

## Bangladesh: US Indo-Pacific Strategy at One Year

By Porimol Palma

**Porimol Palma,**  
Diplomatic  
Correspondent  
with The Daily Star  
out of Bangladesh,  
explains that  
Bangladesh  
supports the US  
Indo-Pacific  
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military pact.

When it comes to the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), Dhaka says it is with the initiative for its development goals, but not as a military or defense alliance. Bangladesh has long been reluctant to sign defense agreements, including the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) proposed by Washington a few years ago. Deprivation, socio-economic inequity, and political injustice were major factors behind the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In the next two decades, the country, however, faced leadership challenges, with military rule and political killings. This, combined with natural disasters, left Bangladesh impoverished. With the restoration of democracy in 1990, Bangladesh has continued to improve its status and made significant progress. With LDC graduation by 2026, the South Asian nation aspires to be developed by 2041.

Bangladesh believes that its journey of progress cannot be sustained unless its neighbors also develop. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was the brainchild of Bangladesh. It did not work, though, mainly because of rivalries between India and Pakistan. However, Bangladesh and India have engaged deeply in improving the connectivity between the two countries—in rail, road, and waterways. India's major stake here is developing the Northeastern Indian states. Bangladesh wants to boost regional trade, including having market access to ASEAN and eventually East Asia as part of its policy of diversifying exports, which has traditionally been dependent on the United States and Europe.

Bangladesh, which had its maritime boundary dispute with India and Myanmar settled through UN arbitration in 2014, is initiating projects to reap the benefits of the blue economy. At the same time, Dhaka is taking initiatives to ensure the security of its maritime boundary. As its economy grows, it is bolstering the capabilities of its armed forces. Though China is traditionally the largest source of Bangladesh's defense equipment, now it is diversifying sources to include Türkiye, France, UK, and Japan.

After Washington's launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) last year, Dhaka repeatedly said it was studying IPEF's pros and cons. Dhaka also has concerns about what actions Washington may take in Myanmar under the BURMA Act, which speaks of restoring democracy in Myanmar. Analysts explained that Washington may seek Dhaka's support in transporting military equipment to Myanmar via Bangladesh—something that Dhaka is very careful about, as one million Rohingyas in Bangladesh already created a burden, and further confrontation in Myanmar may cause further displacement. Dhaka does not want it.

On April 24, just a day before the Prime Minister's visit to Japan, Dhaka launched its home-grown Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) that spoke of a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Its four principles include Bangladesh's foreign policy dictum, "Friendship towards all, malice toward none;" respect for national sovereignty and equality; political independence; and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. The Outlook also calls for the peaceful settlement of international disputes, respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the UN Charter, and progress toward the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and complete general disarmament.

Bangladesh's former foreign secretary Shahidul Haque says it is crystal clear that the aspects of the IPS that mirror a military alliance meant to counter China are not endorsed by Dhaka's IPO. The word "inclusive" in the IPO says it all. Bangladesh's foreign policy is of non-alignment.

Also, Bangladesh signed onto China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016. Beijing has been a major development partner for Bangladesh, especially in infrastructure. However, Bangladesh's international loans were not mostly from China, but diversified sources including Japan, World Bank, Asian Development Bank etc. Thus, Dhaka made a fine balance in this case.

Policymakers think Bangladesh is not positioned to take sides in an alliance of Indo-Pacific-focused global powers. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, during her meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on April 25, however, made some interesting remarks. For example, on the East and South China Sea, the two premiers reiterated that any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion increase tensions that could undermine regional stability and the rules-based international order. They said the securities of Europe and of the Indo-Pacific are inseparable, and conflict in any region has ramifications in the Indo-Pacific.

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The two leaders elevated Bangladesh-Japan relations to a strategic partnership. Think tanks close to Dhaka say the new partnership means Japan and Bangladesh will have policy convergence when they take a position on international events, apart from defense and security cooperation. Hasina and Kishida agreed that Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific and Bangladesh's IPO have much in common. The same could be said for Western policies on the Indo-Pacific. Thus, some experts say that the IPO embraces the IPS.

Then why is Dhaka not joining the IPEF? An economist and international relations analyst close to the government said joining IPEF does not give you market access or trade privileges. The agreement also contains prescriptions for financial transparency, democracy, free media, and anti-corruption efforts. Bangladesh fears it may face challenges if it joins the IPEF. Such apprehension may be true given that the US already imposed [sanctions against seven present and former Rapid Action Battalion officials](#) for gross human rights violations. It also did not invite Bangladesh to the Democracy Summit in 2021.

US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas repeatedly spoke of free and fair elections in Bangladesh and said the whole world would be watching it as the last three national elections that led to the victory of Awami League were allegedly mired with irregularities. The ruling Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina is also careful about the upcoming polls.

Prime Minister Hasina visited Washington DC on April 28 after meeting Kishida in Tokyo and before attending the coronation of Charles III and his wife, Camilla, in London—three capitals that play critical roles in global politics. It is not wrong to think that Hasina will try to convince Washington, London and Tokyo that her party was better than any other for the development of Bangladesh and checking Islamist militancy, which is also in their interests. However, it is hard to think that Dhaka will concede to western pressures of joining any policy that advocates a defense alliance, though Dhaka is boosting military cooperation for its sovereignty.

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