direct investments (Billah, 2022b).

### 2.2 The Rationale behind the Orchestration of the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the US:

The Indo-Pacific Strategy was skillfully crafted by the US to fortify its influence in the region. The rationale behind their position was to solidify an overarching

presence to curb all other influences that may or may not be detrimental to its own position. This section describes such rationale elaborately.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy was brought to discussion by Gurpreet S. Khurana, a Marine Strategist and Executive Director of the New Delhi National Marine Foundation. He was the first to use the term "Indo-Pacific Strategy" in 2008 (Chen, 2018; Khurana, 2019). It was a referral to the Western idea of forming distinct alliances with the countries of the aforementioned region. The ties would predominantly be economic, social, and political. The emphasis of such alliances would be to exert the dominant presence of the West (The United States, the United Kingdom, EU and Australia) over the region to "ensure" that no other overarching influence is exerted upon the countries of the region (The Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2022). By logical conclusion, the overarching presence is a nod to China for its saturated presence in the region.

During 2009-2010, concern arose within the US administration about the active Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese were then pursuing Anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden.

Overserving such an undesirable situation, the US had soon realized that their then "Asia-Pacific" strategy (coined during the 1970s and 1980s) in the region was not as effective as the Chinese efforts there (Khurana, 2019).

Former US President Barack Obama had initiated the idea of the "Rebalancing Strategy" in the Asia Pacific region during his own Presidency. He sought to reinvigorate the US-East Asia ties on an economic, military, political, and social level, with much emphasis on having a more substantial military presence (Galace, 2016). President Obama had introduced the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) to ensure a firmer grip in the region, financing 10 billion dollars for a gas pipeline across Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, and financing road and infrastructure in Afghanistan (ADB, 2023). His successor, former President Donald Trump, emphasized the "Indo-Pacific Strategy", gaining much prominence after being hailed as a top-level regional priority. It achieved its place in the 2017 "National Security Strategy" of the Trump Administration (NSS, 2017; pp. 45-47). President Trump objectively held an "Anti-China" stance in his vision of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" as only being restricted to the larger economies in the region, preferably the likes of India, Japan, and Australia. Moreover, President Trump was highly critical of the Indo-Pacific approach of his predecessor, but seemingly followed Obama's footsteps in his own approach. Initially one of Trump's visits included a visit to Japan to embolden further talks with the country, there was also talks of joint missile defense improvement with South Korea and Japan (NSS, 2017; pp. 45-47). President Trump, although had rejected the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), had come up with the BUILD Act, a government agency for development financing, with 60 billion dollars (Arora-Cox, 2020), it still pales in comparison to China's investments in the region.

More recently, the US President Joe Biden reiterated the US' desire to maintain its presence in the region upon attaining office. He vowed to safeguard a Free, Open, Connected, Prosperous, Resilient, and Secure Indo-Pacific region through bolstering old alliances, strengthening newer ones, and setting up links in between the partners (Basnyat, 2022). As aforementioned, the US views China's approach as a threat to its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Ever since the threat gained prominence, the successive US Presidents have been fighting tooth and nail to form alliance strategies to counter China. President Biden has reinstated his efforts to emphasize more of the US' involvement in the Indo-Pacific region through investments, bilateral relations, economic and political cooperation and promote growth, infrastructure and development in these regions (The Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2022).

A quick observation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy would make evident that the Strategy predominantly addresses security concerns, which supersede the economic aspirations of the US. Although they would go on to declare a separate Economic Framework going forward, it cannot be denied that the security dimension stands at the forefront of the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy. Such aspirations give rise to the assumption that certain security threats are perceived by the US in the Indo-Pacific. With China's relentless expansion in the South-China sea and ambition of being a present player in the Indo-Pacific region, the IPS paints a picture of why the US is acting the way it is.

### **2.3 The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF):**

Vashisht (2023) points out that, the United States from the birth of the IPS had solely focused on the security dimensions of the strategy, while largely skipping over its economic dimension, which by a mile and a stretch is the more important aspect to the developing nations of the Indo-Pacific. To pacify the necessity, the US invented the Economic Framework appendage to the IPS.

The economic framework, which was announced on May 23rd, 2022, in Tokyo, was an inauguration of an economic framework under the IPS, which includes a number of Indo-Pacific countries, including India, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, and the Philippines. This joint frontier will encompass 40% of the world's total economy (Zaman, 2022; Billah, 2022b). The framework for this Indo-Pacific Economic integration was signed in Tokyo during Biden's first Asia tour in 2022 after his election-amid instabilities worldwide, particularly in this region (Haroon, 2022).

The IPEF had four pillars; digital trade and standards, resilient supply chains, clean energy and value-driven responsible commerce (Vashisht, 2023).

According to Dr. Rahul Mishra, a Senior Lecturer at the Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Malaysia, the IPEF includes the countries of the QUAD, as well as these other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Dr. Mishra opines that the US and its allies, specifically the actors of the QUAD, deem their

recognition as actors for the “fighters of good” and sole “security providers” for the Indo-Pacific countries (Mishra, 2022).

However, the notion of security is that it is provided against some perceivable threat. Following such a premise, the United States for the IPS had pursued a campaign where it painted Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific region as a threat, stating China as “the most serious long-term challenge to the international order” (Mishra, 2022; Haroon, 2022). Another ambition of Washington was to collaborate with “like minded countries” with democratic values.

A distinctive characteristic of the IPEF is that, the other major economies it encompasses, most notably would be Japan and Australia, are countries who hold a similar tune to the political philosophy and economic policies similar to the US, India being a country which previously had held the practice of “nonalignment” in the Cold-war era, now seems to be testing the waters to adopt multilateralism (Pitman, 2022).

### **3 The Rationale behind the Indo-Pacific Strategy by other Heavyweights vis-à-vis the US**

Before discussing the potential of the Indo-Pacific Strategy in relation to Bangladesh, we must first make sure why the allies of the US are seemingly such staunch advocates of the Strategy. Since the advent of the idea of the “Balance of Power” in the 16th Century to the present global scenario, the key reason for any nation or a state to join alliances falls within interests of their own, primarily related to security concerns or to increase their individual powers by making alliances with interested members. The Indo-Pacific Strategy falls within this specific dogma.

The US wishes to keep its presence in the region through military means, more specifically through countries like India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Indonesia as geo-strategically important partners to counter any dominance which might pose a threat to the stability in the region (NSS, 2017, p. 47). The US is also a big actor in the region's foreign investment and aid. Aside from the US, there are other nations who are staunch advocates of Indo-Pacific Collaboration. It should be noted that these nations are allies to the US and hold similar political principles.

#### **3.1 India:**

Being the biggest democracy of the world, India is one of the most influential actors in the Indo-Pacific arena. However, powerful New Delhi may be, it suffers from a sense of undeniable insecurity due to Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific littoral, and such fear stems from multiple factors (Chen, 2018; Pant, 2022).

Being an active member of the Quad with a pro-West attitude, India envisions itself as the regional head of South and Southeast Asia, hence support

for the IPS has been emboldened by New Delhi. According to Brig Shahedul Anam Khan, the purpose of calling the framework "Indo-Pacific " is to tilt focus excessively towards India. However, India has shown greater reticence towards being embroiled in unnecessary confrontations. He added, the country may take greater advantage of being the regional leader, with overt support from the United States in that regard (The Daily Star, 2019).

But unlike the United States, India wants to engage economically with China, despite the critical mistrust apparent due to their border conflict. It should be noted that India envisions greater cooperation between the Indo-Pacific countries for the collective good of all, and to maintain connectivity, already apparent from its Act East Policy. However, India has been a vocal advocate of data localization, which goes against the very essence of the Indo-Pacific Strategy's advocacy for cross-border flow of data and digital trade. Moreover, India is in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) alliance "with" China. Yet, it is vehemently against Chinese investment in the Asian countries within its vicinity due to fear of its debt-driven diplomacy, specifically Chinese meddling in New Delhi's neighbors like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. India sees Chinese involvement in the region as less economic, and more political (Shesharaj, 2022; Billah, 2022). India also wants a more inclusive Indo-Pacific region consisting of Russia, East Asia and the Microstates of the Eastern Pacific. Additionally, it aspires to be a mediator for the US-China competition (Liu and Jamali, 2021; p.11).

The country also aspires to be a Transit hub for energy transports (Liu and Jamali, 2021; p.18). India sees the Indo-Pacific Strategy as an opportunity to attract more investments into its rare-earth elements sector, in which India has the 5th largest reserves in the world, and to create more jobs for its youth (Vashisht, 2023). All in all, the high-rise ambitions being exerted by India is what makes it such a staunch advocate of the IPS.

### **3.2 Japan:**

Being a democratic nation and strong ally to the South, Southeast Asia and the West, Japan is a natural advocate of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Due to its insecure geographical position as an Island nation, Japan often finds itself being precariously perched next to its nuclear neighbor, North Korea (People's Democratic Republic of Korea), and the constant condition of not knowing its other neighbor China's next move has let Japan shifting towards its Western allies. Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in 2007 speaking to the Indian parliament, had dubbed Indo-Pacific relations as the 'Confluence of the Two Seas' (Abe, 2007). Abe and President Trump had also signed an energy treaty in 2017, the Japan–United States Strategic Energy Partnership (JUSEP), to ensure more climate-friendly LNG based energy usage in Japan (The White House, 2017). Japan also sees itself as being an external partner to the Association of the

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with the new Indo-Pacific Plan focusing on supplying a further \$100 million to the Japan-ASEAN integration fund to bolster development plans in the region.

It should be noted that Japan's Indo-Pacific ambitions are predominantly economic, with the aspiration to replace China in service and commodity sectors, often taking larger risks to be esteemed as a better competitor. Tokyo has already established a positive reputation in the energy and infrastructure sectors (Paskal, 2021). Japan's New Plan which it had declared in March of 2023, established four major pillars, which sought to address issues of digital connectivity, climate change, health, education, cybersecurity, cross-border data transfer, food security, marine security and promoting safe and stable use of the air and sea areas among many others (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2023). Moreover, Japan had initiated "The Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" with an initial budget of \$200 billion to create quality infrastructure in Africa and Asia, consisting of Roads, Railway Corridors, airports, ports etc. Moreover, military cooperation of Japan with the other Indo-Pacific countries has drastically increased (Vashisht, 2023).

### **3.3 Australia:**

When it comes to Indo-Pacific aspirations, Australia was a pioneer in the 1960s when it first referred to the Indo-Pacific as the "India" region during the Cold War, which naturally inclined them to have strong relations with India in the present era. Naturally, Australia is a flagbearer of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and maritime security in this region. It joins India, the US, and Japan in the QUAD alliance, alongside being a part of the AUKUS trilateral security alliance with the US and the UK. Australia seemingly exerts the agenda to strengthen bilateral trade with the US, and to establish a stronger presence in the South and Southeast Asia region. (Chen, 2018).

Australia, however, has not yet have a published, tangible Indo-Pacific Document solidifying their outlook on the Strategy. But it has mentioned its Indo-Pacific aspirations in its National Defense White Paper (2016) and Foreign Policy White Paper (2017) (Vashisht, 2023). But, the country still manages to ensure its tangible support for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" through multiple bilateral and plurilateral relations. The country has placed its primary focus on expanding and advancing its defense capabilities and pursuing substantial defense relations with countries and organizations such as ASEAN, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia and the United States (Vashisht, 2023). As part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Australia also shares principles of technological advancement and cooperation in the field with the US, India and Japan.

Like Japan, Australia has put much emphasis on infrastructural development in the Indo-Pacific region, being part of the "Blue Dot Network"

alongside Japan and the US, which assign “blue dots” to infrastructural projects based on quality standards (Vashisht, 2023). Australia bears the rationale that multilateral initiatives tend to have a slower pace to produce and show tangible effects. Canberra instead opts for Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with singular countries, rather than creating new multilateral platforms. Australia already shares FTAs with 9 countries, and is keen on establishing FTAs within the Indo-Pacific region, especially with India and Indonesia (Vashisht, 2023).

### **3.4 The European Union (EU):**

The European Union also bears the same motto with the United States and allies in regards to an Indo-Pacific Policy. The EU focuses on the infrastructural standards and goals of the G-20 to promote growth in the region. Approximately, 40% of the EU's trade goes through the South China Sea, which makes it pivotal for the EU to engage in peacemaking efforts in the Indo-Pacific arena and maintain stability (EU Indo-Pacific Fact Sheet, 2022). The EU has derived its Indo-Pacific principles from the individual Indo-Pacific Strategies of its European appendages such as France, Germany and the Netherlands, shaping and molding the Indo-Pacific agenda of the EU (Vashisht, 2023). The EU takes its distinctive approach in maintaining its own identity in the Indo-Pacific sphere through engaging in economic diplomacy and cooperating with China regarding development and growth in the Indo-Pacific region, instead of condemning China or solely treating them as a threat in contrast to the US. Europe also has strong trade ties with China with a deficit of €400 billion on their end, so to rattle China with an aggressive and isolating Indo-Pacific Strategy is not a decision deemed wise by the EU, which might lead to less access to the Chinese Market by European companies (Borrell, 2023). However, the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy consists of values and principles such as human rights, gender parity, democratic values, digital connectivity, trade security, cybersecurity, supply-chain resilience, marine security, regional cooperation among others (Vashisht, 2023). Such principles are quite synonymous with, if not absolutely mirroring the Indo-Pacific Strategy declared by other nations.

## **4 The Indo-Pacific Strategy: Prospects and Challenges for Bangladesh**

This section elaborates Bangladesh's own agenda regarding the Indo-Pacific, the prospects of the IPS and challenges it faces. The section further discusses Bangladesh' own Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO).

Bangladesh has been weighed as an important actor for the IPS for its geographical location, as well as, to an extent, due to its recent close ties with China. As a coastal country, Bangladesh enjoys the "blessing and a curse" dynamic; being a coastal country does have its perks, but countries as such are vulnerable to fall victim to the inevitabilities of Global warming and Climate change. Being approximately by the coast of the Bay of Bengal, the US sees

Bangladesh as a prominent actor with true potential to be a part of the IPS in the region. However, Bangladesh itself has its own priorities to meet if it aims to join any coalition.

In the early start of this decade, the US Deputy Secretary of State, Stephen E. Biegun, represented President Biden's desire for Bangladesh to join the IPS, considering Dhaka as a potential partner (The Business Standard, 2020). At the time of conducting this study, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, AK Abdul Momen had stated that Bangladesh is considering the potential of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (UNB, 2023b). Biegun had previously also reiterated the US' desire for Bangladesh to join the Quadrilateral Framework (QUAD) in October, 2020 (Mostofa, 2023). This blatantly portrays just how important Bangladesh has increasingly become to US foreign policy.

As far as QUAD is concerned, its rationale lies in being an "anti-China" alliance more so than it establishes itself as a regional integration mechanism (Chen B. & Chen Y., 2022). The sole purpose of US presence alongside its allies in the region deemed as the "Engine of Global Growth" was not so much for regional integration for a free-flow of trade, rather it was to further curb Chinese influence in the region. This was due to fear of China grabbing hold of supreme dominance in the Indo-Pacific and thwarting US' s own agenda in the Indo-Pacific (Pitman, 2022). So, it is evident that the QUAD and IPS are similar in both rhetoric and agenda.

When it comes to being courted by its neighbors, Bangladesh has received support from its friends who espouse pro-US agendas that seem to try to overwrite China's efforts and contributions in the country. For example, Bangladesh's closest neighbor India has shifted its political discourse from centralizing focus on Pakistan to now being more persistent upon the "Act East Policy " implemented by PM Narendra Modi. This policy is the successor to the "Look East Policy" of 1991 by then PM Narsimha Rao (Pant, 2022; Motaher, 2019, p. 13). The old policy, which primarily focused on attaining strong economic ties eastwards, was upgraded to emphasize strategic partnership and military cooperation in the Modi Administration. India sees Bangladesh as a primary focus of its Indo-Pacific desires to come off as the regional leader of the Indo-Pacific, assisting Bangladesh in upgrading its coastal radar system and maritime patrol boats (Bhaumik, 2022). For India to move away from the cliché of its animosity towards Pakistan and bolster its presence in Eastern countries, ensuring development for its northeastern region and a peaceful Bay of Bengal periphery, it needs to form a strategic relationship with Bangladesh (Pant, 2022).

Japan, a tested and true friend of the country, believes that Dhaka and Tokyo share the same principles to adhere to democratic values and practices. ITO Naoki, former Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh, had urged Bangladesh to take full advantage of its geographical position and its vast coastline to strengthen the country's economy further (UNB, 2022a).

In order to critically analyze the region, we must step out of the binary definition of power dynamics in the realm of contemporary global politics. Kikuchi Tsutomu, Professor of International Political Economy at Aoyama Gakuin University in Japan, holds the opinion that the Indo-Pacific competition is not merely a battlefield between two distinct Global powers sitting at opposing ends on a map. This kind of rhetoric is outdated, he claims. The actors in the region are not pawns to be saved and asked to function in accordance with what the mighty and powerful countries want them to do, but rather they are "game changers" themselves (UNB, 2022a). Both the Hasina and Kishida Administrations have set for joint commitment towards a free and open Indo-Pacific with collective security and growth for all (Ahmed, 2023).

#### **4.1 Analyzing Bangladesh' Intention behind its Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO):**

Keeping up with the regional trend, Bangladesh has released a 15-point "Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO)" which details Dhaka's attitude, aspirations and foreign policy agenda in relation to the Indo-Pacific region. The Outlook establishes a certain framework within which Bangladesh will determine its policies and plans of action to promote peace and stability, while promoting security in the Indo-Pacific. According to the Outlook, Bangladesh seemingly envisions a 'free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for the shared prosperity for all.' The IPO emphasized collective growth through regional and sub-regional collaboration between Indo-Pacific nations to manifest tangible and sustainable development and regional stability.

For the IPO, Dhaka predictably followed the omnipotent principle of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' "Friendship to All, Malice to None" which spearheads almost all of Bangladesh' foreign policy attempts. The IPO maintains firm respect for International Law and binding UN treaties and conventions, also crediting constructive international cooperation as a guiding principle.

The 15 points mentioned in the Outlook involve solid points for maintaining regional stability and harmony while fostering progress and development. Prominent points include-

- 1) Fostering regional and International cooperation for tangible and sustainable development.
- 2) Promoting regional and international peace, peacekeeping and peace building and promoting a "Culture of Peace".
- 3) Cooperation between the Indo-Pacific countries for stronger lines of communication and sustainable development.
- 4) Supporting value-driven regional counterterrorism efforts and eradicating transnational crimes through normative and practical action between the Indo-Pacific countries.

- 5) Establishing a sustainable multilateral system for the free flow of goods, services and people through efficient supply-chain facilities between the Indo-Pacific grouping.
- 6) Fostering technological collaboration to combat food security, future pandemics, water scarcity and other environmental and social concerns.
- 7) Preservation of the oceans and maintaining environmental integrity while promoting the oceans-based economy.
- 8) Promoting sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources while jointly collaborating to restrict any form of pollution to these resources.
- 9) Addressing the pressing issue of climate change and global warming through ensuring concerted action.
- 10) Collaboration in the fields of science, technology, research and innovation.

Upon inspection, it is evident that the IPO does not stray much far from the normative political culture and foreign policy principles Bangladesh has already been preaching and putting into practice. According to Delwar Hossain (2023), the IPO is a "comprehensive and effective document", further calling it "Bold" and "Game-changing", while praising Bangladesh' effort to contribute to collective growth and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

On a critical note, Zillur Rahman (2023), stamped the IPO as an attempt to placate the US, who has been growing weary of the lack of cooperation by the Bangladesh Government in order to disseminate principles of democratic values. Furthermore, there was little or of no mention of eradicating corruption, improving democratic practices and improving the state of law and order by rejuvenating the institutions of the country. All of which are the core fundamentals of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Unfortunately, these fundamentals were not to be found in the Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh. There is also no explicit mention of the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2023).

The IPO had much potential to be a lectern for Bangladesh as a stronger Indo-Pacific actor. However, Bangladesh's efforts to portray its regional ambitions fell short of being more specific in terms of actions to pursue, and the effort ended up feeling subdued.

The Outlook missed out on mentioning specific actions towards upholding democratic values and human rights. Neither has there been any mention of possible solution-driven actions to Bangladesh's Refugee Crisis with respect to

the ethnic Rohingya. This makes the IPO look somewhat incomplete for Bangladesh. The IPO is, indeed, useful and very crucial to Bangladesh's emergence as a more vocal actor in the Indo-Pacific realm. This vagueness of the Outlook might stymie Bangladesh's attempt at conducting specific foreign policy actions.

#### **4.2 Understanding the Prospects of What the IPEF May Offer Bangladesh vis-à-vis Infrastructure and Investments:**

As discussed in a previous section, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework focuses primarily on reaffirming an anti-corruption stance, holding governments accountable, sustaining an undisrupted supply chain amongst the member countries and promoting and sustaining bilateral/multilateral trade amongst the countries (Chen D & Chen Y, 2022). The framework still is restricted to being in its declared phase, lacking an institutional output (Pitman, 2022).

The US sees Bangladesh as a viable candidate to join the framework (Billah, 2022a; Billah, 2022b). The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh has strictly mentioned that Bangladesh will only join such collective frameworks only if such coalitions are restricted to being economic in nature, and no political agenda is pushed towards the partners (UNB, 2022b). Although there have been substantial bilateral discussions between the US and Bangladesh regarding the latter's accession as a member to the framework, IPEF consisted of only 13 countries in its initial declaration, which Bangladesh was not a part of (Billah, 2022a). It should be noted that, the US had briefed Bangladesh on the IPEF and its benefits during the second US-Bangladesh High-level Economic Consultation, during which Bangladesh had placed primary focus on supply-chain resilience, decarbonization pillars and prioritizing US investment in the Blue Economy sector of Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2023).

It cannot go unacknowledged just how much Bangladesh is dependent upon foreign assistance and cooperation in advancing infrastructure within the country. The necessity of state-of-the-art machinery and technology also falls close second in the list of primary necessities of the country for a massive and withstanding economic evolution.

Bangladesh, in its trade with America enjoys certain perks which include duty and tariff free exports, which facilitate profitability in the country. While Bangladesh is to level up to being a developing country in 2026, which will lead to the country losing its preferential trade status with the Western hegemon (BBF Digital, 2023). Bangladesh must seek out other means to continue similar trade facilitations with the US for it to continue transnational business in the US. It should be strictly emphasized that the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is not a free-trade agreement, rather it merely focuses on promoting cross-border connections of members to facilitate trade and information exchange. Dhaka is

currently exploring a number of preferential trade, free trade, and comprehensive economic agreements in Asia. The country has shown interest in signing more of such agreements in the coming years (Mirdha, 2021). For instance, Dhaka has also shown great interest in engaging herself in BRICS. In this respect, the country is just awaiting a formal invitation (UNB, 2023c).

Due to the strict adherence to standard setting by the IPEF, Dhaka could face more distress than relief in transnational trade with the actors involved, whether Bangladesh joins the framework or not. The framework also emphasizes trade facilitation, renewable energy, and most importantly maintaining undisrupted supply chains (Mishra, 2022).

The critics to the framework voice the opinion that, the IPEF is yet another ploy for the US to involve itself in the region to instill its ideologies and political practices within the members party to the framework, with sole focus on being the antithetical presence against Chinese dominion over the Indo-Pacific (Mishra, 2022). So, Bangladesh must tread lightly in its way forward joining any further West-led groupings.

#### **4.3 How Strategic Autonomy May Work in Favor of Fulfilling Bangladesh' Own Agendas:**

Bangladesh, bearer of the unshakeable foreign policy principle "Friendship to all, malice to none" has always been in favor of bilateralism/multilateralism to maximize the fruitfulness of its economic ambitions, which can be most successful through diversified transnational collaboration. But as tactful as it may be, Bangladesh has been dealing with a triangular involvement with the US, China, and India for the last decade. Such a precarious position on the global stage has proven Bangladesh to be a very witty actor in world politics. It would be unwise of Bangladesh to go against its non-aligned mantra and choose one ally while going against others. As of now, Bangladesh has taken a steady "wait and see approach" to depict how the Indo-Pacific Strategy might play out (Billah, 2022a).

Under the Sheikh Hasina administration, Bangladesh has always maintained the policy of not seeking excessive comfort under a singular, overarching financier. The country's motto has always been to diversify its inflow of investments from different countries; be it the US, Japan or even China. In fact, the Prime Minister on her visit to the UNGA Session in September, 2022, had urged the United States to further improve investments in renewable energy, automobile, pharmaceuticals, heavy machineries, chemical fertilizers, ICT, marine resources, shipbuilding, medical equipment, and COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing (BSS New York, 2022). So, there is potential for a Bangladesh-US Indo-Pacific collaboration, but not at the expense of a sacrificial lamb called "strategic autonomy".

## **5 The Multitude of Priorities Bangladesh Harbors as an Indo-Pacific Nation: The Rohingya, Renewables and Infrastructure**

Traversing foreign policy in an ever evolving and polarizing political arena is a complex feat for any country whatever. Bangladesh has been attempting to walk over a challenging tightrope and attempting to balance its foreign policy as efficiently as possible. This section analyzes how Bangladesh may leverage its position against interested parties in order to prioritize and fulfill its national interests.

Although not set in stone as yet, Bangladesh might consider joining the IPS if its primary priorities and objectives were to be fulfilled. However, it is not advisable for the country to contradict its other foreign affairs and agreements in favor of one whose political destiny and solidity is nowhere near grounded.

Bangladesh has prior affairs and agreements with other countries including Russia and China; two of the US' top adversaries on the global stage. Bangladesh's most prominent priorities are infrastructure development, finding a solution to the Rohingya Refugee crisis and finance adaptation-related advancements to addressing climate change. All of which include bilateral/multilateral relations with a diverse group of partners. This section primarily discusses such relations.

### **5.1 Bangladesh' Accession into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):**

The most ambitious project by the Chinese to date would be the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is an aggregate of overland and maritime roadways connecting East Asia to Europe. Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the project in 2013, when it was initially declared as "One Belt, One Road" signifying the maritime and overland cross-border routes, but it was subsequently proposed as the "Belt and Road Initiative", or the BRI (Mcbride et al., 2023; Motaher, 2019, p. 11).

With the BRI, Xi Jinping had envisioned moving both westwards through the mountainous former Soviet regions to Europe and Southwards through Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and other Southeastern countries, finally reaching the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, which are within the focal point of the Indo-Pacific region. To date, more than 60 countries have become signatories or have shown interest in the BRI project. China has so far invested nearly US \$962 billion dollars in the project (Wang, 2023). Morgan Stanley, an investment banking firm, has estimated that the BRI investments could cost China 1 trillion dollars in its lifetime by 2027 (Morgan Stanley, 2018).

From such an interpretation, it is quite clear that China has its own set of ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region, which might not be in line with the Indo-Pacific Strategy by the US. Bangladesh joined the cornerstone project in October, 2016 with an initial offering of \$27 billion by President Xi Jinping. It is clear that Bangladesh must maintain a practice of "benefactor balancing" so that the

relation with China remains fully-functioning with no hurdles involved (Bhattacharjee, 2020). China has evidently funded the major critical infrastructure; The Padma Bridge, which has become a crowning jewel of development for the Sheikh Hasina Administration alongside developing the Dasherbandi water treatment plant, the development of the national ICT infrastructure for Bangladesh Government phase-III, construction of the Karnaphuli River underground tunnel, and the installation of Single-Point Mooring (SPM) with a double pipeline (Kabir, 2021). So, it is quite transparent how Chinese influence is currently present in Bangladesh.

However, Bangladesh should remain cautious not to drive itself off of its diplomatic balancing act and disrespect some of its bilateral relations.

## **5.2 The Importance of both the US and China in Finding a Pragmatic Solution to the Rohingya Crisis:**

Bangladesh has played a pivotal role in setting a magnanimous precedent of humanity when it first allowed a mass exodus of Rohingya refugees who fled their homeland due to what can only be described as "ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya minority by the Military Junta of Myanmar. In fact, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had dubbed the Rohingyas "the most vulnerable people in the world" (BBC, 2022). Bangladesh, since 2017 has taken in more than 1.1 million Rohingya refugees, who are increasing in number exponentially due to reproduction within Bangladesh's borders. Bangladesh, in this regard, needs international assistance with this regional crisis that is happening within its territory (BBC, 2022). This is where key actors could assist Bangladesh in its mission of Rohingya repatriation and be able to attain Bangladesh's support.

A deal brokered in November 2017 between Bangladesh and Myanmar with assistance from China suggested the repatriation of Rohingyas, but that deal never came to full fruition (Motaher, 2022, p. 533). According to "The Center for Policy Dialogue", a Bangladesh-based Think Tank, it costs 1.22 billion dollars annually to cater to the Rohingya refugees within the country (Jamshed, 2021). The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, had asserted that Bangladesh had spent nearly US 300 million dollars monthly, accounting for US 3.6 billion annually (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). But much to the chagrin of Bangladesh, the international actors have been tightening their donations gradually, which in turn is causing an imbalance in Bangladesh's capabilities to house the refugees to the best of its abilities, causing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to address them as a "big burden" (AMI, 2022). For the repatriation forecast, CPD has predicted that it will likely take 12 years for full repatriation of the Rohingyas if there is stability in the inflation rates, and 300 Rohingyas are repatriated a day, which in present context seems highly unlikely (Jamshed, 2021; Dhaka Tribune, 2021). In order for Bangladesh to solve this situation, the Global partners, who in their own interests

want Bangladesh to join their respective spheres of influence, could assist Bangladesh in the repatriation process, and establish stronger relations with the country.

The United States, which had facilitated foreign aid worth 1.7 billion dollars since the beginning of the crisis to Rohingyas inside and outside the Rakhine region, has always championed Bangladesh for its efforts towards said humanitarian crisis. In March 2022, US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken had formally acknowledged the atrocities in Myanmar as "genocide" and had reiterated international gratitude towards Bangladesh's efforts yet again (Blinken, 2022). The US has also put pressure on the Myanmar regime by sanctioning a majority of their military officials, including the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces, Min Aung Hlaing (US Department of State, 2022). In Early 2023, the US has announced an additional \$75 million dollars for 60,000 Rohingya refugees living in the Southwest coast of Cox's Bazar, for their critical aid (Sakib, 2023), with a promise of more aid periodically.

Another country that can substantially assist and cooperate in the Rohingya repatriation process is China. Both Naypyidaw and Beijing share a co-dependent relationship for economic, geo-political, strategic security and a number of other issues. Even with China's multitude of interests in Myanmar, it has also made efforts to assist Bangladesh in facing its ordeal. China, coupled with Bangladesh and Myanmar had created a tripartite mechanism for Rohingya repatriation in 2019 at the UN General Assembly Session. The first round of trilateral meeting was initiated by China in 2018 followed by a virtual tripartite meeting on January 20, 2021 (Shamsuddin, 2022). Moreover, Myanmar has shown keen interest in the Rohingya repatriation process with initial offerings to take in 1000 Rohingya refugees, which was supposedly a result of pressure from China (Ejaz, 2023). In fact, China has mediated between Dhaka and Naypyidaw to initiate a pilot project of Rohingya repatriation, which would initially send 6000 Rohingya refugees annually. However, this project was criticized by the UN and the West for not being "safe enough" (The Daily Ittefaq, 2023).

We must keep in mind that China has immense control over Myanmar, which Bangladesh can view with a silver lining, and use its own relationship with China to expedite the repatriation process. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated Chinese support for the Rohingya repatriation during his visit to Bangladesh in August, 2022. And according to Shahriar Alam, State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, the country sees China as a very prominent partner to assist the country in the repatriation process (Al Jazeera, 2022). Bangladesh must assume the total solution to this crisis with the assistance of all parties involved. Indeed, China has made it possible to bring the Tatmadaw Chief to talks about repatriation, where the US lacks stricter and firmer actions, albeit their aid through financial assistance was undeniably impactful.

### **5.3 Addressing Climate Change and Transitioning to Clean Energy:**

The concern for Bangladesh should be to uphold and promote any precipice to its economic development. Bangladesh also has concerns with Climate Change and shifting towards Renewable Energy. The country, which has a goal to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions and to generate 40% of its energy from renewable sources by 2041, has partnered with China to fund its renewable energy projects. Bangladesh houses a fuel-reliant economy and energy sector, with gas making 51% and oil accounting for 28% of its current needs. The country has a plan to shift away from GHG emissions, which according to UN statistics will be a whopping 76% of the country's emissions by 2030 (Begum, 2022). China will be able to assist Bangladesh to reach its renewable dreams through its public-private partnership projects. Following which the Bangladesh-China Renewable Energy Company (Pvt.) Limited (BCRECL) was established. The aim was to implement Renewable Energy (Solar And/ Or) based Power Plants of the Capacity of 500 MW at Sirajganj, Pabna and Patuakhali initially. The initiative will allow Bangladesh to reach its goals of 10% of its energy from renewables. The government is also eyeing to import hydropower from Nepal and Bhutan (UNB, 2023a). According to global energy think tank, Ember, Bangladesh could generate 6500 megawatts of electricity from solar energy by investing \$11 billion dollars which Bangladesh spends on LNG imports for a period of 3 years (Yousuf and Rahman, 2022).

Climate change has been one of the most pressing concerns for Bangladesh for a while now. A country situated on deltaic plains, which lies in dire straits for lax mitigation and adaptation processes. Begum (2022) further adds, while both the US and allies, and China are now being more vocal regarding renewable energy (President Xi Jinping declared in September, 2021 that China will not fund any further coal-based power plants abroad), the future is only expected to "proceed greenwards" from this point on. If competition between the two camps to exert influence in the Indo-Pacific will result in more active participation in promoting environment-conducive energy alternatives, the outcome may be a guaranteed win-win situation for both the region and the powers competing to exert influence.

### **6 Bangladesh Joining the IPS: Probable or Improbable**

As aforementioned in previous discussions, Bangladesh has made sure to assure itself of its deft and gregarious diplomacy with allies from across the world. Be it the relationship with its immediate neighbor India, or with the country's most prominent benefactor during the modern times, China, maintaining economic diplomacy with Russia, or promoting normative democratic practices alongside the current hegemony in Global Politics; the United States. This strategic diplomatic practice has aided Bangladesh in many ways economically. Through maintaining its witty mechanism of dealing with these distinct foreign

counterparts, Bangladesh assured itself of economic, political and military improvements which have been constantly improving. Therefore, Bangladesh should always keep the trajectory it had been following for the last decade, and use it to catapult itself to a more advanced national progress and economy. This section elaborates a final verdict and conclusive findings on the probability or lack thereof of Bangladesh joining the IPS.

The research has led to the following findings.

#### **6.1 The Relationship with China is Growing Stronger and More Resilient:**

Let the fact be known that Bangladesh is not a global superpower, and it traverses its way in international politics through maintaining friendly and strategic relations with other countries. Singularly siding with the IPS for Bangladesh might bring in a few benefits in the short run, whether it be through further reduced barriers to trade, upgraded military diplomacy, perhaps even a stronger confluence of democratic practice alongside other members in the partnership, but it cannot be taken lightly that, Bangladesh would position itself to be a less desirable destination for Chinese investments and soft loans. Bangladesh, which has such strong ties with China may bring forth the consequences of lesser Chinese interest in the country. Noteworthy would be to mention that Bangladesh is quite reliant on Chinese support for funding of the country's megaprojects and infrastructure. The Readymade Garments (RMG) sector is the part and parcel of Bangladesh exports which pump the most oxygen into the Bangladesh economy. The RMG sector accounts for an estimated 83% of our total switch export earnings each year which is not indicative of a sustainable and diverse economy (Uddin, 2019). Now it should be remembered that Bangladesh is yet to attain self-sufficiency in harnessing raw materials from its own soil. Most of the unprocessed and processed cotton we acquire for the garments industry is strictly imported from abroad; mainly China and India (Volza, 2022). India aside, China shifts its gears towards holding a "western aversion" position on the Global stage. Li Jiming, the former Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh has dubbed the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework promoted by the US as "nothing but political" (Sarker, 2022b). Ambassador Jiming had expressed his concerns that the China-Bangladesh relations might be strained if Bangladesh were to join the quadrilateral grouping, when Bangladesh had initially been offered the QUAD invitation by Secretary Biegun. China sees the IPS and IPEF as a Western attempt at guising their sole hegemonic interest under the cloak of saccharine altruism in the name of regional cooperation. Bangladesh was one of the initial countries to respond to the Belt and Road Initiative, suggesting joint cooperation has not only increased, but will further assist Bangladesh in achieving its 2041 Agenda. China is also keen on Free Trade Agreements with Bangladesh. And to do so, the Chinese side suggested for the Central Banks of both countries to collaborate on exchanging Taka-RMB

currencies for business purposes, which will further embolden Bangladesh-China trade relations (Sarker, 2022a).

Moreover, China has become Bangladesh's top contributor in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), being Bangladesh's top investor partner for 12 consecutive years, taking the top spot during the fiscal year (FY) 2022 with \$940 million dollars (Financial Express, 2022). In total trade, loan and investment, Chinese financial cooperation with Bangladesh is at \$60 billion dollars, the highest for any foreign partner of Bangladesh (Mostafa, 2023). But China itself has its own motives ingrained underneath its cloak of altruistic behavior. Evidently, Liu Jinsong, the director-general of the Department of Asian Affairs in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had met with and told Bangladesh's ambassador to Beijing, Mahbub Uz Zaman, in a stark and aggressive tone for Bangladesh to drop any remnant of "Cold War mentality" and "Bloc Politics" and assume true multilateralism. He also suggested Dhaka to maintain its sovereignty by rejecting any Western influence in its political bearings. This goes to show how averse the Chinese mentality is towards any Western presence in the Indo-Pacific region, all while trying to expand its own hegemonic supremacist agenda in the Indo-Pacific region, fearing that the ruling party of Bangladesh is inclined towards joining the US-led QUAD and the IPS (Majumdar, 2022).

## **6.2 Bangladesh Favors Diverse Sources for Infrastructural Investments:**

According to Dr Masrur Reaz, chairman of Policy Exchange of Bangladesh, Dhaka needs to be critically agile regarding any financing they seek for the projects they envision, given that the projects are of critical importance to the nation and not mere embellishments. Dr Masrur emphasized national interest above all and had specifically favored investment in developing green-growth infrastructure and production facilities, building a digital economy and tapping into the global supply chain (Haroon, 2022).

Although Bangladesh has had tremendous support from the Japan Investment Cooperation Agency (JICA) ever since its inception as an independent nation, which has financed most of Bangladesh' critical infrastructure such as the Matarbari Deep Sea Port, the Mass Rapid Transit or MRT Lines 1 and 6, the Extension of Hazrat Shah Jalal Airport being among the top-tier projects at hand. JICA is also planning to fund the industrialization of the coastal region of Bangladesh from Chittagong to Cox's Bazar known as the "Big-B Initiative", which is to be a boon for the industrial sector of Bangladesh, while providing critical jobs for the people. China in recent years has become the most prominent actor in providing the country with much needed infrastructure, albeit as part of China's Indian Ocean aspirations. Between 2009-2019 China had invested \$9.75 billion in infrastructure investment in Bangladesh (FAIR, 2023). And joining the BRI has led to stronger ties in trade and investment between Dhaka and Beijing.

Dr Monzur Hossain, Director (Research) at the state-run Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), also sees potential for Bangladesh being part of the IPS as it mostly consists of south and southeast nations of Asia. However, he determines the fate of the success of Bangladesh with the success of this regional pact.

Bangladesh should assure itself of its historical "Friendship to all, and malice to none." policy towards each country both in strict bilateral and multilateral senses. Bangladesh also receives its dominant share of weapons from China. With increasing support from the likes of Japan as a supplier of military weapons, Bangladesh is still heavily reliant on China for its military stockpile. Bangladesh also depends on China funding its infrastructure through solid investments, the likes of which have had tremendous influence on the upward growth of Bangladesh. Brigadier Shahedul Anam Khan explained that China predominantly has had soft power influence on Bangladesh, and the United States is an economic destination and security provider. It is for sure up to Bangladesh to maneuver its diplomatic trajectory veering away from any particular camp to side with (The Daily Star, 2019).

### **6.3 Bangladesh' Shares Stable Diplomatic and Economic Relations with Russia:**

Bangladesh which also maintains warm relations with Russia has had the Eastern European giant on its side when tribulations were at their peak; the Liberation War. Russia helped to extract landmines implanted in the coastal area of Chittagong Port during 1973, to which Russia had lost one of their own to fatality, Russia has always maintained a stable relationship with Bangladesh. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, an organization observing international trade, has reported that, despite the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020, Russia and Bangladesh were still able to maintain bilateral trade estimated at 2.4 billion dollars.

Moreover, even with the recent global political turmoil due to the Ukraine-Russia war, Bangladesh is trying to normalize bilateral relations with the country as much as possible, but the road to such friendship is tumultuous. According to a February 2023 report, Bangladesh had to bar 69 US-sanctioned Russian ships from berthing in its port due to fear of US secondary sanctions. But the relationship between the two nations remains strong nevertheless (Sakib, 2023).

Before the cross-border excursions had begun, Bangladesh used to import 3.5 million tonnes of wheat annually, to quench the annual national need of 7 million tonnes of the commodity. Moreover, Bangladesh used to import lentils, mustard, wheat and cotton from both Russia and Ukraine before the war had erupted (Sajid, 2022).

The reality is that trade between both Moscow and Dhaka are not only strong but brimming with potential (Morgulov, 2022). The contributions of the

Rosatom State Corporation to the development of the energy sector of Bangladesh is immense. Russia took part in implementing the largest joint project-construction of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Pabna, which is financed through the state credit extended by Russia. Bangladesh and Russia also work jointly on antiterrorism initiatives and hold similar views on internal instabilities (Morgulov, 2022).

Despite Russia being preoccupied by the war, there have been no restrictions on imports from Russia, including imports of fertilizers, food products, and machinery for the power plant (The Business Standard, 2022). This goes to show the goodwill the two countries share with one another.

Amid restructuring economic ties with Russia, it is safe to assume that Moscow would not be too keen on Bangladesh compromising its sovereign position in the presence of the US in the region (Sakib, 2022). Given US' tendency to bear the "safekeeper" mentality, and the active, yet "on the sidelines" interference in favor of Ukraine in the War against Russia, the US-Russia relationship has further deteriorated (not that it was ever so strong to begin with).

Given the "highly integrated" nature of the IPS and its economic addendum, the IPEF, it can be predicted that Russia might fear information giveaway by Bangladesh due to obligatory bindings with the United States through the IPS, since President Biden is aiming for data liberalization amongst member states to the IPEF, which some members are not so keen on doing. If Russia senses second-hand hostility from Bangladesh's side, it might presume that Bangladesh's sovereignty and foreign policy makeup have been compromised, which might result in Russia becoming less and less cordial with Bangladesh (Pitman, 2022). Given its precarious position, Dhaka cannot lose or jeopardize its trading partners, since in the majority of instances, it faces a trade deficit. Meaning, it imports more than it exports.

#### **6.4 The Future of the IPS is Unpredictable and Uncertain:**

What makes the Indo-Pacific Strategy more unreliable is the change of US Presidents and them having policies vastly contrasting the policies of their predecessors. In most cases succeeding US Presidents tend to differ in their foreign policy approaches from their predecessors, which makes entrusting the US to have a stable transnational policy all the more troubling. For instance, there started a sense of pure skepticism within the government, the elites and the general people in South Korea (Republic of Korea) after former US President Donald Trump had come to power, fearing that that US policy towards providing security to South Korea would not sustain, which makes such relationships more unreliable (Jung et al. 2021; p. 59). James Crabtree of Singapore's International Institute for Strategic Studies concluded that the IPEF is the equivalent of an "all-pain, no gain economic deal" for countries of Southeast

Asia (Chen B. & Chen Y., 2022). The Indo-Pacific Strategy has an unspoken dictation of taking China out of the sphere of assistance and cooperation to the countries in said region. As mentioned before, the IPEF has been established, but is yet to be fully effective to produce tangible results. And this hypothetical Utopia being envisioned by the US is "too ideal" to a great extent, since, the IPEF countries, as strong or less mighty as they might be, tend to have stronger economic ties with China than with the US, be it linked to the BRI, or trade ties from a moderate to a large extent (Chen B. & Chen Y., 2022).

### **6.5 Bangladesh Must Determine its Own Political Destiny:**

Joining the IPS, there is a possibility of the Indo-Pacific countries having their political autonomy compromised and limited, and being "lectured" and forced into political decisions that these countries might not desire. Billah (2022b) suggests for Bangladesh to either form its own strategy in the Indo-Pacific, or pursue regionalism or sub-regionalism, be it through already existing obsolete mechanisms such as SAARC, ASEAN, (which Bangladesh shares an observer status) or even jumpstarting a new regional integration mechanism from scratch. We can take the example of Indonesia, which rejects both the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the BRI by China. It instead prioritizes regional multilateralism through existing institutions such as the East Asia Summit. Indonesia believes that major powers and their initiatives should operate within the framework of the East Asia Summit (EAS) (Jung et al. 2021; p. 60).

BRICS, a grouping of five countries Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, has recently shown keen interest in expanding its membership, and introducing an alternative to the US dollar to conduct trade among its member states. Bangladesh has already shown interest in joining BRICS if it were to be invited (UNB, 2023c).

The findings suggest that the best fit for Bangladesh would be to steer clear of any polarized behavior in the Indo-Pacific region, and to strengthen multilateralism. Bangladesh must reach a neutral-enough position where the country can cooperate with both the US and China, with the key being compatibility, sustainability, cooperation and mutual growth, while prioritizing national interest foremost. Analyst Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Bangladesh's former ambassador to Beijing, iterated that China to Bangladesh is very important, but so are India and the United States (Al Jazeera, 2022). Each of these countries holds a significant importance of interest to Bangladesh. So, Bangladesh cannot afford to pick a side at this moment, or at any given time. Though Bangladesh has so far not been a key participant or signatory to the Indo-Pacific Strategy, according to the AK Abdul Momen (Foreign Minister of Bangladesh), the potential for an IPS-Bangladesh collaboration is "present" (UNB, 2023b).

To conclude, it can be summarized that, no matter how lucrative the initial offerings of the IPS and its economic framework, the IPEF may seem, it is

undoubtedly in its initial phases. Furthermore, Bangladesh has been able to maintain steady and sustainable relations with both the West, which includes the US, as well as China without joining any polarizing coalition. This presents the deft foreign policy practices Bangladesh already conducts. Exemplary would be the impartial nature of Bangladesh' "Indo-Pacific Outlook", which stands as testament to its stable and withstanding foreign policy principles.

It is essential for Bangladesh to steer clear of joining the alliance just yet, since there is absolutely no guarantee of the IPS being sustained by the US, and collaborations guaranteed by the member states. Bangladesh has also shown keen interest in joining other more refined and time-tested groupings such as BRICS, membership of which seems highly likely. Lastly, since there is absolutely no guarantee that the Strategy will be a successful one, one that the USA will not estrange itself from when circumstances become "too tough", it would be best for Bangladesh to stick to its current strategy of staying neutral and not join the Indo-Pacific Strategy at this instant. Bangladesh, for the time being should explore the possibility of the success of the IPS further through conducting further research, studies and analysis of the coalition's prospects. Lastly, Bangladesh should always keep in mind that the "wait and see approach" never fails.

## 7 Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific Strategy has been deemed as the reemergence of the US in the Indo-Pacific region. The strategy is an essential one for US politics to establish its political presence among the countries of this portion of the globe, to further expand its military presence and practice its longstanding mode of "Extended Deterrence". The strategy is also an overt Western desire to remove Chinese presence, political, economic or otherwise, from this region. Bangladesh, however, though not yet a member of the IPS, has fallen within the periphery of the US ambitions. The objective of this paper was to determine the prospects and benefits for Bangladesh in joining this US lead Indo-Pacific coalition. The findings suggest that Bangladesh, which maintains a very healthy relationship with a majority of countries of the world, is reluctant about joining the IPS at such an early stage of post-inception period of IPS. Multiple perspectives were discussed and analyzed regarding whether or not "net benefits" for Bangladesh were present. The study reached the conclusion that, the strategy might seem to be a very promising endeavor by the Western giant, but eventually, with the US' track record of being inconsistent with their multilateral partnerships, and with the shift of foreign policy with each passing President, it is uncertain just how far the trajectory of Indo-Pacific Strategy will go. In spite of presenting its "Indo-Pacific Outlook", it would be wise for Bangladesh to keep to its strategic autonomy and the "wait and see" approach until or unless, there are more promising aspects being provided by such an alliance. It would be unwise of

Dhaka to join coalitions that go against its inclusive foreign policy principles. For a better future for the country, Bangladesh needs to make the best, thought-out choices which are congruent with its constant foreign policy practices.

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