

The U.S War on Terrorism and Its Implications for Bangladesh's Politics and Bangladesh-U.S Bilateral Relations in the Twenty First Century

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Abstract

Bangladesh-United States bilateral relations had always been a manifestation of the willingness of both countries to adjust to changing global environment. Bangladesh and the United States have strong commitment to combating and preventing the spread of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization in Bangladesh as well as South Asia. As we know, small countries like Bangladesh usually want to stay with a powerful bloc for security and economic development. Since the present world is economically and politico-strategically a 'modified-multi polar' one, leaning too much toward a particular bloc is quite risky. Considering this reality, the politics of Bangladesh gave birth to numerous events like, security issues, regimes change, 1/11 event, relation with regional power like India, China and so on and took a new turn in her relationship with the United States in light of 'War on Terrorism'. The purpose of this paper is to understand the implication of US policy of 'War on Terrorism' on Bangladesh politics. It also analyzes the changing nature of Bangladesh-US relations in the twenty first century. The paper has adopted qualitative method to scrutinize the data. The paper suggests that the U.S' policy of War on Terrorism has made a deep imprint on Bangladesh's domestic politics and U.S-Bangladesh bilateral relations. The anti-terrorism policy put strain on Bangladesh's democracy for almost two decades.

Keywords: *War on Terrorism; Bangladesh Politics; Bangladesh-U.S relations; Continuity; Change*

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Introduction

Bangladesh-US relationship is multifaceted. Both countries share some common visions like anti-terrorism, democracy, economic liberalization, human rights and so on. At the beginning of the 21st century, War against Terrorism became one of the most significant issues in the Bangladesh-U.S relations. This paper is about the nature of the Bangladesh-U.S relationship in the context of the War on Terrorism.

The American and pro-Western scholars, attached great importance to the Islamists since the United States emerged as the world's only super power in the post-cold war era. Samuel P. Huntington, a famous political scientist, in his book 'The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order' (Huntington, 1996) had predicted clash between Islamic and Christian civilizations to be the main feature of the future world politics. Such anti-Islamic attitude and fear of Islam (Islamophobia) got momentum when the 9/11 incident took place in September, 2001. The perception of 'anti-Muslim attitude' was also nurtured by some powerful policy advisers and political scientists such as, the then Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, President George W. Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice and others. Together, they were called the Neo-conservatives (the neo cons). They occupied the key positions in the Bush administration who had chalked out a grand strategy of establishing a US-dominated international system or U.S global hegemony in the 21st century (Esposito, 1999; Kabir et. al, 2014, p. 23). U.S President George W. Bush declared 'crusade' against Islamic terrorism called 'War on Terrorism'. This policy became a dominant instrument of the United States in her attempts to establish unipolar system. The Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh like, Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) etc. began to raise their heads in the first half of the 1990s had undergone several transformations. It should be mentioned that the presence of Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh dates back to the late 1980s, when approximately 3,000 Bangladeshis reportedly left for Afghanistan to join the US-Saudi-sponsored anti-Soviet Jihad (Riaz, 2012). As Bangladesh was receiving approximately 15% of its bilateral development assistance from the US in the 1980s (Fair & Abdalla, 2017), Bangladeshi authorities were lenient on their nationals to join the anti-Soviet Jihad (Fair & Abdalla, 2017). Equipped with the knowledge of insurgent warfare and Jihadist ideology acquired during their stay in Afghanistan, the Bangladeshi Afghan veterans had established their own Islamist insurgent groups in their homeland, Bangladesh, in order to materialize their dream of making an Islamic revolution in Bangladesh. The Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B), formally founded in 1992 with some funds from Al-Qaeda and led by Afghanistan veterans like Maulana Fazl-ur Rehman, Mufti Abdur Rouf, Mowlana Abdus Salam, Aatur Rahman Khan, Mufti Sheikh Abdul Hannan and others. With the aim of transforming Bangladesh into an Islamic state, the HUJI-B carried out some of the Islamist terrorist activities in

the country (Kabir, 2006, p. 204; Bari, 2003). Originally, manned by the volunteers/Mujahids who joined the Afghan Jihad against Soviet occupation as part of establishing global 'khilafat' pursuing a circumscribed local agenda for a period in the early 2000s. These groups have since taken different shapes (Kabir, 2006, p. 36-38; Riaz, 2016). For instance, the 1993 death threat against the feminist author Taslima Nasreen was attributed to HUJI-B. Another homegrown Bangladesh-based militant group, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) was formed in 1996 and began to recruit, train, raise funds and mobilize members across the northern and southern regions of the country. Ali Riaz argues that while the Bangladeshi Islamist Militants originally emerged to fight for the global agenda of fighting 'an atheist' Communist system [Soviet Union], of late, their goals were shifted to the establishment of the so-called global Caliphate by joining transnational organizations such as Islamic State (IS) (Riaz, 2016). Their dream of establishing a Sharia-based governance system faced challenges from both the domestic and external forces at the beginning of the 21st century. Most important challenges against the Bangladeshi Islamists came from the U.S strategic decision to fight against "Islamic" terrorism and her secularizing allies within Bangladesh. Unfortunate implication of these strategies for Bangladesh was the shrinking of democratic space in the name of war on terrorism for almost two decades.

In such a context, Bangladesh politics gave birth to numerous events and the Bangladesh-US relationship took a new turn. The U.S policy of war on terrorism made a "paradigm shift" in Bangladeshis domestic politics and the Bangladesh-U.S bilateral relations. Although, there are good amount of polemical writings on the issue, there is a dearth of academic works linking the impact of U.S policy of counter-terrorism to Bangladesh's domestic politics and Bangladesh-U.S bilateral relations in the 21st century.

Thus, this paper has set its goal is to understand the implication of U.S policy of 'War on Terrorism' for Bangladesh politics. It also tries to analyze the changing nature of US policy towards Bangladesh and Bangladesh-US relation with the changes of regimes in Bangladesh; the BNP-led 4-party nationalist-Islamist alliance regime during 2001-2006, the Soft-pro-Indian and pro-Western Emergency Regime during 2007-2008 and the Awami Legue-led re-secularizing and de-Islamizing regime during 2009-2024. This paper has set the following research questions:

1. How did the 9/11 change the U.S foreign Policy?
2. What was the impact of U.S policy of 'War on Terrorism' on Bangladesh politics?
3. How did the various regimes deal with the issue of 'War on Terrorism' in Bangladesh?

It suggests that the U.S policy of counter-terrorism not only shaped Bangladesh-U.S relations but also Bangladesh's domestic politics as the U.S preferred parties were committed to her policy of war on terror. She also put almost singular emphasis on its strategic interest over its moral aspect like human rights and democracy. Resultantly, this policy of singular focus on war on terror contributed to the lack of human rights and "democratic deficit" for almost two decades in the 21st century.

Methodology

Qualitative method has been employed here to conduct research for this paper. This paper has dealt with the issue of the impact of U.S policy of war on terror on Bangladesh politics and Bangladesh-U.S relations for a specific period from 2001 to 2024. Since the catalysts of Bangladesh-U.S relations and Bangladesh politics are numerous and complex in nature, a qualitative approach is appropriate in identifying the relationships among those catalysts. As a result, numerical methods such as regression or cross tabulation have not been used here. Descriptive and Interpretive approach has been followed here in this research. Content Analysis techniques have been used in this paper in order to understand the issues dealt with in this paper. Various books, Journals and Magazine articles, reports, newspapers and credible online sources have been used for this study.

The U.S War on Terrorism, Its Implications for Bangladesh Politics and U.S-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations in the Twenty First Century

In order to understand the implication of US policy of ‘War on Terrorism’ on Bangladesh politics, here, in this paper, we have attempted to analyze the U.S’ war on terrorism, the changing nature of US policy towards Bangladesh and Bangladesh-US relations with the changes of regimes in Bangladesh.

The U.S War on Terrorism

With the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the world system went through transformation and the United States rose to an unrivalled position to lead the world. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the beginning of a new polar structure, which analyst Charles Krauthammer defined as “The Unipolar Moment” in one of his essays (Rourke, 2005). After the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks, there took place major shift in US foreign policy. President George W. Bush, Jr. responded to the attacks with the declaration of a War on Terror and later enunciated a ‘New National Security Strategy (NNSS)’ in 2002 which came to be known as the ‘Bush Doctrine’ (Sarker, 2023). On 29 January 2002, President Bush in his first State of the Union address elaborated on the Bush Doctrine, which he developed further in his book *Decision Points* (Sarker, 2023). Since then, the United States had adopted the policy and actions of ‘unending war’ against “Islamic” terrorism, known as “War on Terror”. This war was directed not against any specific state; its target could be any undefined and unspecified country, organization, entity or even an individual. However, the crackdown on Islamic militants and stricter policies toward Muslim states were visible. The US placed on the table a clear option for the countries of the world that “either you are with us (in the US war against “Islamic” terrorism) or against us (in the US war against terrorism)” (Kabir, 2006). The traumatic events of 9/11 propelled the US to get deeply involved in South Asia with explicit interests and a new geopolitical vision.

Almost every country supported the US-led “War on Terror”. EU countries changed their domestic and foreign policies to adjust to the goals of the war on terror. Asian countries were not far behind. Various regional organizations such as the EU and NAFTA adopted ‘Counter-terrorism action

plans and security strategies' in the context of the 9/11 events and US policy of War on Terror. They understood that, it would be useful to cooperate with the U.S in efforts countering terrorism. The U.S had publicly shaped all its security measures including the definition of terrorism. Alan Dupont, the former director of Australia's 'Asia-Pacific Security Program' remarked in this regard that, "the way the United States will go, others will follow that way" (Rourke, 2005).

There are two reasons for South Asia, including Bangladesh, became significant for US foreign policy after 9/11. **First**, President George W. Bush's declaration of 'War on Terror' identified South Asia as a major source of threat and this issue re-defined US relations with this region. That led the United States to attempt to bring New Delhi and Islamabad together in a common cause for "the war against terrorism" (Sarker, 2023). The U.S-Western-Indian narrative was that the 9/11 attack was carried out by the Al-Qaeda operatives. Osama Bin Laden, the Al-Qaeda leader (first general emir) and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri resided in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as the "guests" of the Taliban authority. Pakistan was also viewed as "the hub" of Islamist terrorism. US security forces began their invasion of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in 2001 and kept Pakistan on board in that invasion and consequent occupation. This is how the 'War on Terror' came to South Asia. **Second**, the rise of terrorism and terrorist activities in South Asia, especially in Pakistan, along the Afghan border. The 9/11 attacks changed South Asian political contours, altered US perspectives on South Asia, made the previously 'marginalized' Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh the so called 'front-line states' (Kronstadt and Vaughn, 2004). Perhaps for the first time, the United States saw India as increasingly important to its core foreign policy interests leading U.S to bring New Delhi, Islamabad, Kabul and Dhaka together into a common cause for the 'war against terrorism'. The rise of political Islam and terrorism in the name of Islam increased the strategic importance of South Asia at the turn of the 21st century. South Asia became a significant security concern for the US because, for the first time, the region was perceived as a place which could threaten the security of the U.S homeland and its citizens.

The U.S War on Terrorism and BNP-led 4-Party Nationalist-Islamist Alliance Regime: 2001-2006

By the year 2000, when Bill Clinton visited Dhaka as part of his South Asia tour, the Islamic fundamentalism and militancy became a serious security concern for the western countries. Bill Clinton kept himself confined within the US embassy premise in the pretext of threat from the Islamic extremists having connection with Al Qaeda (Mazhar, 2009). Indeed, the secularizing AL-government of Sheikh Hasina published a booklet in 2000, titled, *Democracy Versus Religious Fundamentalism*, to magnify the scary pervasiveness of "Islamic" terrorist threat in Bangladesh (Kabir: 2006, p. 57). The threat was exaggerated perhaps for carrying U.S-Western-Indian favor in the upcoming Sangsad elections to be held in the 2001. Clinton went to India to lay the groundwork for a defense and security agreement among India, the United States, and Israel. His visit resulted in the rapid emergence of new Indo-US-Israel tie (Mazhar, 2009). The Indo-US nuclear deal was also signed at that time. In that process, Bangladesh was pushed into extreme

insecurity. Its influence on the political consciousness of the people and internal politics of Bangladesh was immense. The International Crisis Group (ICG) stated in its report that the “Islamic militant” politics that was growing since 1999 was of different nature than that of the communist challenge (Mazhar, 2009). The strong and politically determined Islamic militancy posed dire consequences. There were evidence of the rise of religious conservatism in Bangladesh. Although the Islamist militants raised their heads in the early 1990s, they emerged as visible as well as credible threat in Bangladesh by the end of the 1990s. In 1991, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia formed the government in an understanding with the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and in 2001, it formed government in Bangladesh with two Islamist parties in its 4-party nationalist-Islamist alliance. In part, the victory of the 4-party alliance in the 8th Sangsad elections was a victory of the “Muslimness” and “territorial-cultural distinctiveness” of Bangladesh (Maniruzzaman, 2001). The BNP-led 4-party alliance government (2001-2006) was initially perceived by the United States as a regime with moderate Muslim credentials (Vaughn, 2007). The AL, pro-AL intellectuals, and media worked to prove that with the BNP-led 4-party alliance government in power with Jamaat and Quomi Madrassa-based Islami Oikkya Jote (IOJ) as its partners, Bangladesh was about to become a Taliban-infested hot-bed of Islamic Militancy . They also portrayed the government as a protector and promoter of the Taliban and all sort of Islamic radicals, which did not respect the religious minority and wished its members to leave Bangladesh (Kabir, 2006, p. 187). On the other hand, IOJ leader Mufti Fazlul Haque Aminee’s remarks, “We are all Taliban, Bangla(desh) will be Afghan(istan)”, indicated their growing strength, confidence and assertiveness. Having been admitted into the ruling coalition and government, Islamic extremists got a greater scope to operate and to become more active and encouraged (Kabir, 2006, p. 203; Sumaiya et.al., 2024). Several incidents of extremist activities made the civil society seriously concerned. Some prominent Bangladeshi newspapers had played the crusaders’ role against the growing power and assertiveness of the Islamist forces (Kabir, 2006, p. 187). So, there was a fundamental change in the attitude of the United States for it brought about a major change in its foreign policy towards South Asia including Bangladesh. When the U.S ambassador Harry K. Thomas came to Bangladesh in 2001, there was a move to include Bangladesh in U.S foreign policy agenda of ‘war against terrorism’. In U.S foreign policy, there was, and still is, an overt suspicion that as an overwhelmingly Muslim-majority country, there always remains a possibility of the rise and proliferation of Islamic terrorism in Bangladesh. In 2002, the Bush administration issued a document, titled, “The National Security of the United States of America” the so called “Bush Doctrine” (Rourke, 2005), which essentially singled out Muslim states for potential terrorist activities. Since India became the closest U.S ally in South Asia, the US started to see the South Asian countries through India’s eyes. In Bertil Lintner’s writing “Beware of Bangladesh: A Cocoon of Terror”, published in *Far Eastern Economic Review* and reported in a serialized article in *The Bangladesh Observer* mentioned about the Islamic Fundamentalism and terrorist syndrome of the BNP-led 4-party government as well as numerous other reports in the domestic press and various activities by the (Hindu, Buddha, Christian Oikkya

Parishad (HBCOP) and AL abroad raising the same issues which, to a certain extent, damaged the reputation of Bangladesh as a Moderate Muslim Democratic Country. These campaigns forced India's Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to send his security advisor, Brijesh Mishra, to Bangladesh in this regard (Linter, 2002; Kabir, 2006, p. 188). As a result, it became suicidal for the BNP-led four party alliance government, as the Bangladesh-India relation was not working well at all during the 4-party alliance government (2001-2006). It seemed the BNP-led four party nationalist-Islamist alliance government came to power in Bangladesh at a 'wrong time' with 'wrong partners' (Kabir, 2006, p. 188). Ten truck-loads of arms smuggling issue, BNP-led government's sheltering of the Indian cessationist ULFA leaders, soft and ambivalent attitude toward the militant Islamists, lack of security of the religious minority etc. made India deeply concerned. India suspected Chinese involvement in providing arms to the Indian separatists through BNP-led government. All these "disturbed" Bangladesh-India relations. Bangladesh began to be suspected as a 'cocoon' of "Islamic Terrorists" like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq (Sumaiya et al., 2024; Karlekar, 2005). When the Islamist parties in Bangladesh demonstrated on the streets against the US invasion of Iraq in early 2003, it added fuel to the fire on the Bangladesh-U.S relationship (Powell, 2003). The convenors of Bangladesh Caucus in the U.S Congress, Benjamin Gilman and Joseph Crowley, visited Bangladesh to see for themselves the validity of the campaigns against BNP-led 4-party government (Kabir, 2006, p. 188). It changed the U.S attitude towards Bangladesh which later adversely affected the BNP-led four-party alliance government. In the 8th parliament elections in 2001, the BNP-led nationalist-Islamist four-party alliance won a huge majority and formed the government in alliance with two Islamist parties (Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote). Two Jamaat leaders, accused and later convicted and executed during the AL-led center-left re-secularizing government (2009-2024) of anti-liberation activities, became cabinet ministers for the first time in the history of Bangladesh. Awami League accused the BNP of rehabilitating anti-liberation and Islamic fundamentalist/militant forces in mainstream politics. This decision of the BNP did not get easy acceptance from the opposition and the civil society of Bangladesh. As the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh is alleged to have links with Pakistan's ISI, the United States became concerned and got somewhat dissatisfied with the BNP government. Before the August 21, 2004 Grenade attack on the opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina's meeting, Bangladesh was not included in the US Central Intelligence Agency-CIA's annual report, titled, 'Patterns of Global Terrorism'. But after that, the US had identified Bangladesh as a 'vulnerable Islamic state' (Karlekar, 2005). The concern arose further with the attack on British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury in Sylhet on May, 21, the grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina's rally on August, 21, Bomb blasts in 63 districts on August 17, 2005. The US State Department's Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, Joseph Cofer Blake, expressed his anxiety and serious concern at a press conference in Dhaka on September 05, 2004. He said that the US was monitoring the possible terrorist activities in Bangladesh (Karlekar, 2005). On January 25, 2005, the then-US ambassador in Dhaka, Harry K Thomas, wrote to Washington, D.C that the government's "inability or unwillingness to solve such

incident [committed in 2004] fuels speculation that the perpetrators, Islamist or otherwise, enjoy political protection” (Sarker, 2023). On February 07 of the same year, Harry K. Thomas met with prime minister Begum Zia and after that in a cable regarding the meeting, he wrote, “We have serious concerns given our experience after the August 21 attack, when the BDG denied ATF consultants’ access to key witnesses and failed to protect the crime scene from severe contamination.” (Sarker, 2023). It also claimed that terrorist attacks on political opponents using local and Pakistan-based militant groups and torture and intimidation using the state machinery, including the army, marked the 2001-2006 tenure of the BNP-led four party alliance government. Many BNP politicians, U.S officials in Dhaka, several international human rights watchdogs and the media at that time pointed finger at the then prime minister’s son and heir-apparent Tarique Rahman and his office-based ‘Hawa Bhaban’ clique (Choudhury, 2023). Former U.S ambassador, James F Moriarty, said that “Notorious for flagrantly and frequently demanding bribes in connection with government procurement actions and appointment to political office, Tarique is a symbol of kleptocratic government and violent politics in Bangladesh” (Choudhury, 2023). The religiously-motivated violence peaked on 17 August 2005, when Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), exploded 459 synchronized bombs in 63 of Bangladesh’s 64 districts in order to push for the adoption of Sharia Law (Fair & Abdallah, 2017).

From the 1990s, Bangladeshi newspapers were constantly reporting on the rise of Islamic militancy. It is true that some of the operatives of these militant organizations had combat experience in Afghanistan and Palestine and were trained in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya and/or Palestine. Although many of these operatives had alleged links to Osama bin Laden, there is no conclusive evidence of al-Qaeda operating inside Bangladesh (Ali, 2006). Before the formation of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in 2003 as a special Law and Order Organization, the BNP government launched “Operation Clean Heart”, a ruthless joint drive by the troops from October 17, 2002 to January 9, 2003. After the formation of RAB upon the suggestion of the US, it conducted operations called ‘Spider Web’. The operation ‘Spider Web’ was mainly conducted in the South-Western part of the country dominated by the renegade guerrillas of some degenerated “leftist” parties (Ali, 2006). As a result of massive government drive, Islamic militants like Mufti Sheikh Abdul Hannan, Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiquil Islam alias Bangla Bhai were arrested in March, 2006, and the activities of the militant networks of the JMB and the HUJI-B were severely disrupted. Despite this, the opposition AL leader Sheikh Hasina had stated “militants are partners of the government...the government captures a few militants whenever foreign guests visit Bangladesh.” She also alleged that Jamaat had 15,000 guerillas and its own training camps. She also stated that the arrest of some JMB operatives was “only the tip of the iceberg” (Hindustan Time, 2006).

It appeared that the government shifted its position; by August 2005, it felt the heat to acknowledge and address Islamist militant issues. In response, JMB leader Rahman reportedly remarked, “masks will fall and you [implying the authorities] will be exposed” (Agence France Press: 2006). Such

an allegation is consistent with allegations by the AL leaders. Selig Harrison, a prominent South Asian analyst noted in August 2006 that “a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement linked to al-Qaeda and Pakistani intelligence agencies is steadily converting the strategically located nation of Bangladesh into a new regional hub for terrorist operations that reach into India and Southeast Asia”. He also pointed out that the then prime minister Khaleda Zia’s BNP’s coalition with Jamaat led to a “Faustian bargain” that has brought Jamaat officials into the government. Those officials, in turn allowed Taliban-styled squads to operate with increasing impunity. (Harrison, 2006).

Since the U.S State Department took all sorts of measures the BNP began to take important steps in countering extremism in Bangladesh. Of all terrorist types, the ‘Islamic’ terrorism and/or Islamic extremism became the most serious concern of the US policy of ‘War on Terror’. War on terror was directed exclusively against these “Islamic” terrorism. As a result, the BNP-led four party alliance’s “moderate Muslim” identity got compromised due to its mismanagement of the militancy issue. On the other hand, many still believe that the terrorist attacks in Bangladesh in 2005-2006 were used against the BNP government as well as against Bangladesh as a Muslim Majority country (Begum, 2015). Another aspect of the terrorism issue should not be neglected which is the issue of terrorism and fight against terrorists gave the United States the opportunity to further penetrate countries through different anti-terror agreements and agencies in order to ensure training of and cooperation with law-enforcing agencies of many countries (Begum, 2015).

The U.S War on Terrorism and “Soft” Pro-Indian and Pro-Western Emergency Regime: 2007-2008

Bangladesh politics took a new turn with the declaration of the state of emergency and the installation of the military-backed government on January 11, 2007 known as the 1/11. Many Bangladeshi experts think that, it was an attempt by the United States and the EU to install an obedient non-political government in Bangladesh very much in the style of the Karzai government in Afghanistan. It was a disguised military coup which took Bangladesh under a very restrictive emergency rule for two years and most politicians were put in jail. Bangladesh at that time was compared to a huge prison where the whole population was imprisoned (Begum, 2015). Ali Riaz said that ‘while the BNP government was in power, neither the BNP nor the coalition government was in any way a buffer force against terrorism. There was the lack of understanding of the role of BNP-led coalition government in sustaining US interests in the war on terror, attempts to propagate and establish through academia and the media, the subsequent correlation of international equations with local politics, are ample reasons to believe that 1/11 was a result of the superpower’s intention to search for allies for the war on terror’ (Riaz, 2008; Sumaiya et al: 2024). Some argue that the emergency regime (2007-2008) and the subsequent Awami League’s Center-left-re-secularizing and de-Islamizing regime (2009-2024) came to and stayed in power to recalibrate Bangladesh’s domestic politics and Bangladesh-U.S bilateral relations in line with U.S policy of war on terrorism after 9/11 (Sumaiya et al., 2024). The emergency regime did not only try to reform the domestic politics but also took a major shift in foreign policy and external

relations. Since the Military Backed Caretaker Government (MBCG) was clearly a Civil-Society-Military-backed soft pro-Indian and pro-US/western government, it naturally forged an especially close relationship with India and the U.S. As India was a strategic ally of the United States in Asia in the context of war against terror, Bangladesh had to collaborate with them. During the tenure of US Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis in Dhaka (2006-2007), politics of Bangladesh came to be known as the 'politics of corruption'. The former Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia and numerous other leaders and activists of the Awami League and BNP were charged by the emergency government with corruption cases. The top leaders of the two parties were arrested in July and September, 2007. Before that the AL chief Sheikh Hasina visited the United States in March, 2007, a U.S embassy cable quoted the then DGFI officials as saying that there were 'a number of options to exit politics gracefully' for her. The U.S embassy, which was maintaining close contacts with the 'officials behind the scenes' (Liton & Ashraf, 2011) informed Washington on June 4 that having 'failed to exile the two ladies, the next option for the government is to take Hasina and then, for the sake of bipartisanship, Zia, to trial on corruption and perhaps other charges' (Liton & Ashraf, 2011).

The reform agenda of the Military-Backed Caretaker Government (MBCG) was to construct alternative parties called 'King's Parties' and political structure beyond the Awami League-BNP-centric two-party system which the west (specially the U.S) and their Bangladeshi friends considered the 'dysfunctional' two party system (Sumaiya et al., 2024). This agenda is known as minus-two-formula meaning removing Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia from politics. Ambassador Butenis cabled to Washington on April 22, 2007 and reporting to the then army chief Moeen U Ahmed said that reforms in political parties were essential but difficult to carry out with Hasina and Khaleda staying in Bangladesh (Liton & Ashraf, 2011). This experiment failed and the emergency regime began negotiation with the political parties to formalize the 9th Sangsad election. After being released by executive order, Sheikh Hasina praised the army-backed emergency government's 'anti-corruption campaign'. In a press briefing, she expressed her support for the US policy of the 'eternal war on terror' and promised to take Bangladesh on the same path (Munshi, 2009). Awami League supported the emergency regime claiming it as the result of Awami League's movement and Awami League publicly announced to give legitimacy to all the acts of this government. AL's anti-Islamist militancy and secularizing position made it the darling of India and the West. The International Crisis Group (ICG) suggested Bangladesh to be a strategic ally in the war against Islamic terrorism to change the existing political environment in the country. This period was very significant for Bangladesh as she engaged herself in the 'War on Terror' (Mazhar, 2009). James F. Moriarty came to Bangladesh in March, 2008 as the US ambassador (2008-2011) revealed the agenda of the United States regarding Bangladesh without hiding anything during his confirmation hearing and on the day of presenting his official credentials. This is known as Moriarty's theory of 'Three Ds'. The three Ds stood for 'Democracy, Development and Denial of Space to Terrorism'. Bangladesh-US relations were guided by these three principles (Ds)

(Munshi, 2009). It was inevitable that the United States was more comfortable with that party which would give priority to its 'war on terror' policy.

Understanding the political reality of Bangladesh was not the purpose of superpowers like U.S, Europe, China or India. Their only interest was to suppress Islamic terrorism or extremism. The West, particularly the US, wanted to construct an alternative new political structure which would be pro-West, committed to serve its interest, mainly, in fighting Islamist militancy and terrorism, which was on the rise over the years (Sumaiya etal, 2024).

The U.S War on Terrorism and Awami League-led Re-Secularizing and De-Islamizing Regime: 2009-2024

Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of its iconic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, came to power with her partners in grand coalition. Awami League's partners in the 14-party alliance were mostly diehard secular leftist parties and the parties opposed to the Islamists tooth and nail. The Awami League-led government was a government of a clear left of center secularizing and de-Islamizing coalition. Sheikh Hasina's rise to power in 2009 came at a time when the world was deeply embroiled in the "Global War on Terror". The geopolitical context of this war significantly shaped the trajectory of her governance, as Hasina adeptly aligned her policies with the counterterrorism strategies of the United States. Since the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations were heavily focused on the terrorist activities all over the world, they allowed India too free space to determine the politico-ideological landscape of South Asia including Bangladesh. U.S' position against the Islamists and terrorists was unwavering. Its commitment to war against 'Islamist' terrorism was unquestioned. Thus, neither the U.S nor India raised any serious concern then about Sheikh Hasina government's abuse of human rights and shrinking of democratic space. It is suggested that India somehow managed the US that Bangladesh under AL and Sheikh Hasina will always be with the US. The role of India regarding Bangladesh was to protect and promote the Awami League government. India's strategic interests in Bangladesh have long revolved around security and regional stability. One of the key pillars of the Hasina-India alliance was her government's all out cooperation in addressing India's security concerns, particularly in its insurgency-prone North-Eastern states. Naturally, after coming to power in 2009, Sheikh Hasina adopted a 'zero tolerance' policy against terrorism and corruption. Islam and Islam (2018) argues that during Sheikh Hasina's first term (1996-2001), her government 'demonstrated no inclination towards opposition to Islamization but, during her 2nd and 3rd terms (2009-2014 and 2014-2018) in coalition with the leftist parties, witnessed a major shift in her governing approach from indifference to Islamization towards the process of secularization' (Sumaiya etal, 2024; Islam and Islam, 2018). In 2009, the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and US President Barack Obama institutionalized bilateral relations between the two countries. High-level officials of the two countries held mutual annual partnership talks and regular discussions on security and military issues. Counter-terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism remained on the top of the US agenda in her relations with Bangladesh. Awami League-led grand

coalition government, formed in 2009, stood firm against terrorism. Hasina government's 'Zero Tolerance' stand against terrorism was highly appealing to the United States. The U.S and the West had favorable view toward the AL-led coalition for its hard and unequivocal position against Islamist militancy. The government first passed the Anti-Terrorism Law in 2009 which was amended in 2013 to further strengthen it.

During Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Bangladesh on 5 May 2012, an agreement was signed between the two countries to hold periodic dialogues on diverse subjects, ranging from defense and security cooperation to economic and trade cooperation (Rashid, 2012). In addition, through the Bangladesh-U.S Partnership Dialogue Agreement in 2012, the US-Bangladesh relationship had moved from the level of cooperation to the level of partnership, and the bond between the two countries had gradually strengthened (Rashid, 2012). The government also enacted the 'Money Laundering Prevention Act' in 2012 to stop funding for terrorist activities. The report of the US State Department on terrorism stated, "Bangladesh as a member of the Asia-Pacific Group on Money Laundering and the Central Bank and the 'Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit' all are leading the government's activities to suppress the financial activities of terrorists" (Sify News, 2018). As Dan Mozena, the then U.S Ambassador to Bangladesh, stated in March, 2014 that "Bangladesh is a moderate and generally secular and tolerant country, though sometimes this is getting stretched, at the moment--alternative to violent extremism in a very troubled part of the world" (EFSAS, 2019). While religiously motivated 'Islamist' terrorism in Bangladesh may not be as lethal as in other parts of South Asia and the Muslim World, Mozena mentioned that Bangladesh's the role in fighting terrorism and militancy was one of the key determinants of Bangladesh-US partnership (Arif & Nabi, 2023).

Bangladesh government also banned political activities of several militant Islamic parties including the Harkat-ul-Jihad Bangladesh- HUJI-B, Ansarullah Bangla Team, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh- JMB, Shahadat-e Al Hikma, Hezbut Tawheed and others to curb Islamic terrorism. All these presented Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina as a credible and committed partner of the U.S' on the issue of 'war on terror'. The 2016 terrorist attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in the aristocratic Gulshan section of Dhaka propelled the government more rigorously into the fight against terrorism. Based on this, a report was submitted from the U.S State Department on terrorism in 2017. It stated that, "prior to the attack on Holey Artisan Bakery restaurant, approximately 79 suspected terrorists were killed and more than 150 extremists were arrested under counterterrorism programs" (<https://bd.usembassy.gov/>). It took almost twelve hours to end the siege after the terrorists stormed the restaurant. That horrendous attack exposed significant weaknesses in Bangladesh's counterterrorism preparedness. In the backdrop of the Holey Artisan terrorist attack, the visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry in 29 August, 2016, highlighted the importance of cooperation in the areas of terrorism and security. Prime minister Sheikh Hasina expressed a clear desire to cooperate with the US and John Kerry announced that the two countries had agreed to take additional steps by which intelligence and law enforcement

agencies of the both countries would work together to fight against terrorism (Herman, 2016). In 2018, both the countries conducted Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) and Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEE) focusing on counter-terrorism issues. A consensus about suppressing terrorism emerged in the international arena during this time. Bangladesh collaborated with the United States to strengthen its internal security and response to terrorism. The US government supplied various forms of assistance to Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC), the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU), and other police units. The U.S government also provided training for the judges and prosecutors of the Anti-terrorism Tribunal (ATT) on managing evidence, conducting investigations and terrorist financing cases (Tactics Institute for Security & Counter Terrorism, 2023). For much of Hasina's rule, she enjoyed close ties with the United States, which offered diplomatic support even in the face of widespread electoral fraud during the 2014 and 2018. The U.S administration whether Democratic or Republican chose to overlook these democratic deficits. The primary concern for the U.S was the stability of the regime that aligned with its security interests, particularly, regarding the containment of Islamist extremism in South Asia. The utility of the 'war against terror' in South Asia supposedly got exhausted and ended with the withdrawal of U.S troops from Afghanistan at the beginning of the Biden Administration in 2021. This means by the beginning of 2020's 'war against terror' became a secondary priority to U.S regarding its national interests. 'Containment of China' has arguably become the most important priority of US policy toward Asia, including South Asia. As the war against terrorism took backstage in U.S global policy and particularly in Asia, this shift has impacted Bangladeshis domestic politics as well as Bangladesh-U.S relations since 2021 (For details, see, Sumaiya et al., 2024). One can see vividly that pressure from the post-war on terror Biden Administration (2021-2024) was mounting pressure against the erstwhile staunch ally, Sheikh Hasina's government to abide by the norms of democratic rule, human rights and free and fair elections. Hasina's government fell partly under the weight of heavy U.S pressure and arguably a pro-U.S interim government led by the West and U.S-friendly nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus, came to power in August 2024 (Akther, 2025).

Conclusion

There is no denying that like the whole world the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks also shook the South Asian political landscape. Since the Bush administration regarded terrorism as the 'mother of all threats' and further declared the modern terrorists as 'the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century' omnipresent in the world and always ready to attack our civilization, it was no surprise that as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks 'everything has changed' in U.S policy which largely reshaped the whole world. South Asia, including Bangladesh, was not an exception and outside of the post-9/11 grand design for the world. President Bush's idea of waging War on Terror unified U.S domestic opinion, and also received support and sympathy from the international community.

Bangladesh-United States bilateral relations had always been a manifestation of the willingness of both countries to adjust to changing global environment. Bangladesh and the United States have strong commitment to combating and preventing the spread of terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalization in Bangladesh as well as the entire South Asia.

In this long period of time, the governments in Bangladesh had also changed. Indeed, the U.S war on terror in Bangladesh and South Asia at least to some extent determined the governmental changes in Bangladesh in almost two decades in the 21st century. Changes in and influence of global politics and environment, internal governance system and leadership had greatly influenced the foreign policy of Bangladesh. As a result, over the year, the foreign relations of Bangladesh had also changed. Along with the change in global issues, a major change could be observed in Bangladesh's foreign policy. However, since the current world is economically and politico-strategically a 'modified-multi polar' one, and extremely inter-connected and inter-dependent, leaning too much toward a particular side is may be quite risky. In spite of BNP's good relations with both the US and China, the 'war on terror' issue caused some strain on the BNP-led government's relationship with the US. India got a "blank cheque" from the Bush and Obama administrations to dominate this region. Resultantly, India could put a lot of pressure on BNP-led government (2001-2006) in the name of her security interests. BNP-led nationalist-Islamist Center-right-coalition government found itself in a dilemma as to how to make a balance between BNP's natural and traditional friendship with the U.S and at the same time, keep its two major Islamist allies-the Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikkya Jote-on board and happy. After all, they constituted "vote banks" for the BNP. That led BNP's commitment to anti-terrorism war to some extent ambivalent. A dramatic shift took place in the Bangladesh-U.S relations during the emergency period (2007-2008). This military backed emergency government developed a very close relationship with India and the US policy toward Bangladesh. This emergency regime was very much pro-U.S and Pro-Indian. That helped them get further access to Bangladesh's domestic politics. War against Terrorism was one of the most important foci of the US. India convinced the US to keep trust in Awami League in implementing U.S policy of war on terror in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has always maintained close relationship with the United States. The Awami League-led secular government in the era of 'war on terror' maintained and deepened that relation. The issue of 'war on terror' in U.S foreign policy supposedly ended with the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan at the beginning of the Biden Administration in 2021 and became a secondary priority to the U.S. Bangladesh-US relations took a new turn. From that point of view, Bangladesh has to balance its foreign policy behavior with the changing pattern of the United States' policy calculations. As the U.S foreign policy priority under the Biden administration from war on terror to democracy, human rights, the AL-led government found itself into a new territory. The Sheikh Hasina government also found it difficult to go along with the U.S in the "Post-War on terror" era as her party and government was not ready to meet the U.S conditions for democratization and human rights. Neither was it ready to reduce its ties with China in the new Sino-U.S rivalry (For details, please, see, Kabir, 2024, Sumaiya etal, 2024, Akther, 2025). Thus, arose a tension in the

Bangladesh-U.S relations which ended with the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government through the "monsoon revolution" in August 2024. The new Yunus regime has focused a close relationship with the U.S.

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