



**BANGLADESH'S INDO-PACIFIC
OUTLOOK: A MODEL FOR
MAINTAINING BALANCE**

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On April 24, the day before Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan, the country's foreign ministry formally [announced](#) the country's Indo-Pacific Outlook. The outlook has been much-awaited, considering the increasing pressure great powers have put on "swing" states to join their side.

However, the IPO highlights Bangladesh's independence, self-determination, guiding principles, and firm belief in the existing liberal international order. Against this backdrop, it is worth assessing the outlook, which positions Bangladesh as an example for other small states on how to participate in the liberal order, yet remain neutral in an era of great power competition.

Bangladesh's outlook

The Bangladeshi prime minister's Japan visit is crucial for both nations, as [eight MoUs](#) were signed during the visit. Moreover, PM Hasina visited the United States and the United Kingdom directly afterward. As a result, the IPO announcement holds a great deal of significance for the country's foreign relations.

The [15-point outlook](#) views security as a prerequisite for economic prosperity. In it, Dhaka clarifies that it has no intention of picking sides in the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between China, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other. It should be noted here that the term "Indo-Pacific" is, itself, of Western origin, and China has [criticized](#) its

use as part of a [strategy](#) to contain China. However, as Bangladesh has traditionally practiced a balanced foreign policy, it appears unconcerned about the Chinese reaction to such a concept—and China has, thus far, not reacted to Bangladesh's IPO.

However, Bangladesh does believe in a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific and considers the stability and prosperity of the region essential to its [Vision-2041](#)—to emerge as a developed nation by 2041.

In the outlook, Bangladesh also clarifies that it believes in international relations based on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations, and peaceful settlement of international disputes. Bangladesh also reaffirms adherence to the relevant UN treaties and international conventions such as UNCLOS. It also emphasizes the strengthening of mutual trust and respect, forging partnerships and cooperation, and promoting dialogue among the nations.

Moreover, it [calls for](#) strengthening existing mechanisms on maritime safety and security in the Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh's IPO also prioritizes enhancing physical, institutional, energy, digital, and human connectivity, facilitating the movement of goods, services, capital, and people across state boundaries. Across the region, Bangladesh's IPO also calls for fostering cooperation among Indo-Pacific countries. The 15 points also include collaboration with sub-regional partners and relevant organizations for regional cooperation and mutual benefits.

Balancing the great power rivalries

A look at the 15-point IPO suggests that Bangladesh reaffirms its belief in the liberal order in its IPO. Accommodating the free and open Indo-Pacific, and reaffirming its belief in the peaceful settlement of disputes is an example of such claims. Bangladesh's belief in liberal values and norms facilitates Western countries'—such as the United States and its allies—interest in maintaining the status quo.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's emphasis on connectivity and free movement of goods and services facilitates the interests of emerging powers such as China and India. Hence, the IPO may allow the country to equalize tensions among great powers, especially amid the current geopolitical rivalry.

The IPO also emphasizes sub-regional and other relevant organizations for mutual benefits. For the past few years, Bangladesh has deepened its engagement with ASEAN, and attending mini-laterals such as Colombo Security Conclave. It is also the current chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Organization. Such subregional and minilateral organizations will help the country to ensure security in the region without picking any sides. And lastly, Bangladesh's incorporation of multilateralism and sustainable development goals also suggest that the country is likely to rely on global platforms and forums for its security. Such emphasis on these organizations will allow Bangladesh to remain neutral while ensuring security at the same time.

Practicing self-determination and guiding principles

For some time Bangladesh has faced immense pressure from both the United States and China regarding its stance on the rivalry. Due to its neutral, balancing policy, it has been stuck in the middle of the power rivalry owing to its geostrategic significance. For instance, a former Chinese envoy has [warned](#) the country not to join in Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, while the United States has expressed its [desire for Bangladesh to support](#) the US Indo-Pacific strategy on several occasions. Furthermore, regional politics and the Sino-Indian rivalry have also brought new challenges. Amid such a complex political space, Bangladesh's neutral and balancing outlook is a fine example of its practice of self-determination.

Moreover, to assure the great powers of its intentions, Bangladesh has incorporated both the "connectivity" philosophy of emerging great powers—such as China, and to an extent India—to expand their connections with the world through infrastructure, mobility, and cooperation in various sectors, but also liberal values such as the free and open Indo-Pacific valued by

Western powers. Perhaps it is tough, yet possible, for a neutral state to embrace both. But the efficacy of such an outlook is largely dependent upon its diplomacy and national power. Besides, this is in keeping with Bangladesh's [long-practiced principles](#) such as friendship to all, malice towards none, balanced and neutral foreign policy, and multilateralism.

An example for other littoral and small states?

It seems Bangladesh's outlook may emerge as successful for the foreseeable future. Through the outlook and subsequent tilt towards Japan, perhaps the country aims to balance between Chinese and Western states. Like many other countries, Bangladesh prefers to sit on the fence in current great power rivalries. Hence, the country aims to manage great power interest geoeconomically—a much-neglected yet very relevant approach. Bangladesh joining China's BRI and approving the deep-seaport project with Japan suggest that Dhaka aims to provide equal geoeconomic opportunity for both blocs while satisfying its infrastructural demand. But success will largely depend on the country's diplomatic prudence and policy execution.

In the present context, the littorals and small states require peace and security for their nation's prosperity. Amid such complex interdependence, they rely almost entirely on the great powers and powerhouses for their wide ranging commercial, economic, and security activities. Therefore, picking a side becomes a zero-sum game and poses a challenge to their interdependence.

Bangladesh's IPO has the potential to ensure both in this context. It promotes a positive-sum game and stays away from any side-picking. Its reliance on multilateralism and neutral policy is also beneficial for cooperation. Hence, it is an exemplary outlook for states such as Sri Lanka or Maldives or any other small and littoral Indo-Pacific states. Small states that cannot afford side-picking should maintain a balance between the great powers, as Bangladesh has, and mobilize their geoeconomic means to equalize the stakes among them.

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