

# **Bangladesh in a Twenty-First Century Turbulent Multipolar World: The Usage of Open-Source Geopolitical Intelligence**

## **1.1 Introduction**

Beijing and Washington's rivalry is transforming global political into a multipolar world order. China's rise has been instrumental in shaping the global world order by intentionally or unintentionally challenging the hegemonic posture of the US. The US, trying to retain the post-Cold War unipolar world order, is overtly trying to challenge the rise of China. The US-China rivalry has not even left behind the South Asian region. South Asia, which has its regional power aspirant to be a great power; India, has turned the region into a theatre of strategic triangular competition along with the US and China. The global and regional power rivalry has turned the region into a battle of competing visions with varying ideologies for regional and global world orders. The strategic triangular relations are rewriting new trade, investment, development and security patterns in South Asia. Just like during the Cold War era, the return of the great power rivalry has placed a developing country like Bangladesh with a completely new set of challenges. As Bangladesh so far has shown its merit in managing global and regional power rivalry, Dhaka is attracting greater geopolitical attention. Bangladesh's vital geostrategic position in the Indian Ocean makes the country more important among regional and extra-regional powers. However, as global and regional power rivalry is getting more intense, even countries like Bangladesh, which prefers a neutral position, face multifarious navigation challenges. Unlike existing literature on the choices available and how Bangladesh behaves in the geopolitical tide, this article introduces how Open-Source Geopolitical Intelligence can help Dhaka in geopolitical turbulence. This article contributes by introducing the usage and applicability of open-source intelligence (OSINT) in the study of geopolitics for Bangladesh. This is qualitative research, and the data collection methods are through secondary literature, documents, and expert interviews (three).

## **1.2 Sino-American Rivalry: Asia the Theater of Great Power Competition**

The rise of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) as a potential candidate to challenge the United States-led western dominance and orders is a sign of a return to the great power competition in the 21st century. The US-China ties are facing the most challenging times during the "Asian Century" (Woetzel & Seong, 2019). As the centre of gravity of power competition has moved toward Asia, more certainly to the Indo-Pacific region, it has turned out to be the

theatre of major power competition. Despite strong interdependency and established cooperation mechanisms, the United States and China are locked in a competitive relationship (Pillsbury, 2016). China is challenging the US dominance in all possible ways via trade policies, promoting a state-driven market economy, military modernisation, shifts in foreign policy in the South and the East China Sea, and technological advancements. The US, afraid of slowly losing its hegemonic position, is also overtly responding to China. President Donald Trump's administration has labelled China as a 'strategic competitor' and 'revisionist power' on their National Security Strategy 2017 (The White House, 2017). While the US Defense Strategy 2018 mentioned that the US is facing 'great power competition' with China (Department of Defense, 2018), and in 2019 US Department of Treasury referred China as a 'currency manipulator' (US Department of the Treasury, 2019).

With its exceptional economic growth, China reflects the change in attitude from the post-Cold War 'cooperative-competitive' nature to 'confrontationist-competitive' (Panda, 2018). Along with its rise, China has demonstrated its desire to challenge the existing international orders and its status quo mostly with its China-centred financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, the National Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Development Bank. The rise of China challenges the vital fundamental component of the US-led western world. Besides its desire to reshape global economic governance, China's military modernisation and increased military presence has become a grave concern for the US.

While speaking of China's rise regionally or globally in the twenty-first century, one definitely cannot avoid the aspect of China's grand strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI is also likely to have an impact on China's relations, and connectivity with Eurasia ultimately has a transformative impact on the global economy, determining its position in comparison to other competing actors like the US, Japan, Australia, United Kingdom or even India. With the help of BRI China has established an alternative model of development for the developing world compared to preexisting Western models. China's foreign policy in the twenty-first century intentionally or unintentionally challenges the US dominance and hegemony mostly in Asia. Feeling uncomfortable, different US administrations have taken up different strategic policies, such as the 'Asia Pivot' of Obama administration, 'Free and Open Indo Pacific' Strategy of Donald Trump administration and 'Free and Open Indo Pacific 2' strategy of Biden administration, which also have intensified the Sino-US relationship.

Analysing these policies reflects that the US is slowly taking hardline approaches to counter China over time.

US-China rivalry is no longer confined into speculative ideas and its leaders' speeches; it has become a game of competitive strategies. Such ambitious competing strategies have potential to spark conflicts (Heiduk, 2021). US-led alliance-based response to China's geopolitical ambition has been to re-initiate the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (often known as QUAD). Such multilateral-based security framework-based cooperation of the US and its likely-minded partners seeks a stronger and coordinated response from democracies to authoritarian China in the Indo-Pacific region. Also, the US led the G7 initiative of the 'Build Back Better World' (B3W) initiative, which is an attempt of major democracies to form a targeted alliance against PRC BRI, which they claim possesses a deep concern over international rule-based orders. QUAD which consists of four members (Australia, United States, Japan and India) is considered as a neo-Asian NATO by PRC. Similarly, AUKUS- a trilateral security partnership formed in 2021 between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom is motivated to act as a counter balancing force against the PRC.

Another flashpoint between the Sino-US relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is regarding the question of Republic of China (ROC) often known as Taiwan. The Taiwan issue is one of the few issues which has the potential of conflict between the two superpowers. People's Liberation Army's naval vessels and fighter jets crossing of the unofficial medium line of the Taiwan Strait (not recognised by Beijing), also reflects China's zero tolerance policy toward the question of Taiwan. As Beijing considers Taiwan as a core national interest of sovereignty and territorial integrity it is a non-tradable factor for PRC. In response, the US has also increased its presence on US naval warships in the Taiwan Strait over the last few years. China considers the US warships sailing through the Taiwan Strait a violation of its territorial integrity and a departure from the US's One China Policy. Based on The Taiwan Relations Act, the US has continued to supply defence equipment to Taipei which also deeply irritates Beijing (Chen, Kastner & Reed, 2017). Slowly over time the US is moving from strategic ambiguity toward the strategic clarity towards Taiwan. The act of Washington shows it is emotionally and ideologically getting attached with Taiwan's democratic development and slowly withdrawing from one-China policy.

The superpower rivalry has led to the breakdown of regular communication between Washington and Beijing. The head-of-state meeting between the US and PRC has become very

infrequent. While it was a practice during President Bush and Obama to continuously engage with their Chinese counterpart, this is no longer the case during President Trump and Biden administrations. While leaders of both superpowers continuously blame each other, diplomatic meetings are mostly a war of words in recent time. The great power competition is turning into a battle of ideology and political systems between the US and China.

### **1.3 The US-China- India the Strategic Tringle: The Case of South Asia**

While India remains as the predominant regional power in South Asia but the increased strategic involvement of distant powers like the US and extra regional power like China have tuned the region into a strategic triangle. India's growing strategic partnership with the US, with a common threat perception towards China reflects that the region is an important theatre of great power competition (Bano 2023). Scholars of China-India relations have argued for long, New Delhi and Beijing are stuck at long-term structural rivalry (Garver, 2002). The dispute of China and India over the border and not having a similar viewpoint toward Tibet led both of the countries toward armed conflict in 1962. Since the early years of 21<sup>st</sup> century, number of military crises have been a negative impact on the political, economic and diplomatic relations between China and India (Mohan & Singh, 2023). While trying to overcome the indifferences, both India and China tried to deepen their strategic relationship through different forums such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) attempting to find alternative world order dominated by the West.

While change in geopolitical scenarios the dynamics of Sino-Indian relationship has also been in flux. The US-China rivalry has led New Delhi and Washington to find strategic convergences and working towards a strategic partnership. The US National Defense Strategy of 2022 mentions "the Department will advance our Major Defense Partnership with India to enhance its ability to deter PRC aggression and ensure free and open access to the Indian Ocean region." However, India does not tend to share an exact same view toward China as Washington. As a regional middle power, New Delhi has shown some strategic autonomy in decision making and not always aligning with Washington. An example would be here how India silent towards Mosco's aggression towards Ukraine and remained neutral during Russian invasion of Ukraine (Bano, 2023). China's being a major arms supplier to South Asian states creates panic and anxiety to India. China also supports Pakistan in all possible ways with an aim to counterbalance the growing India-US partnership.

The US and India has different intension to bond with each other but have a common security threat perception towards China. China's growing development and security partnership with India's immediate neighbours influences New Delhi's strategic thinking and policies (Tourangbam, 2023). While the US is interested in South Asia as China increasing its footprint in the region which impacts it Indo-Pacific vision (Tourangbam and Sharma 2022). There has been a concern that India is investing too much of its energy and resource in finding a mutual ground with the US which is not strategically beneficial. However, the Sino-American great power competition in a way allows India to have greater influence and voice over the South Asian region and even sometimes show agency to alter US views over the South Asian region.

Unlike the Cold War era, when Russian and American economy were not interdependent, the 21<sup>st</sup> century geoeconomics are not that simple anymore. The economic interdependency creates a complex situation for the US-China-India triangular strategic relations. The economic interdependency arises the question of how these three countries navigates the imperative of economics and overcome the security dilemmas (Tourangbam, 2023). The economic outlook reflects it is almost impossible to decouple anyone from the strategic triangles. Other South Asian countries also face the similar challenge in navigating their economic policies as they seem to be locked in the complex interdependence within the strategic triangle US-China-India. Therefore, it is unlikely to expect other South Asian states to choose any one over the other. However, undoubtedly the domestic determinants play a crucial role on how the countries in South Asia such as Pakistan, Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan navigate among the geopolitics of strategic triangles.

China's increasing economic and development footprint deeply worries India. China's infrastructural development project in South Asia set off an alarm bell for India (Stacey, 2018). According to Indian point of view, BRI is nothing just Chinese mechanism of increasing natural sphere of influence (Chakma 2022). Beside Pakistan, China has also heavily invested in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka which India thinks as a tailormade approach to contain new Delhi at its own region. Beijing's significant investment to counter such Chinese presence, India recalculated it diplomatic engagement in South Asia by adopting 'neighbourhood first strategy'. Since the increase of China's presence in South Asia, India has been active in offering generous economic incentives to neighbouring countries. Despite this has not been so easy to hedge among Sino-Indian rivalry, but surely this provides a lot more alternative to choose for

smaller South Asian states. Each smaller states of the region continues to employ different engagement strategy to maintain their ties within this India-China-US strategic triangle.

#### **1.4 Bangladesh in the Geopolitical Chessboard**

Bangladesh, which is in a very strategically important location in South Asia and connects to the broader Indo-Pacific region, has already attracted significant geopolitical importance. Bangladesh tries to use China's BRI for its economic and infrastructural development while balancing its relations with its immediate neighbour-India, and a distant great power- the US. Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook reflects its desperation to maintain neutrality and use economic advantage whenever possible. Hossain (2022, P.1) mentions "being a rising regional economic powerhouse, Bangladesh's economy can act as a weapon that enables it to assert that it has the right to choose amongst competing interests, based on its own priorities, vision and need". An example of Bangladesh's geopolitical significance is how the country was considered for inclusion in BRICS in 2023, a leading global South block. Bangladesh has gained geopolitical significance mostly due to its importance in the global economy and strategic calculative geopolitical moves. Competing rivalry with the struggle to influence has made emerging economies like Bangladesh to perform a delicate balancing act (Hossain, 2023).

Bangladesh, which has slowly started to defy being tagged as a small state with greater investment, development partnerships, and strategic collaboration with superpowers and middle powers. Frequent visits of high-ranked government officials, particularly from the US and China, reflects that Bangladesh has become a hotspot of great power rivalry. Bangladesh's success is based on establishing good relationships with different countries and major powers based on a policy of peace and non-alignment (Haque and Lau, 2023). Many other parts of the world, including developed countries, are deeply impacted by global events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Russian-Ukraine crisis allowed Bangladesh to demonstrate its neutral position without choosing a side. Undoubtedly, Bangladesh's move was not much welcomed by the US and its Western allies. However, while practising the culture of autonomy, Dhaka should not frustrate any of its export destination countries like the US and EU. According to M Touhid Hossain(former foreign secretary of Bangladesh) "China, India can't replace our export market to the US, EU" (The Daily Star, 2023). Bangladesh is an export-oriented and remittance-based economy, so any major impact on either one might severely hurt its economic security. Apart from the economic dimension, Bangladesh needs assistance of the US and the West, like in issues such as the Rohingya refugee crisis and climate change. Despite China

made numerous assurances to help Bangladesh in repatriating the Rohingya refugees, this is yet to see any light of success. It is probably the impact of global geopolitics which is restricting the PRC to do more in resolving the Rohingya problem as promised.

One of the basis of Bangladesh's decision-making relates that Dhaka also does not want to upset the China-Russian camp. China enormously contributes to Bangladesh's socioeconomic and infrastructure development, and Mosco has been Dhaka's trusted friend since 1971. According to Abdul Momen, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, " If you want to beat China, come with basket of money and affordable proposals" (The Financial Express, 2023). The growing Bangladesh-China relation often make India anxious. When Bangladesh bought two submarines from the PRC, India took it as a grave concern for New Delhi's security (Bhattacharjee, 2018). New Delhi realised the necessity to further enhance defence and security cooperation during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India when both neighbours signed multiple defence agreements and MoU's. Also, defence partnership between Bangladesh and the US has also continued to grow (Morsalin & Hannan, 2022). The US has also shown keen interest in expanding the defence and security collaboration with Bangladesh by signing the Acquisitions and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). However, Bangladesh does not want to sign these agreements before the upcoming Bangladesh national elections 2024 (Dhaka Tribune, 2023).

With Bangladesh's upcoming national election and proceeding to an uncertain time, the geopolitics interplay has just become more intense. Dhaka does not welcome the US involvement in Bangladesh's domestic politics and affairs. Bangladesh was invited by the Biden administration's summit for democracy in 2021 and 2023 (The Daily Star, 2023). However, this has not stopped Bangladesh and the US from cooperating in numerous areas, such as the US-Bangladesh security dialogue and bilateral trade and investment cooperation forum. The US' new visa policy, declared in May 2023 to support fair elections in Bangladesh, can also be broadly analysed as another US strategic geopolitical move. AK Abdul Momen, Bangladeshi Foreign Minister about US Visa policy, mentioned, "As a global power, they, of course, can exercise power over others, but we are not bothered because we know how to hold an acceptable election" (Aljazeera, 2023). On the other hand, Beijing does not want and opposes any foreign intervention in Bangladesh's national election (ProthomAlo English, 2023). China's political neutrality and non-interference in Bangladesh's domestic politics have always led to positive working relations, whichever government has been in power since the PRC recognised Bangladesh.

Recently, the US is not finding its regional partner India on its side in the case of Bangladesh. New Delhi and Washinton are growing indifferent regarding Bangladesh, reflecting certain limitations of US-India cooperation. India has made it clear to the US that the upcoming election of Bangladesh is a domestic affair, and it is up to the people of Bangladesh to decide (Bdnews24.com, 2023). Also, when Bangladeshi ready-made garments workers took to the streets in protest the declaration of US Presidential Memorandum on "Advancing Worker Empowerment, Rights, and High Labor Standards Globally," can also be seen through the lens of superpower geopolitics. This primary focus of this section was to critically analyses how Bangladesh is placed at the forefront of the triangular geopolitics.

### **1.5 Surviving the Geopolitical Turbulence (Way Forward): Using Open-Source Intelligence**

As explained in the previous sections, the geopolitical landscape continuously changes, requiring it to collect and analyse relevant data to make informed decisions. This section explains how using open-source intelligence (OSINT) can help better position Bangladesh in a turbulent geopolitical world. Before looking into the necessity and applicability of open-source geopolitical intelligence for Bangladesh, let us first understand what OSINT is.

According to (Gill, 2023, p.1), OSINT is “intelligence produced by collecting, evaluating and analyzing publicly available information with the purpose of answering a specific intelligence question”. OSINT, as the name suggests, relies on open/publicly available data or sources like social media, news outlets, public records, dark webs, leaked emails, speech, magazines, videos, photos, tv, and satellite imagery to detect emerging trends, patterns, and dynamics. The growth of the internet led to a connectivity revolution with a wide exposition of accessible information (ORF, 2023). Starting from political figures, celebrities, and sports stars, the general population have easy access to the internet, where they frequently intentionally or unintentionally share information that might help them to understand a pattern or trend. By leveraging open sources, OSINT can provide insights into any activity or behaviour of a targeted person, organisation, country or region (interviewee II). OSINT is relatively easier but can be time-consuming without a proper data management plan due to the vast amount of data availability. Unlike academic research, which takes much time, one prime advantage of OSINT is that it can produce information quickly and spontaneously (interviewee I). OSINT provides the most updated analysed information/data to understand the situation, which can help rational decision-making. According to an ORF (2023, P.14) report, an “open-source information only



becomes intelligence once it is collected, analysed and disseminated in a timely manner”. However, there are certain challenges related to using OSINT, such as credibility issues unless analysed by trained professionals. It also requires continuous, almost 24/7 tracking and monitoring of websites, social media, speeches, and other sources (interviewee II). Accessing satellite imagery and analysis tools are not often publicly available and require costly subscriptions.

Let's look into how OSINT is useful in geopolitical intelligence. It is often difficult and time-consuming for businesses, investors, and NGOs to have a sound knowledge of global politics. Geopolitical risk assessment can provide insight into how great or regional power rivalry has impacted the trade and commerce of other countries, which can be used to compare and predict the trend for Bangladesh. Risk assessments about the global economy, financial system and the monetary policy of other countries can help to provide some geoeconomic predictions (interviewee I). Collecting information from targeted politicians and countries can also provide some information beforehand about any possible change in regulations, practises, and restrictions to be imposed. OSINT geopolitical intelligence can provide live and updated information about any change in government/ elections, refugee crisis, migration pattern, climate change, ongoing war or any major global event like the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Beside domestic factors, it is becoming inevitably important for parliamentarians, local politicians, civil servants, and security personnel to keep up with international politics as Bangladesh is marching towards a middle-income country with more strategic autonomy in its decision-making. Also, businesses must stay updated about risks associated with geopolitics, such as the impact on the pattern of global supply chain and market disruptions. Geopolitical open-source intelligence can also help to connect the dots to social risk. As the West and the US (mostly Bangladesh's export destinations) tend to have certain requirements about environmental compliance and labour/worker safety, using OSINT, it is possible to track the conversation, speech and social media of essential persons or targeted governments to track such policies or regulations. This would allow precautionary measures to be implemented to prevent national interests. Decision makers need timely information and analysis to ensure Bangladesh's economic security and public safety. Geopolitical intelligence not only provides risk assessment but also unlocks the possibility of any future opportunities (interviewee III). Global and regional power rivalry can also provide many benefits, such as more market opportunities for emerging developing economies like Bangladesh. OSINT's geopolitical

intelligence can unpack more business and commerce opportunities from emerging in the multipolar world.

In any given state, policymakers and government operate and implement policies in the national interest. Undoubtedly, the security agencies of a state have the greater responsibility of keeping the state and government informed about anything relevant to statecraft. Often, a good portion of government officials, non-state actors, businesspersons, journalists, academics, and even some policymakers cannot access intelligence collected by the state's security agencies due to maintaining secrecy. However, given that we are already in the age of digitalisation, technology, and transformation, the turbulent geopolitical world impacts every part of the world, and Bangladesh is no exception. In a globalised and interdependent world, each stakeholder, even non-state actors, has their own or collective role during the global power transition. Sooner or later, Bangladesh must adopt the practice where the state and non-state actors widely use OSINT to make informed decisions. Policy community and businesspersons often do not have time to read detailed academic work or think tank reports. However, these stakeholders must be well informed about the changes in the geopolitical landscape so they can make the correct decisions at the right time. As Bangladesh is an export-oriented and remittance-based economy, relevant stakeholders in Bangladesh can significantly benefit from being accustomed to use OSINT (interviewee II). This in no way means to downgrade the need and usage of traditional forms of intelligence gathering but calls on how the usage of OSINT can greatly benefit policymakers, businesses, banks, and financial institutes, which has been common practice among many developed countries in recent times.

In the 21st century, as economics and geopolitics are interdependent, companies have emerged to meet such needs. A UK-based company like IHS Markit Ltd is an excellent example of how it provides analysis and solutions between financial markets and politics using OSINT (ORF, 2023). Also, specialised American-based BlackRock provides investment advisory and risk management suggestions based on OSINT (ORF, 2023). Initially, Bangladesh might depend on such professional OSINT intel providers, but sooner, local OSINT companies might be much more beneficial. Even world-leading defence and security think tanks like the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI) and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) use OSINT to maintain databases and track military developments worldwide (interviewee III). It is time for Bangladesh to adapt to challenges emerging from 21st-century geopolitics with relevant solutions.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

In the twenty-first century, the US-China strategic competition has become more intense. The deteriorating trust, mutual respect, and cordial relationship between the two superpowers have been challenging for themselves and other middle and smaller powers. Besides the superpowers, the multipolar world order has provided regional middle powers like India to compete with China and sometimes disagree with the US. With China and India's varying interests and views, the South Asian region is a great theatre of global and regional power rivalry. All these have made South Asia's small states, such as Bangladesh, face complex challenges in navigating their foreign policy. Despite Bangladesh's diplomatic maturity, it is becoming difficult for Bangladesh to uphold its foreign policy principle, 'Friendship to all, malice to none'. With such problems at this backdrop, a developing country like Bangladesh must adopt the solutions required in a digitalised world of the Internet of things (IoT). Therefore, this article proposes that it is important for Bangladesh's state and non-state actors to adopt open-source geopolitical intelligence to survive the geopolitical turbulence. This article makes a policy-relevant recommendation that the usage and applicability of open-source intelligence (OSINT) for Bangladesh is necessary in a time of intense regional and global power rivalry.

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