



PROCEEDINGS

Seminar
on

REGIONAL GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE: IMPACTS ON THE SECURITY DYNAMICS OF BANGLADESH AND WAYS FORWARD



22 October 2025
at BISS Auditorium

Jointly Organised by



Armed Forces Division (AFD), Chief Adviser's Office, and



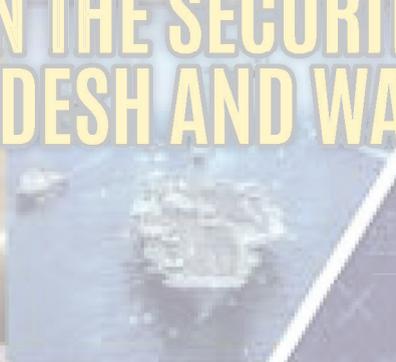
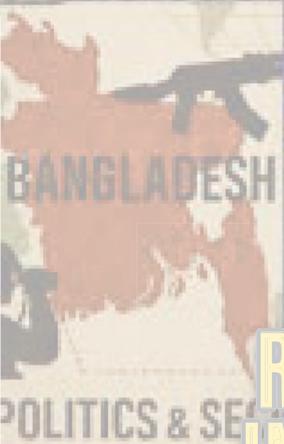
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)



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Proceedings on Regional Geopolitical Landscape: Impacts on the Security Dynamics of Bangladesh and Ways Forward



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), in collaboration with the Armed Forces Division (AFD), Chief Adviser's Office, organised a national seminar titled “*Regional Geopolitical Landscape: Impacts on the Security Dynamics of Bangladesh and Ways Forward*” on Wednesday, 22 October 2025, at the BISS Auditorium in Dhaka. **Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc**, Honourable Adviser to the Ministry of Shipping and the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Interim Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, graced the event as the Chief Guest. **Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc, PhD**, Principal Staff Officer, Armed Forces Division, was the Special Guest. The seminar commenced with a Welcome Address by **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General of BISS.

The Keynote Presentation was delivered by **Professor ASM Ali Ashraf, PhD**, Chair, Department of International Relations, and Director, Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka. The seminar featured a Panel Discussion with distinguished speakers,

including **Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas**, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, who deliberated on “*Evolving Regional Security Dynamics: The Traditional and Non-Traditional Dimensions*” and **Dr Shahab Enam Khan**, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, who made a presentation on “*Shifting Geopolitical Landscape of Bangladesh and Ways Forward*”. An open discussion session followed the presentations, during which distinguished participants raised questions, comments and queries. The session was moderated by **Ambassador (Retd) M Humayun Kabir**, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI). **Captain Shafiu Muznibin, (TAS), psc, BN**, serving in Armed Forces Division, acted as the Master of the Ceremony of the seminar. This seminar aimed to portray the geopolitical situations and their evolving nature in this region. Moreover, it focused on the impacts on the economic, security, and political dynamics of Bangladesh in order to look for some viable strategies to be adopted based on the discussions and comments by the participants and presentations.

The seminar was attended by senior officials from the defence forces and various defence institutions, former diplomats, representatives from government ministries, foreign missions, academia, research organisations, the media, and students, who exchanged perspectives on how Bangladesh can effectively respond to emerging challenges while leveraging opportunities in the shifting regional and global orders.



WELCOME SPEECH



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng

Director General, BIISS

Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng, extended a warm welcome to the Honourable Chief Guest, Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Shakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc, Adviser, Ministry of Shipping and Ministry of Labour and Employment, the Interim Government of Bangladesh. He also acknowledged the presence of Honourable Special Guest, Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc, PhD, Principal Staff Officer, Armed Forces Division, and the moderator, Ambassador Humayun Kabir, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute. He also expressed gratitude to the distinguished keynote speaker, esteemed

panellists, senior officials from the government and defence forces, members of academia and representatives from print and electronic media. He stated that it was a great honour and privilege to welcome everyone to the seminar titled “Regional Geopolitical Landscape: Impacts on the Security Dynamics of Bangladesh and Ways Forward,” jointly organised by the Armed Forces Division (AFD), Chief Adviser’s Office and BIISS.

Major General Iftekhar remarked that the seminar had taken place at a time when the global and regional security environment has been undergoing rapid and unsettling transformations. From the resurgence of large-scale wars in Europe and the Middle East to renewed tensions in South and Southeast Asia, the world is witnessing a revival of conflicts with far-reaching implications. He emphasised that South Asia could no longer be regarded as a passive periphery of global geopolitics, as it has emerged as a region where the strategic interests of major powers intersected. He pointed out that the US’ Indo-Pacific Strategy, China’s Belt and Road Initiative, India’s Act East Policy and the divergent US interests in regional security partnerships all reflected an increasing intensity of engagement in the region’s broader neighbourhood. Bangladesh, he mentioned, being situated at the intersection of South and Southeast Asia and at the heart of the Bay of Bengal, could not remain unaffected by these geopolitical shifts, even though it is not directly involved in causing them.

The Director General drew attention to the growing volatility in South Asia, highlighting issues including the protracted crisis in Myanmar, the Rohingya situation in Bangladesh, the rise of asymmetric tactics and the spread of new technologies—all of which, he explained, have significant implications for Bangladesh’s strategic environment. He further noted that non-traditional security threats, especially transnational crime, cyber vulnerabilities,

climate change, natural disasters, and pandemics, continue to test national resilience and are becoming increasingly intertwined with traditional geopolitical concerns. He remarked that post-COVID-19 vulnerabilities and climate change impacts have further complicated Bangladesh's security calculus.

Major General Iftekhhar reminded the audience that security in the modern era can no longer be confined to the military domain alone, as it now encompasses economic, social, technological, and environmental dimensions. He also observed that major power rivalries, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, has intensified with US-China competition, Washington's renewed engagement with Pakistan and the ongoing India-China strategic contest. These rivalries are not distant geopolitical dramas; rather, they have direct consequences for regional diplomacy, trade, infrastructure and security, particularly in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal region.

The Director General reflected that for a country like Bangladesh, which follows a pragmatic and constructive foreign policy, the challenge lay in navigating this competitive environment with prudence while safeguarding its national interests. Alongside the challenges, Bangladesh must recognise the opportunities ahead. Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in various socio-economic indicators, and its young, dynamic population is one of its greatest assets. Bangladesh's strategic location could also serve as a bridge for trade, connectivity, and cooperation in the region. He emphasised that by leveraging these strengths, Bangladesh could enhance its security and contribute to regional stability. Therefore, he argued, the country needs to adopt a comprehensive approach to security that addresses multiple dimensions, including, but not limited to, strengthening diplomatic ties with neighbours and partners through dialogue and cooperation, enhancing defence capabilities, and engaging actively in regional and global platforms that foster collaboration on shared challenges.

The Director General explained that the seminar's objectives are to promote a deeper understanding of these evolving geopolitical and security dynamics and their implications for Bangladesh. The discussions, he hoped, would not only diagnose existing challenges but also generate forward-looking perspectives. He expressed confidence that the outcomes would inform both strategic decision-making and military preparedness, enabling Bangladesh to respond effectively to current uncertainties and future threats. Before concluding, he extended sincere gratitude to all distinguished participants and stated that the strength of policies lies not only in foresight but also in the collective wisdom generated through shared dialogue and understanding.

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION

Regional Geopolitical Landscape: Impacts on the Security Dynamics of Bangladesh and Ways Forward



ASM Ali Ashraf, PhD

Professor and Chair, Department of International Relations and

Director, Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka

Professor ASM Ali Ashraf began by saying that it was an honour and a privilege to be present at the seminar and to speak before such an informed audience. He mentioned that he was addressing a very interesting topic and expressed his gratitude to the chair of the session and to the Director General of BIISS for effectively setting the tone of the discussion, which made his task much easier.

He explained that his keynote address would focus on several key areas: the importance of studying the regional geopolitical and security dynamics; the conceptual and analytical frameworks underpinning this topic; and the implications of these dynamics for Bangladesh's security posture. As an academic, he also intended to reference relevant literature to demonstrate that the regional geopolitical landscape is complex, multidimensional, and open to multiple interpretations.

Professor Ashraf emphasised that the reason this topic deserves serious attention is that Bangladesh and its neighbours exist in a geopolitically active and constantly evolving region. This complexity, he observed, posed enormous challenges- traditional, non-traditional and hybrid- that has significant implications for Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. He added that the issue is particularly relevant given the ongoing debates surrounding national elections, political transitions and the country's direction. Therefore, he argued, any discussion on geopolitics and security needs to be situated within the broader political context of the country. He then mentioned two guiding questions for his discussion:

1. What are the impacts of regional geopolitics and geopolitical landscapes on the security dynamics of Bangladesh?

2. What policy options can Bangladesh adopt to address or mitigate these challenges?

He clarified that his research adopts a qualitative method, drawing on both primary and secondary data sources. According to Professor Ashraf, discussions on geopolitics and its security implications are well-researched, with several important scholarly contributions in the field. He referred to four books, noting that he has co-authored one titled “The Futures of Borders and Geopolitics in South Asia,” published the previous year. He explained that while the concept of geopolitics has long been dominant in Western contexts, South Asian countries are now reinterpreting their geographical and political realities through this lens. Various theories, he added, linked geography, such as a country’s size, access to the sea, landlocked status, and environment, to the formation of national security perceptions.

He further argued that the three central terms in the title of his presentation- region, geopolitics, and security- should not be treated as linear or unambiguous. He pointed out that during the opening remarks of the seminar, speakers had used overlapping terms such as South Asia, the Indian Ocean Region, and the Indo-Pacific Region, which, in his view, reflects the conceptual flexibility of these ideas.

Professor Ashraf noted that geopolitics has been a contested concept. Traditionally, it referred to how geography shaped political outcomes; however, modern interpretations have expanded to include dimensions of geoeconomics and geostrategy, highlighting the interplay between economic and strategic factors and geography. Similarly, the term “security” has evolved from a narrow focus on state and territorial integrity to encompass human security, economic security, food security, climate change, and pandemics.

He went on to provide a brief historical overview of geopolitical thought, noting its European origins among Swedish, German, British and American scholars who debated the importance of land power versus sea power and the role of expansion and colonisation in state survival. While classical geopolitics emphasised power and territorial expansion, contemporary scholarship examines questions of global stability, the East–West confrontation, the rise of China and the strategic competition in the Indian Ocean region.

To explain the impact of the regional geopolitical landscape on Bangladesh’s security, Professor Ashraf presented a conceptual framework linking three variables: the external environment, domestic politics, and strategic culture. He argued that the relationship between external geopolitical pressures and national security must be understood through the lens of domestic political structures and strategic culture, which are shaped by history, ideology and leadership perceptions.

He explained that the global power distribution, whether unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar, has a profound impact on regional dynamics. After a brief unipolar moment following the Cold War, he observed, the international system is now transitioning toward multipolarity, with American dominance increasingly being contested by China, Russia, and the BRICS nations.

He then discussed three regional geopolitical constructs — South Asia, the Indian Ocean Region, and the Indo-Pacific—to illustrate how geopolitical priorities vary depending on the perspective adopted. South Asian discussions tended to focus on border conflicts and bilateral rivalries; Indian Ocean debates prioritised maritime trade routes and chokepoints;

while Indo-Pacific analyses emphasised great power competition, particularly between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS).

Drawing on a co-authored study he conducted with Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas, he summarised findings from nine regional and international journals. The results, he noted, showed that discussions of regional geopolitics overwhelmingly revolve around great power politics, bilateral relations and traditional security issues such as terrorism and border management, while regional cooperation received comparatively limited attention.



He then turned to the domestic dimension, asserting that international pressures and regional realities are filtered through each country's strategic culture and political regime. Bangladesh, he observed, has been undergoing a period of political transition marked by the collapse of the previous regime and the emergence of reform and electoral agendas, which directly influence its security perceptions.

Professor Ashraf categorised Bangladesh's security dynamics into three types: traditional, non-traditional and grey-zone security. Within traditional security, he identified two major concerns: the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the Rohingya crisis. He explained that historical insurgencies, porous borders and transnational crimes such as arms and human trafficking had shaped Bangladesh's strategic mindset. The Rohingya issue, he stressed, is both humanitarian and geopolitical, as Bangladesh now hosted an estimated 1.5 million Rohingya population, with repatriation prospects remaining uncertain due to the geopolitical interests of major powers such as China, India and Russia's interests in Myanmar.

In discussing non-traditional security, he emphasised two key concerns: electoral politics and economic stability. He noted that elections, though domestic in nature, are often influenced by external narratives. He mentioned that while the US views recent political changes as a response to repression, some neighbouring countries consider them as outcomes

of foreign interference. China, on the other hand, had sought to protect its economic and defence interests in Bangladesh. Economically, he pointed out that the ongoing tariff wars, the aftermath of COVID-19, and the impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war has created significant challenges for Bangladesh's smooth transition from LDC status and for maintaining stable growth. He also cited recent IMF decisions linking loan disbursements to the formation of an elected government, as evidence of how geopolitics and geoeconomics are increasingly interconnected.

Moving to grey-zone security issues, he identified two emerging challenges: cybersecurity threats and extremism, as well as proxy politics. He recalled major cyberattacks and data breaches affecting millions of Bangladeshi citizens, including the Bangladesh Bank heist, and noted that misinformation and disinformation have become serious threats to national decision-making. He also cautioned that proxy political activities and extremist influences, especially amid the changing dynamics in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, following the US withdrawal, could complicate Bangladesh's domestic and electoral climate.

Professor Ashraf concluded by observing that while the state often justifies its actions in the name of national security, such measures can sometimes risk undermining human rights, minority protection, and socio-economic priorities, such as healthcare and climate policy. He therefore called for a comprehensive approach to security, one that avoids selective or "cherry-picked" priorities.

In outlining the way forward, he recommended several policy directions: Strengthening border cooperation, modernising defense, and enhancing deterrence capabilities to protect territorial integrity, Balancing humanitarian responsibilities with national security in managing the Rohingya crisis, building strong political consensus for free and fair elections, diversifying exports, enhancing competitiveness, and signing free trade agreements to ensure economic resilience, investing in cyber capacity-building and adopting "zero-trust" security architecture, and maintaining vigilant intelligence operations and timely diplomatic engagements to counter political proxy activities. Professor Ashraf ended his address on a humble note, expressing gratitude to all participants and thanking them for their attention.



Presentation on Evolving Regional Security Dynamics: The Traditional and Non-Traditional Dimensions



Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas commenced his presentation by expressing gratitude to the Chair of the Session, distinguished guests, and dignitaries, noting that it was an honour and privilege to share a few words at the jointly organised seminar on regional security dynamics. He acknowledged that the keynote speaker, Professor ASM Ali Ashraf, had already provided a comprehensive explanation of the different dynamics of security in the context of Bangladesh, - covering both theoretical and practical aspects. He mentioned that he would avoid repetition but emphasised that certain areas required further discussion, beginning with the issue of setting the context.

Professor Biswas explained that when discussing security, scholars often divide it into traditional and non-traditional categories. However, he pointed out that the conventional distinction between state-centric and non-state-centric understandings of security has gradually diminished. According to him, it is now more important to focus on the intersections of these two perspectives, as they increasingly overlap in contemporary times. Security, he observed, has thus become a complex and multidimensional issue. Referring to the 1994 Human Development Report presented to the UN General Assembly, he stated that since then, numerous issues have been incorporated into the concept of security, thereby broadening and deepening its scope. This expansion, he added, places significant responsibility on all actors—state, government, and non-governmental—to address emerging security concerns in an integrated manner.

Turning to the context of South Asia, the professor remarked that although he did not wish to sound pessimistic, the region remains highly fragmented. He reflected that South Asia's history is unique—not only because of its colonial past but also due to the post-colonial governance models that have shaped its political and institutional structures. He added that since 1947, South Asia has struggled to become a unified and integrated region, with many scholars identifying it as one of the least integrated regions in the world. Against this backdrop of complex, multidimensional security challenges and limited regional integration, he raised the question of how South Asia could effectively address its regional and strategic security dynamics.

Professor Biswas observed that, as highlighted by Professor Ashraf, the region faces numerous traditional security threats, but he emphasised that these should also be viewed through the lens of the security dilemma. He explained that even in the absence of direct provocation, states' efforts toward military modernisation often generate vulnerability. In South Asia, he noted, although the region may not have witnessed many full-scale wars in recent decades, the security dilemma persists strongly. This, he argued, is not only the result of regional rivalries but also of the influence of global powers. He cited the enduring tensions in India-Pakistan and India-China relations, as well as intermittent border skirmishes involving other smaller South Asian countries, as manifestations of this dilemma.

The professor further emphasised that over the past two decades, maritime security has become a significant factor in regional security dynamics. He noted that maritime affairs are not limited to blue economy initiatives or economic cooperation, but also involve traditional competition in the maritime domain. The presence of extraterritorial major powers—such as the US, Australia, India, and China—has further complicated the regional security environment. He reminded the audience that South Asia is unique for being home to two nuclear-armed neighbours, India and Pakistan. He observed that the nuclear deterrence theory, historically tested between the US and the former Soviet Union, has been reinterpreted in the South Asian context. While a nuclear standoff has been avoided so far, he cautioned that smaller conflicts, border clashes, and cross-border infiltrations continue unabated. Hence, he argued, nuclear stability remains a deeply problematic concept for South Asia.

Discussing specific flashpoints, the professor referred to Kashmir as a critical flash point and noted that recurring cross-border incidents every few years have not only strained India-Pakistan relations but also affected the broader region. Similarly, he added, tensions along the India-China border persist, while economic competition remains a factor, and Myanmar has emerged as a significant player in the regional equation. He pointed out that Myanmar occupies a unique geostrategic intersection between South and Southeast Asia, serving as a field of intense regional and global power competition.

Professor drew attention to the Rohingya crisis, describing it as a humanitarian and geopolitical challenge that has deeply affected Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the surrounding region. The professor emphasised that, despite ongoing efforts by Bangladesh, the international community, and global protection regimes, a sustainable solution remains elusive. He warned that the situation is likely to persist for years and will continue to affect regional stability, human security, and ecology. He also noted that the involvement of non-state actors, such as ethnic armed groups including the Arakan Army, further complicates the conflict landscape.

The professor then questioned whether South Asia wanted to allow its neighbourhood to become a playground for global power politics. Referring to the United States' BURMA Act and similar international interventions, he cautioned that external involvement could make the region's security environment even more complicated.

Addressing non-traditional security threats, the speaker acknowledged that these had already been discussed extensively, but he emphasised their deepening impact. Issues such as climate-induced displacement, radicalisation, violent extremism, and border management, he said, all represent non-traditional threats that jeopardise not only the survivability but also the progress of states. He also drew attention to emerging challenges such as energy, food, and water security, as well as misinformation and disinformation, which were not previously recognised as security issues but now significantly affect the survivability of states.

Professor Biswas then elaborated on the concept of security grey zones, explaining that these refer to cross-border and hybrid security challenges where the state's control is uncertain or contested. He noted that undemarcated borders, cyber threats, the governance of artificial intelligence, and disinformation exemplify this evolving grey zone. He emphasised the need for convergence between state and non-state actors to regulate these areas effectively, cautioning that otherwise, the region would face growing instability.

Moving to regional cooperation, the professor described the existing cooperation deficit as one of the region's most persistent problems. He observed that low inter-regional trade is often cited as a barrier to economic and monetary union, but he also pointed out that South Asia has failed to establish a regional security community, unlike Southeast Asia's ASEAN model conceptualised by Amitav Acharya. He noted that regional bodies such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and IORA remain highly state-centric and bureaucratic, resulting in limited engagement between state and non-state actors. He emphasised that the absence of regular security dialogues and trust deficits among South Asian countries have created major functional and strategic crises that could deepen in the future.

The professor then posed a key question: whether South Asia has a strategic compact and how it could be made comprehensive. He appreciated the keynote speaker's reference to strategic culture, noting that Western scholars often associate it only with militarily powerful states. He emphasised that modern strategists must now explore how middle and small powers can develop their own strategic cultures and formulate corresponding strategic compacts. Such compacts, he suggested, could take the form of written or unwritten national security strategies that integrate traditional, retraditional, and non-traditional dimensions, as well as the crucial grey zone or transborder security challenges.

He urged that regional cooperation should be designed with a fifty-year outlook, envisioning how to strengthen ties despite persistent rivalries such as those between India and China and India and Pakistan. Within these frameworks, he called for deepened cooperation among neighbours and next-door neighbours.



In conclusion, the professor conveyed that South Asia's strategic outlook should prioritise collaboration and cooperation to sustain regional stability. He emphasised leveraging the region's geoeconomic potential since economic security is essential. Furthermore, he stressed the importance of maintaining sovereign policy space or strategic autonomy in policymaking and urged that strategic culture be contextualised according to South Asian realities rather than compared to other regions.

Presentation on Shifting Geopolitical Landscape of Bangladesh and Ways Forward



Dr Shahab Enam Khan

Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University

The speaker began by expressing gratitude and pleasure at returning to BIISS. He thanked the respected Principal Staff Officer, Director General, and moderator for the opportunity to speak. He mentioned that his task had been made easier by the previous speakers, who had already elaborated on the theoretical premises of Bangladesh's strategic imperatives and decision-making. He noted that Professor Ashraf has discussed the contest achieved, strategic culture, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, while Professor Niloy has addressed both traditional and non-traditional security dimensions.

The speaker stated that his focus would be on Bangladesh's real-time challenges and the country's future trajectory in terms of augmenting its strategic culture, strategic thought, and overall structural responses to the ongoing regional and global transformations.

Professor Khan observed that the evolving trends in strategic thinking are primarily driven by developments in geopolitics and geostrategy, which, in turn, are reflected in recent regional flashpoints. Citing examples from recent months, he referred to the Pakistan–Saudi defence pact, which he described as significant for altering regional geopolitical equations. He further mentioned India's engagement with the Taliban and the continuing instability in Myanmar, highlighting the Rohingya funding crisis discussed by earlier speakers, which has caused donor fatigue and poses serious implications for Bangladesh's security.

The speaker outlined the multi-tiered trends shaping the strategic environment. He first drew attention to the rapid diffusion of hard power through advanced technologies, the emergence of cognitive warfare—his main focus—and the growing intensity of resource competition.

Discussing the evolution of hard power, Professor Khan explained that Bangladesh's strategic outlook must take into account developments such as the United States' multi-domain strategy, which integrates diplomatic, economic, and operational approaches. He also noted that the AUKUS partnership is reshaping technology integration and contributing

to a new strategic dynamic in the Indo-Pacific region. He added that replicated initiatives across the region are scaling up autonomous capacities at a remarkable pace.

Professor Khan then referred to recent advancements showcased in Beijing, including long-range strike capabilities and anti-access/area-denial networks, as well as battle-tested military technologies demonstrated in Pahalgam a few months prior. He added that allied innovations are equally noteworthy—Japan is expanding its electronic warfare systems, while Australia has operationalised its MQ-28 Ghost programme under the manned–unmanned teaming doctrine. He emphasised that the emergence of such doctrines are particularly significant.

Moving to cognitive domain warfare, the speaker explained that this form of conflict extends beyond kinetic operations and involves the manipulation of perception, cyber operations, and AI-enabled disinformation. He highlighted that such warfare influences decision-making not only domestically but also in regional and global strategic contexts. Citing Taiwan as an example, he mentioned that the island has become a primary testing ground for coordinated cognitive warfare. He further referred to NATO’s recognition of cognitive warfare as an existential threat to trust and democratic stability, stressing its relevance to Bangladesh’s future foreign policy considerations.

Turning to resource nationalism, Professor Khan observed that the global shift toward clean technology has accelerated demand for critical minerals. He cited that lithium prices has increased by 30 per cent in a year, while nickel, cobalt, and graphite prices has risen by 8–10 per cent. He added that supply chains has now become national security priorities for major powers, leading to heightened export controls and trade restrictions. The speaker pointed out that Indonesia’s ban on nickel ore exports and the United States’ strategic stockpiling efforts exemplified this growing trend. He cautioned that these developments carry major implications for Bangladesh’s ambitions to indigenise its defence industry and diversify its energy mix toward renewable and electronic sectors. He also noted that such trends will influence international trade compliance requirements in the near future.

On maritime issues, Professor Khan remarked that the increasing tensions in the South China Sea pose challenges for Bangladesh. The speaker emphasised that these developments make strategic supply chains more vulnerable, resulting in higher insurance costs, delayed exports, and energy disruptions. He observed that continued contestation from the Bay of Bengal to the Malacca Strait underscored the need for Bangladesh to develop contingency protocols and strategic reserves.

The speaker further stated that the convergence of geopolitics and economics presented Bangladesh with a critical foreign policy challenge, particularly regarding its alignment with emerging alternative institutions. He questioned whether Bangladesh should deepen its engagement with BRICS, AIIB, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and how it can position itself within the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). He described this scenario as complex—presenting both opportunities and risks—and linked it to trends in trade fragmentation, new protectionism, tariff wars, and plurilateral trade arrangements.

The speaker noted that the fourth industrial revolution had emerged as a new battleground, influencing Bangladesh’s transition to a modern economy. He identified

critical minerals as the new oil, reshaping geopolitical equations and posing challenges for Bangladesh's economic transformation.

Professor Khan then turned to the shifting political culture, noting that Generation Z represented a new security dynamic. He cited data showing that 90 per cent of Gen Z individuals are influenced by social media, with 24 per cent of them residing in Asia. This generation, he argued, perceives security differently from earlier ones—through the lenses of information warfare, cyber activism, AI, cryptocurrency, digital safety, and encryption. He also pointed to the global rise of populism, which he believed has intensified, hardened political responses and widened generational and institutional divides. These shifts, he noted, have contributed to eroding global norms, strengthening parallel power structures, and exacerbating competition in technology and trade.

The speaker identified Bangladesh's major external actors—namely the US, China, Japan, India, Myanmar, and the Middle East—as competing to influence the country's security posture, while its key partners included the United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore. This environment, he said, requires Bangladesh to carefully balance its diplomatic engagements, including participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while simultaneously considering RCEP accession, ASEAN cooperation, and enhanced maritime security ties. He observed that countering extremism and misinformation has become important elements within Bangladesh's evolving foreign policy and security frameworks.

Presenting his “strategic autonomy” action agenda, the speaker proposed practical measures involving trade and industrial hedging, connectivity realism, technological security, and defence cooperation. He added that developing cognitive resilience and addressing challenges related to the Rohingya and Myanmar crises are also critical.

He explained that for Bangladesh, strategic autonomy meant “maximum optionality” rather than simple independence or interdependence. This, he said, requires improved access to RCEP, diversification of supply chains, and enhancement of cognitive and defence capacities. He argued that Bangladesh needs to strengthen its critical mineral security and adopts responses to counter global trade fragmentation through multi-alignment and regional hedging—via RCEP, BRICS, bilateral arrangements, and existing frameworks like BIMSTEC.

In his concluding observations, the speaker emphasised the importance of institutionalising shock resilience through strengthened internal security. He called for a national consensus on security issues, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Cox's Bazar, as well as the development of mechanisms to counter misinformation and disinformation.

Professor Khan emphasised that military preparedness remained essential, necessitating the advancement of the Armed Forces Division's doctrine, the development of veterans, and investment in defence research and development. He emphasised the importance of maritime domain awareness and highlighted the need to transition from traditional UN peacekeeping to new forms of peace engagement.

The speaker advocated for bipartisan training on geopolitics, regular parliamentary sessions on strategic issues, and independent evaluations by nonpartisan think tanks of foreign investments.

In outlining Bangladesh's strategic roadmap for achieving resilient autonomy, he proposed a phased approach to defence modernisation. The first phase, he explained, would focus on doctrinal advancement, AI integration, and indigenisation of defence production. The second phase would involve the incorporation of UAV and electronic warfare systems alongside new aircraft and naval platforms. The final phase would emphasise the development of joint forces, AI-based decision systems, and electronic warfare ecosystems to strengthen Bangladesh's resilience against external threats.

Professor Khan further highlighted the need to integrate trade and connectivity within this strategic roadmap through participation in regional institutions, such as the RCEP, as well as investment in submarine ports and cables, digital customs systems, and port modernisation. He suggested that establishing the Bay of Bengal as a logistics hub could serve as a key pillar of Bangladesh's outward trade and supply chain resilience.

Finally, the speaker underscored the necessity of political consensus as the cornerstone of resilient autonomy. He called for shared national narratives on the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Cox's Bazar, and continuity in defence and foreign policy. He recommended the establishment of parliamentary geopolitical sessions, inclusive political dialogue, and the institutionalisation of a multiparty security council to ensure sustained strategic continuity for Bangladesh.

OPEN DISCUSSION



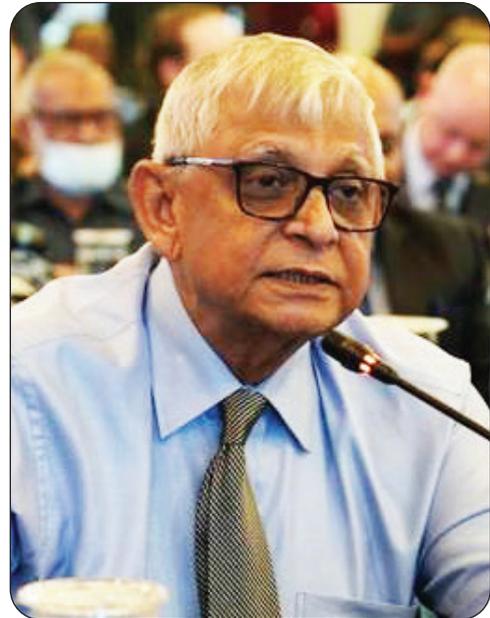
Brigadier General (Retd) M Mofizur Rahman, psc, P Eng, CMC
Lead Consultant and CEO, R&G Consulting

Brigadier General (Retd) M Mofizur Rahman asserted that in consistent with the national policy of “malice towards none”, Bangladesh should not aspire to be a battleground for competing powers. Instead, the nation should strategically position itself as a bridge connecting its neighbouring countries, particularly its larger neighbours, amidst the influence of the US. The speaker reiterated that Bangladesh must avoid becoming a battleground and instead embrace its role as a regional bridge. From this strategic perspective, the speaker directed a specific question to Professor Ashraf and Professor

Biswas, asking them to elaborate on the optimal strategy for managing the country’s challenging relationships with its neighbours.

Air Commodore (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, ndc, psc
Treasurer, East West University

Air Commodore (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury referred to the two points raised by Professor Ali Ashraf, *i.e.*, external forces operating internally and the military dimension of the issue. He expressed the conviction that military solutions alone would prove ineffective unless the full implementation of the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord was addressed, thereby ensuring the integration of the CHT people with the nation. He also highlighted the serious issue of extremism rising in Bangladesh. This was characterised not only as religious extremism but also as intra-community conflict within the Muslim population. He cited various recent examples of this trend, particularly the attacks on Mazars and the desecration of bodies, specifically after the 5th August. Furthermore, he drew attention to the involvement of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan



(TTP), noting the recent unprecedented instances where a Bangladeshi citizen has reportedly been killed during a conflict in Pakistan involving the TTP. Finally, he stressed that these are grave national issues that required immediate attention. Given the forthcoming election, he urged that the nation should treat these matters with utmost seriousness.



Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Mahmud Hussain, BBP, OSP, ndc, psc, acsc, GD(P)
Distinguished Expert, Aviation and Aerospace University, Bangladesh (AAUB)

Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Mahmud Hussain shared his views regarding the concept of the security dilemma. While this concept is typically understood to operate at the state level between different countries, his personal belief is that the security dilemma could also operate effectively at the domestic political level. He then directed a question to the Chief Guest regarding the National Security Council (NSC). He posited it as the overarching structure required for creating a strategic culture in Bangladesh. His central question was: What security dilemma exists between politicians and the country’s security experts, specifically scholars, academics, and others, that has ultimately impeded the formation of the National Security Council in Bangladesh?

Major General (Retd) Fazle Elahi Akbar
Former Force Commander of the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS)

Major General (Retd) Fazle Elahi Akbar expressed his firm belief that Bangladeshis often failed to recognise their own strengths, and that without a clear understanding of those strengths, any discussion or strategy would remain purely theoretical or “bookish”. He argued that this lack of self-awareness has led to several misconceptions circulating within Bangladeshi society, even among the intelligentsia.

He then outlined three such misconceptions. The first misconception was the belief that Bangladesh is a small country. He rejected the claim by pointing out that Bangladesh is actually the eighth-largest nation in the world in terms of population. He shared that the second misconception



is that Bangladesh is a poor economy. He contested this as well, asserting that the country's economy is stronger than Pakistan's and that the performance of its defence forces had proven their capabilities. The third misconception he identified is the notion that Bangladesh was encircled by India and therefore needs to act submissively, like a pilot fish that merely follows a shark. He strongly disagreed with this view. He shared an analogy that if India is considered to be a human body, then Bangladesh would be the stomach within it, implying that if the stomach became unhealthy, the entire body would suffer. Major General Akbar concluded by posing a question to the panellists, asking for suggestions to overcome these misconceptions in order to unite the nation and fully realise its strengths.



Dr Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan

Registrar, American International University Bangladesh and Visiting Research Fellow, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, United Kingdom

Dr Mohammad Zahid identified himself as a constructivist, aligning with the Critical School of thought that emphasises uncovering nuances rather than conforming to mainstream narratives. Referring to one such nuance, he discussed Bangladesh's recent decision to sign the Convention on Enforced Disappearance, an international human rights instrument that has been in force globally for some time. He pointed out that while there are 19 core international human rights treaties, Bangladesh

has already signed most of them, more than many countries in the region, but has previously refrained from signing this particular one. Dr Khan questioned the origin and strategic rationale underpinning this decision. He clarified that he is not arguing that the decision to sign was wrong, but rather he was concerned whether the implications for Bangladesh's strategic autonomy had been properly analysed. He wondered if sufficient thought has been given to how this commitment might affect the country's governance, its societal structure, and the conduct of its day-to-day administration.

He then referred to recent developments involving the Human Rights Commission, noting that its chairman has made controversial public statements, such as claiming to have directly contacted individuals rather than engaging with political leaders, which illustrated potential confusion or overreach in governance practices. He also mentioned ongoing debates over Bangladesh's possible participation in the Peace Commission, suggesting that these instances reflected deeper inconsistencies. Concluding his remarks, Dr Khan posed a key question: whether there exists a cognitive dissonance within the current interim government's strategic culture. He argued that the government appeared increasingly inclined to align with and surrender to international instruments rather than cultivating a robust, independent strategic culture rooted in Bangladesh's own values, narratives, and national needs.

Major Farjana Sharmin

Education Directorate

Army Headquarters, Bangladesh Army

Major Farjana Sharmin greeted the panel and thanked Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas for his detailed and informative presentation. She recalled that Dr Biswas has discussed the idea of a strategic compact and emphasised the need for a long-term security vision. She then raised a question about how that security vision should address the repatriation of the Rohingya. Noting that Myanmar has recently signalled only limited eligibility for returns and that many Rohingya remained insecure there, she observed that human-rights agencies has warned that the returns under current conditions would be unsafe. At the same time, she pointed out that Bangladesh faced enormous humanitarian and funding pressures. Against that backdrop, she asked how Bangladesh could formulate a comprehensive security vision that would ensure safe repatriation of the Rohingya while balancing national security concerns and regional diplomatic imperatives.

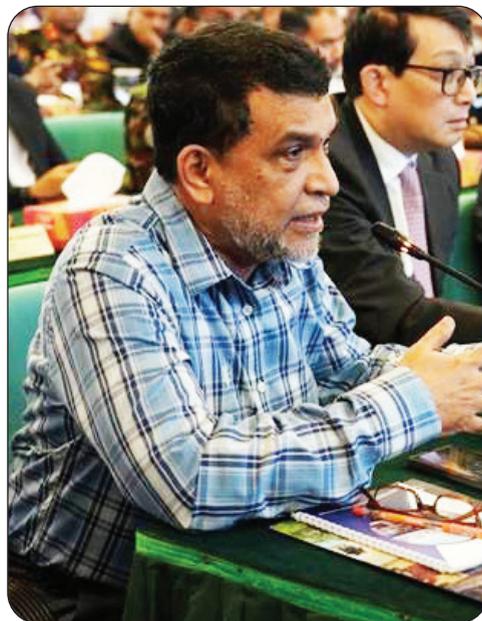
Air Vice Marshal (Retd) M Abul Bashar

Bangladesh Air Force

Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Bashar raised questions regarding two key issues. The first are concerned the growing threat of misinformation and disinformation campaigns. He noted that although all panellists has acknowledged this as a significant challenge, none of them have clearly identified what concrete steps could be taken to counter it.

The second issue he highlighted was the Generation Z factor. He observed that this phenomenon has become increasingly prominent, noting that youth-led movements or unrest involving Generation Z has occurred in Sri Lanka, followed by Bangladesh, Nepal, Madagascar, and even Peru, spreading across different parts of the world. He asked how such movements should be understood: whether they served as stabilising or destabilising forces within societies.

Air Vice-Marshal Bashar further questioned whether there was sufficient understanding of what attracted or agitated Generation Z, and how governments might effectively respond to or engage with them. He concluded by reiterating his thanks.



**Air Commodore Mohammad
Mushtaqur Rahman**
Bangladesh Air Force

Air Commodore Mohammad Mushtaqur Rahman stated that he wished to address a key issue concerning one of the most dynamic and enduring regional geopolitical tensions, *i.e.*, the relationship between India and Pakistan. He observed that the seminar has given limited attention to the role of air warfare strategy in shaping this tension, despite its significant impact on the regional security landscape. He noted that developments following incidents such as Pulwama has demonstrated how air strategy can redefine the contours of regional defence and deterrence.



Referring to an earlier point made by Air Vice-Marshal Bashar (Retd), he mentioned that Bangladesh existed within what could be described as a geographical cage surrounded by powerful neighbours, whether they are viewed as partners or potential adversaries. Drawing on his perspective as an air defender, he argued that such a setting is not merely a defender's paradigm but can, in fact, be seen as an offender's paradise, suggesting that strategic vulnerabilities can also present opportunities if addressed wisely.

In this context, he raised an analytical question: how Bangladesh might mitigate its geographical disadvantages, whether through political merit, security capability, or, as Dr Niloy had suggested, through a framework of defensive realism. He further asked whether such a framework should incorporate elements of retaliatory deterrence, referring to Article 62 of the National Constitution, which authorises the establishment and strengthening of the nation's military, including the Army, Navy, and Air Force.



Rear Admiral (Retd) A S M A

Awal, ndc, psc

Former Ambassador and Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, Bangladesh Navy

Rear Admiral (Retd) A S M A Awal directed a question to Professor Ali Ashraf concerning the Bay of Bengal. He noted that the seminar has rightly referred to the geopolitical “Great Game” of the East and observed that the Indian Ocean contained eight choke points, of which four—the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca are the most significant. He pointed out that Bangladesh is directly affected by the dynamics surrounding the Strait of Malacca, which represents a key area of geopolitical contestation. He remarked that Bangladesh’s foreign policy has not

placed sufficient emphasis on addressing strategic issues related to the Bay of Bengal. Citing a remark by Professor Muhammad Yunus, Honourable Chief Adviser, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, he added that Bangladesh’s capacity to leverage the region’s geo-economic potential, particularly in relation to landlocked neighbouring countries, remained underdeveloped. Admiral Awal further highlighted that, while major powers viewed the Bay of Bengal as part of a larger power struggle, Bangladesh primarily saw it as a zone for development and initiatives related to the blue economy. Given the competing interests of India, the US, China, and Japan, he asked how Bangladesh can navigate these complexities and shape its policy in a way that will best serve its national interests.

RESPONSES BY THE SPEAKERS



ASM Ali Ashraf, PhD

Professor and Chairman

*Department of International Relations,
University of Dhaka*

Professor ASM Ali Ashraf began his response by reflecting on Bangladesh’s strategic approach in managing its relations with neighbouring and extra-regional powers. He reformulated the core question as whether Bangladesh should align itself with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). He noted that the long-held diplomatic maxim of “friendship to all” often suffered from conceptual ambiguity and required clearer strategic articulation in today’s global context. Considering Bangladesh’s developmental imperatives and economic dependencies, he argued

that decisively aligning with a single great power would be both strategically restrictive and financially burdensome. Therefore, he advocated for pursuing strategic autonomy through a pragmatic policy of hedging, which will allow Bangladesh to engage in multilevel cooperation with competing geopolitical actors in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. Such an approach, he noted, will help Dhaka safeguard its national interest while maximising flexibility amid intensifying regional rivalries.

Turning to the queries regarding internal stability and peace, Professor Ashraf addressed the enduring challenges arising from the incomplete implementation of the 1997 CHT Accord. He fully concurred that this remained one of the most pressing security and governance concerns for Bangladesh. He emphasised that restoring the confidence of the hill communities and integrating them into the broader national process are indispensable for sustainable peace. Recognising the CHT as a sensitive strategic zone due to its porous borders and the activities of both state and non-state actors, he underscored that military measures alone would not ensure long-term stability. Instead, a comprehensive approach is required that is grounded in social harmony, resilience, and inclusion so that citizens of diverse ethnic and faith backgrounds can participate equitably in the national fabric. He maintained that such inclusivity was essential for strengthening Bangladesh’s internal cohesion and external credibility in a rapidly changing regional environment.

Regarding the issue of rising extremism, Professor Ashraf noted that Bangladesh’s political transition following the anticipated 2026 elections will likely shape the direction of future counter-extremism efforts. He noted that in a predominantly Muslim country, issues of religious intolerance and radicalisation are deeply sensitive and must be handled with nuance. Addressing the triad of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), Preventing Violent

Extremism (PVE), and Counter-Terrorism (CT) requires balancing domestic sensitivities with international expectations. He asserted that while Bangladesh must never deny the existence of extremist threats, it must also be confident in presenting accurate, evidence-based narratives demonstrating that participation of Bangladeshi nationals in regional or global terrorist networks remains limited. Although instances of radicalisation exist, he contended that the magnitude of the threat is often overstated. The critical task, therefore, lies with national security and intelligence agencies to objectively assess the scale of the threat and respond proportionately where necessary.

Responding to a question about the Bay of Bengal, Professor Ashraf identified three interlinked narratives that shape the region's contemporary strategic environment. The first involves the ongoing naval competition among major powers in the Indian Ocean. He suggested that Bangladesh should maintain an observer's stance in this rivalry while focusing on developing its own maritime strategy to address non-traditional security threats, such as transnational organised crime, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and drug smuggling. The second narrative, he explained, pertains to Bangladesh's active pursuit of the blue economy, a policy direction reinforced by its legal victories at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which significantly expanded its maritime economic zone. The third narrative concerns the need for a paradigm shift from a historically riverine mindset to a more oceanic strategic orientation. He urged greater investment in maritime awareness, research, and capability development to enable Bangladesh to utilise the full potential of its maritime domain and secure its national interests in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific region.

Professor Ashraf concluded that Bangladesh's strategic future hinges on balancing prudence with pragmatism—safeguarding autonomy while engaging constructively with all partners. In doing so, the country must establish an inclusive domestic foundation and a confident external posture that can navigate both regional complexities and global transformations.



Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas

*Professor, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas emphasised the importance of continuously discussing and redefining Bangladesh’s national worldview, noting that it must remain dynamic and responsive to changing contexts. He highlighted that the traditional foreign policy mantra “malice towards none” can be somewhat unrealistic when applied to practical, context-specific policy issues with other nations or regions, underscoring the necessity for periodic reassessment.

He deliberately framed the national worldview through the lens of defensive realism, clarifying that “malice towards none” should be understood as a commitment to avoid preemptive actions rather than as passive inaction. While this concept originated in the context of Cold War nuclear policy, he adapted it to Bangladesh’s non-nuclear reality, emphasising that the core tenet is the obligation to uphold and protect national interests. He questioned whether Bangladesh has successfully defined its national interest and whether it has pursued proactive diplomacy to ensure sovereignty and security.

Regarding the CHT region, Professor Biswas agreed with Professor ASM Ali Ashraf and Professor Shahab Enam Khan that it remains a significant geopolitical hotspot due to its peripheral location, complex history, shared borders with India and Myanmar, and its strategic exit routes. Drawing on Bangladesh’s fifty years of experience, he asserted that the country has developed the capacity to manage the CHT effectively, though such control should not be interpreted hierarchically. Aligning with the Critical Security Studies school of thought, he emphasised that state dynamics are fluid and non-traditional, and rigid, hierarchical control is neither desirable nor feasible.

In revisiting his concept of a “Strategic Compact,” Professor Biswas expressed scepticism regarding the feasibility of achieving a completely peaceful, utopian South Asia through external interventions over the next two decades. He characterised South Asia as inherently the least integrated continent, noting that expecting a European Union-style regional structure is unrealistic. Consequently, Bangladesh must rely on its own lived experience to maintain stability and security within the CHT.

Professor Biswas also addressed the rise of extremism and violent radicalisation in Bangladesh. He stressed that disruptions in internal governance have led to problematic

narrative shifts in security matters, particularly in relation to extremism. He warned against denying the existence of a security crisis, emphasising that extremism is not purely internal but has significant transnational connections. Given Bangladesh's high level of connectivity, both homegrown radicalisation and external influences must be acknowledged and addressed. He concluded that an inclusive, whole-of-society approach is essential to effectively counter extremism and related security challenges, involving all segments of the population.

Responding to questions regarding national security strategy and the Rohingya crisis, Professor Biswas explained that the term “strategic compact” captures the complexities of formulating an overarching national security policy. While some advocate for a written policy, he argued that the absence of one can also provide strategic flexibility. He highlighted that Rohingya repatriation has been increasingly difficult within the global refugee protection framework, citing the experiences of Syrian and Afghan refugees. International organisations such as International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have shifted focus towards host-community integration or third-country resettlement. The Global North often securitises refugee movements despite nearly three-quarters of refugees residing in the Global South. Professor Biswas emphasised that Bangladesh must continue to press the international community to regard the Rohingya crisis as a global responsibility, rather than a bilateral issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. He noted that the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), established under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Statelessness Convention, prioritises repatriation, a principle yet to be fully realised in the Rohingya case.

In conclusion, Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas advocated for a nuanced, pragmatic, and forward-looking approach to Bangladesh's national security, highlighting the importance of dynamic worldviews, strategic realism, societal inclusion, and proactive diplomacy in navigating complex regional and domestic challenges.



Dr Shahab Enam Khan

Professor

*Department of International Relations,
Jahangirnagar University*

Professor Shahab Enam Khan referred to the issue of Generation Z and described it as a crucial element in understanding contemporary information ecosystems. He explained the structural composition of how information campaigns operated, whether through activism or artificial intelligence, and how Generation Z is integrated into these processes. Drawing upon empirically validated data, he noted that understanding these dynamics allow policymakers to develop more effective responses to the challenges of misinformation and disinformation. He stated that such misinformation is closely linked to extremism, radicalisation, and even political decision-making. Professor Khan stressed the importance of promoting digital literacy as the first line of defence against misinformation. He highlighted that many institutions, including ministries, schools, and universities, are increasingly engaging with this issue; however, he called for greater investment and a holistic approach that extends beyond focusing solely on Generation Z. He added that older generations are equally susceptible to misinformation.

Turning to the topic of defence modernisation, Professor Khan pointed out that one of the critical aspects of the Air Force modernisation roadmap was improving both air and territorial defence systems. He highlighted the importance of developing indigenous capabilities in air defence and electronic warfare, and possibly adopting new doctrinal frameworks. Unless these foundational issues are addressed, he argued, Bangladesh would struggle to build an autonomous and independent defence system capable of strategic flexibility.



Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc
Honourable Adviser
Ministry of Shipping and Ministry of Labour and Employment
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc, began his response by noting his current oversight of two key portfolios: the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Shipping. He pointed out that the Ministry of Shipping is a substantial operation, with its jurisdiction spanning the entire nation, encompassing all land, sea, and riverine ports, inland water communication networks, and the certification of all vessels operating both domestically and internationally, including the Bangladesh Shipping Corporation. He then offered a personal anecdote

to illustrate the nation's lack of a strategic framework, recalling that upon assuming office, he discovered that despite having numerous existing ports and a deep-sea port under construction, there was no overarching strategy for port operations. This is a fundamental omission in building a strategic national structure, as nobody in the ministry understand how to integrate these vital assets. He was subsequently committed to implementing a comprehensive port strategy that would integrate all national ports and incorporate necessary defence considerations before the conclusion of their tenure.

Then he focused on a critical national security concern, *i.e.*, a major development project had been implemented near Ramgarh without any apparent consultation with the defence establishment. He asked the audience to observe the situation and opined that senior military officials have been entirely unaware of the fact. This lack of consultation highlighted a serious failure in the defence planning process. He also addressed decades-long infrastructure deficiencies that impacted security, noting that despite Bangladesh being 54 years old and successive governments coming and going, a necessary parallel north-south road has never been implemented, leaving the primary road network vulnerable. This central road was deemed insecure not only from large neighbours but also from the influence of countries like Myanmar, which could pose a threat to communication at any moment. He criticised the urban planning that concentrates critical assets along a single road, creating a massive strategic liability.

In concluding his response, the Chief Guest asserted that the country lacks a concept for integrating the strategic and tactical implications into national construction works, such as bridges and airports. He questioned whether security practitioners were ever consulted regarding the classification, routing, or tactical location of new roads and bridges. Citing the railway project on the Padma Bridge as a recent example of this systemic failure over the last five decades. He shared that no integrated strategic structure exists. He clarified that the National Security Council was meant to provide the conceptual framework for such structures, but nobody has ever truly been concerned about the idea. He strongly criticised the CHT Peace Accord, arguing that it was fundamentally flawed because it failed to define the details of land distribution and the movement of settlers, warning that proceeding without a clear "red line" would lead to a civil war. He lamented that those military forces who have dedicated themselves to the country's integrity over the preceding four decades were never consulted during the treaty's creation. He concluded by reiterating that the lack of an integrated military headquarters and any coherent strategic structure mean that the serious discussions and questions raised at the seminar would likely go unimplemented.



Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc, PhD

*Principal Staff Officer
Armed Forces Division*

Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc, PhD shared his perspectives on several questions raised during the discussion. He agreed with General Akbar's remarks that Bangladesh was neither small nor poor and emphasised that the country's GDP and per capita income are higher than some states with more advanced national security infrastructures. He rejected the notion that Bangladesh is encircled by India, noting that Bangladesh should navigate its relationship with India from a position of equality.

Regarding strategic culture, he acknowledged that Bangladesh must accelerate the process of developing a coherent strategic framework, including the signing and implementation of relevant international treaties. He mentioned that beside strengthening strategic culture, efforts to be duly focused on pressing domestic security needs. In reply to Major Farjana's question on the Rohingya issue, Lieutenant General Hassan stated that Bangladesh's sole objective is the safe repatriation of the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs). He explained that the situation is becoming increasingly complex due to the growing influence of the Arakan Army in Myanmar. He shared that Bangladesh had raised the issue at the United Nations and appointed a special representative for the Rohingya issue while continuing diplomatic engagement with international stakeholders to ensure a sustainable solution.

Addressing a query regarding Generation Z, Lieutenant General Hassan disagreed with the perception that Generation Z is a destabilising force. Instead, he described them as a stimulating factor capable of bringing positive political change. He emphasised the need to listen to young people and understand their aspirations, arguing that society should adapt to them rather than expecting them to conform to traditional norms.

Finally, responding to Rear Admiral Awal's remarks about Bangladesh's position in the Bay of Bengal, Lieutenant General Hassan observed that two major strategic currents—the Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are shaping the regional environment. He stated that Bangladesh's primary mission is to safeguard its maritime boundaries and exploit all potential maritime resources. He noted that the government is engaging with key stakeholders to enhance its capabilities before clearly defining its strategic stance on these issues.

REMARKS BY THE MODERATOR



Ambassador (Retd) M Humayun Kabir
President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)

Ambassador (Retd) M Humayun Kabir expressed his appreciation to all three panellists for their insightful and well-delivered presentations. He remarked that the discussion has been rich and intellectually stimulating. Sharing his personal reflections, he suggested that the discussion should encourage participants to focus on what lies within Bangladesh's control. He emphasised that the foremost priority should be building political consensus on key strategic issues, beginning with the nation's worldview—how Bangladesh perceives itself, its neighbours, and the wider world. He explained that this includes its relationships with immediate

neighbours, extended regional partners, and distant but friendly nations. Ambassador Kabir emphasised that Bangladesh must first ensure internal cohesion, as it would be impossible to play a meaningful role internationally without unity within its borders.

Reflecting on his professional experience, he noted that one persistent challenge for Bangladesh has been the tendency of domestic actors to involve external powers in internal matters. He cautioned that if such practices continued, the country's independence and sovereignty could be compromised. He argued that managing internal affairs effectively should be the first step in strengthening national security, and that this is where the development of a strategic culture and coherent worldview became vital.

He further observed that managing relationships with neighbouring and extended countries requires a clear understanding of Bangladesh's strengths, weaknesses, and priorities. He advised that policy decisions should be based on objective assessments rather than either over-ambition or unnecessary self-doubt. He supported the idea of maintaining strategic autonomy in decision-making, ensuring that all engagements are guided by national interest. Ambassador Kabir reiterated that while all relationships may not be equal, Bangladesh should maintain friendly relations with all nations. If others choose not to reciprocate, that would be their prerogative; however, Bangladesh should not adopt an unfriendly stance towards any country.

Ambassador Kabir noted that, given Bangladesh's interconnected economy and society, it could not afford to ignore its relationship with the outside world. He emphasised the importance of sustaining partnerships with international allies, noting that a significant

portion of the national budget and Annual Development Programme (ADP) continues to rely on external support. Therefore, engagement with development partners has to be managed carefully, taking into account evolving national priorities. Ambassador Kabir remarked that Bangladesh is part of an interdependent global environment, and its relations with partners should reflect both national priorities and international realities. He highlighted that the country's priorities and social narratives are evolving and so is the younger generation's outlook towards the world. He encouraged allowing the new generation to define and design Bangladesh's future vision based on principles of equality and dignity, while remaining anchored in the nation's core interests.

He concluded his remarks by reaffirming that Bangladesh is open to working with all countries, provided that relationships are built on mutual respect and aligned with national priorities. To close the session, Ambassador Kabir thanked the three distinguished speakers—Professor Ali Ashraf, Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas, and Professor Dr Shahab Enam Khan for their thought-provoking presentations, which, he believed, offered valuable insights into Bangladesh's current position and future direction. He also expressed his gratitude to the audience for their engaging questions and comments, noting that their participation had made the discussion lively, productive, and forward-looking.

SPEECH BY THE SPECIAL GUEST



Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc, PhD
Principal Staff Officer, Armed Forces Division

Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc, PhD, delivered his speech by reflecting on the theme of the seminar and sharing his analytical perspectives on the evolving geopolitical landscape and its implications for Bangladesh's national security. Started by questioning whether the global community truly possesses a clearly defined geopolitical landscape, he noted that in the contemporary world, national, regional, and global dynamics are deeply interlinked and mutually inclusive. Adopting the concept of 'related geopolitical landscape', he thinks, it better

captures the interconnected and overlapping nature of modern security environments. In today's world, politics often takes precedence over geography, particularly in South Asia. As the pursuit of happiness, peace, and freedom depends on a secure environment, he emphasised the fundamental importance of national security.

Lieutenant General Hassan noted that the scope of national security has expanded beyond traditional notions of military defence, intelligence, and cyber warfare and includes economic, political, environmental, and societal dimensions. The protection of critical infrastructure and public safety has also become integral to modern security strategies. Citing data from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), he mentioned that, globally there are currently around 120 conflicts, including those between Russia and Ukraine, Hamas and Israel, Iran and Israel, and Pakistan and Afghanistan, among others. He questioned whether these should formally be called wars, pointing out that despite the absence of official declarations, continuous operations in the information domain and the development of fifth- and sixth-generation warfare have effectively kept the world in a perpetual state of conflict. Many of these confrontations, he noted, involve both state and non-state actors and are heavily influenced by information, disinformation, and space-based technologies.

Discussing great power competition, Lieutenant General Hassan analysed the strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean, and South Asian regions. He stated that Bangladesh is not immune to the challenges posed by this competition. With China consolidating its geopolitical influence in Asia and the United States and its allies advancing Indo-Pacific strategies, a policy of containment is taking shape globally. He explained that Bangladesh currently maintains an observer's stance and will determine its future position based on national convenience and strategic priorities. Drawing from his recent visits to international

defence forums, he illustrated how both the US and China are expanding their influence through large-scale diplomatic and defence engagements. He also commented on the regional frameworks, observing that ASEAN appears reluctant to engage deeply in South Asian affairs, while organisations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and IORA have not been able to produce substantial outcomes for Bangladesh. He emphasised the importance of prudence, **foresight**, and balance in navigating these complex challenges while safeguarding national interests and promoting regional peace.

Turning to emerging technologies, Lieutenant General Hassan identified drone technologies, low-cost innovations, information warfare, cyber operations, and increasing involvement of private enterprises in modern conflicts as transformative developments. He referred to the use of Starlink and private defence contractors as examples of non-state participation in warfare. He emphasised that these technological changes will shape Bangladesh's strategic thinking and defence planning in the future. He noted that smaller forces have increasingly demonstrated resilience against superior powers, citing lessons from conflicts such as those in Gaza and between Azerbaijan and Armenia. He also emphasised the importance of developing technological capabilities, including space technology, to counter misinformation and disinformation effectively. Focusing on Bangladesh, he highlighted the country's unique location between South and Southeast Asia and its proximity to nations of diverse faiths. He remarked that while Bangladesh's geographic position is often described as an asset, it could quickly become a liability if not managed wisely. Bangladesh must engage with its neighbours, both large and small, on an equal footing, guided by prudence and national interest. Reflecting on regional security, he cited the example of India and Pakistan to illustrate how nuclear-armed states can engage each other and their complex relationship can rapidly escalate into conflict. He also drew attention to growing competition between Western and Chinese technologies and the use of non-military mechanisms to exert strategic pressure.

Labelling the Rohingya crisis as Bangladesh's most persistent security challenge since independence, Lieutenant General Hassan opined that Myanmar's internal conflict continues to intensify, with the Arakan Army gaining control over large parts of Rakhine State and relying on drug trafficking and arms smuggling for resources. This has led to cross-border issues, including abductions of Bangladeshi fishermen and threats to maritime security. Both the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) are viewed unfavourably by the Arakan Army, further complicating the situation. Among Myanmar's three key stakeholders—the National Unity Government, the military junta, and the Arakan Army, he identified the last one as the most hostile towards the Rohingya. He emphasised the need for Bangladesh to engage regional and international partners in the pursuit of a durable solution while safeguarding its own national interests.

While discussing the internal and non-traditional threats, Lieutenant General Hassan noted that external and domestic challenges are now closely intertwined and referred to recent armed group activities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. He also mentioned environmental issues, including rising sea levels and salinity, as growing threats to national security. He reaffirmed that Bangladesh has always sought peace and stability as the foundation of its development. However, he emphasised that peace is not automatic and must be achieved through effort, dialogue, preparedness, and a unified purpose. Emphasising the importance of

bringing greater clarity to Bangladesh’s national security strategy, foreign policy, and military diplomacy in the coming years, he advocated for moving towards a more specific and defined axis of cooperation based on mutual benefit and national interest. Quoting Deng Xiaoping’s maxim, “Build your strength and bide your time,” he suggested that Bangladesh should focus first on intangible capacity-building and gradually develop tangible strength.

In conclusion, Lieutenant General Hassan emphasised the importance of political will in enhancing national security, noting that some countries with lower GDPs have developed more advanced security infrastructures than Bangladesh. He emphasised the need for stronger civilian governance and oversight of both civil and military bureaucracies to ensure a coherent national security framework. He also called for the enhancement of indigenous defence industries and investment in advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, robotics, human–machine integration, and space systems, to achieve greater self-reliance. Finally, he reaffirmed that peace and security should be achieved not only through friendship but also through strength. He concluded by emphasising the importance of combining hard and soft power while fostering partnerships based on national interests, patriotism, mutual respect, and dignity.

SPEECH BY THE CHIEF GUEST



Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc

Honorable Adviser

Ministry of Shipping and Ministry of Labour and Employment

Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc delivered his speech by emphasising the significance of the topic under discussion and sharing his insights on Bangladesh's geopolitical realities and strategic positioning. He explained that geography largely determines a nation's strategy and behaviour, influencing its national, military, and economic policies. Referring to Tim Marshall's concept of being 'prisoners of geography', he noted that while geography constrains

nations, strategic wisdom allows them to play their cards effectively. He agreed with Major General Akbar's identification of three cardinal factors for Bangladesh and rejected the notion that Bangladesh is a small country. Drawing on his recent experiences abroad, he noted that Bangladeshi workers are making significant contributions to the development of the Middle East. He cited examples from a labour conference in the region, the Arafat Market in Dubai, where a majority of shops are owned by Bangladeshis, and the stadium construction in Qatar for the FIFA World Cup, where Bangladeshi labour played a pivotal role. He stressed that such contributions reflect Bangladesh's strength as a nation of 160 million people whose citizens are helping to rebuild other parts of the world.

Brigadier General (Retd) Sakhawat further noted that Bangladesh's population is not only large but also cohesive, with around 98 to 99 per cent sharing a common language, food habits, and cultural practices. This social uniformity shapes the nation's politics, where it is often difficult for one party to think beyond the established pattern of another. Around sixty per cent of Bangladesh's population is under the age of forty years, which is a major national asset. The younger generation, particularly Generation Z, views national progress differently; they do not bear the emotional or historical burdens of 1971 and wish to build a forward-looking country.

Addressing the issue of political grievances and human rights, Brigadier General (Retd) Sakhawat remarked that many citizens have long sought justice for the disappearance or death of loved ones without receiving answers. Such incidents have degraded the nation's moral standing. He argued that uniformed personnel have sometimes been portrayed as villains for actions they did not initiate themselves, arguing that political decisions have often been responsible.

On regional geopolitics, the Honourable Adviser rejected the idea that Bangladesh could think in isolation. He argued that the subcontinent’s geopolitics are deeply interdependent, and instability in one part inevitably affects others. If any state in South Asia becomes unstable, the rest of the region, including Bangladesh, becomes vulnerable as well. Referring to the presence of nuclear-armed neighbours such as India, Pakistan, and China, he warned that even a limited nuclear conflict would have catastrophic consequences for the entire region. He asserted that Bangladesh’s foreign policy must prioritise maintaining balanced relations with all countries without compromising national interests. Citing an example of post-August 5th, 2024, he mentioned that Bangladesh did not close its borders at Benapol or Bhomra despite trade challenges and remained pragmatic in its approach. He argued that Bangladesh cannot afford to adopt a confrontational foreign policy and must evolve strategies that ensure national survival and growth. He urged political leaders to think collectively rather than along partisan lines, taking lessons from nations that act as unified entities while addressing internal differences. He stated that his foremost concern is Bangladesh’s national interest and that cooperation with others is welcomed when it serves that purpose. Mentioning his current involvement with the shipping ministry, he noted that maritime affairs are closely linked to regional geopolitics. He reiterated that Bangladesh is not against any country and seeks to flourish through cooperation and friendship. Hostility, he remarked, ultimately harms those who initiate it, not Bangladesh, which remains a resilient nation.

Concluding his address, Brigadier General (Retd) Sakhawat turned to the Rohingya crisis, which he has studied since 1992. He observed that Bangladesh has not handled the issue prudently and still lacks a clear policy direction. He mentioned, the Rohingya belong to Myanmar and must eventually return there, as permanent settlement in Bangladesh is unsustainable. He also cautioned against ignoring the Arakan Army, which represents local interests in Rakhine State and remains a significant factor in the region. Emphasising mutual dependence, he noted that Bangladesh is Myanmar’s only neighbouring country with a shared border, highlighting the importance of preparing for future diplomatic and security challenges with this neighbour.



VOTE OF THANKS



**Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP,
awc, afwc, psc, PEng**
Director General, BISS

Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng started by saying it was his distinct honour and privilege to extend a vote of thanks on behalf of the organisers, the Armed Forces Division, BISS, and to everyone who contributed to making the seminar a success.

Major General Iftekhar conveyed deepest gratitude to the Chief Guest, Brigadier General (Retd) Dr M Shakhawat Hussain, Honourable Adviser to the Ministry of Shipping and the Ministry of Labour and Employment, for his insightful remarks, which has enriched the day's discussion and provided valuable guidance in understanding the evolving geopolitical realities and their implications for Bangladesh's security landscape. He also extended sincere appreciation to the Special Guest, Lieutenant General S M Kamrul Hassan, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc, PhD, Principal Staff Officer, Armed Forces Division, for his thoughtful observations and encouragement to explore strategic foresight in shaping national and regional security approaches.

The Director General mentioned that the organisers were deeply grateful to the respected moderator, Ambassador M Humayun Kabir; the keynote speaker, Professor A S M Ali Ashraf, PhD; and the esteemed panellists, Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas and Professor Dr Shahab Enam Khan, for their scholarly analyses, which has greatly enhanced the depth and quality of the day's deliberations. Special appreciation was also extended to the participants for their prudent interventions.

Finally, Major General Iftekhar emphasised that as the seminar concluded, everyone should carry forward the insights and ideas shared during the sessions and work collectively to ensure that Bangladesh remained secure, resilient, and proactive in navigating the evolving national, regional, and geopolitical environment. The speaker ended by thanking everyone once again for their gracious presence and participation.

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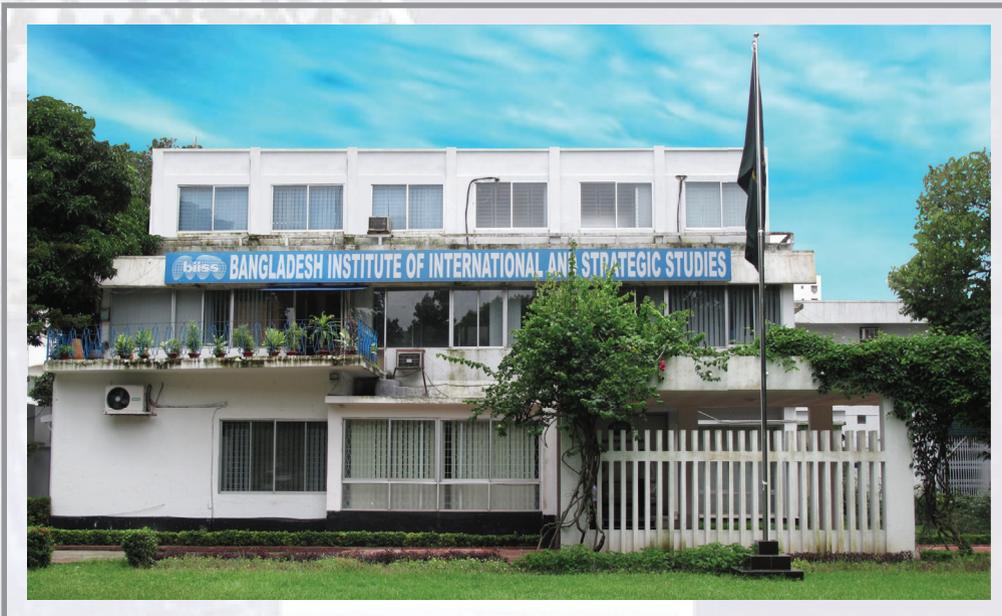
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