



***BANGLADESH WITH MIDDLE
POWERS: A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY
TO REBALANCE FOREIGN POLICY***

BY MD ABU SAIM

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Global geopolitics is shifting toward a more fragmented, conflict-driven order, and small states like Bangladesh find themselves at a juncture, especially in the US-China rivalry. The post-Cold War dream of cooperative globalization is fading into a world of military flashpoints, economic protectionism, weaponization of trade and uncertain alliances. In this changing landscape, the question is no longer whether small and medium-sized states like Bangladesh can stay neutral, but how to stay relevant, stable, and strategically aligned.

Long-standing regional disputes, such as the India-Pakistan conflict, have been followed by the ongoing, unresolved [Thailand-Cambodia](#) border tension. Alongside the protracted Russia-Ukraine war, wars and crises are now no longer confined to specific continents—they have become a part of modern civilization.

Closer to home, Myanmar's protracted civil war brings further destabilizing effects for South Asia, adding layers of humanitarian, security, and diplomatic challenges for its neighbors—Bangladesh foremost among them.

These recent conflicts are certain to have cascading effects on global trade. We are already witnessing international trade becoming increasingly protectionist. In the context of the US-China rivalry and new US tariffs, Bangladesh should not focus solely on trading with major powers. Instead, its foreign policy must be diversified through multidirectional partnerships, especially with rising and responsible middle powers.

But who are these middle powers? [Middle powers](#) sit below the great powers but exert influence over global politics and have considerable economic, political, military, or diplomatic strength.

The age of great power tensions

Bangladesh's foreign policy has mostly relied on great powers—for security and geopolitical reasons but also in matters of trade and defense. In terms of geopolitical alignment, Bangladesh maintains a delicate balance among China, India, and the United States. By leveraging this pragmatic strategy the country has reaped many benefits over the years. However, leaning solely on major powers, no matter how strategic, poses risks to sustained resilience.

Dependence on them makes Bangladesh more exposed to their strategic calculations, and, these powers have significant geopolitical ambitions in the region. Therefore, limiting key foreign relations to just major powers cannot help Bangladesh emerge as a relevant power on the global stage. This was evident in the recent US tariff case, where Bangladesh faced sudden and [severe challenges](#) after the United States imposed a [35% tariff](#) on its exports.

Each great power has strategic stakes in the Indo-Pacific and often conflicting expectations from smaller states. Whether it is trade negotiations, defense procurement, or multilateral alignment, Bangladesh frequently finds itself having to navigate a diplomatic minefield—appeasing one power without alienating another.

The rise of middle powers: A strategic opening

Bangladesh should consider deepening its ties with non-traditional partners—particularly middle power economies like Italy, Turkey, Brazil, South Korea, and even select Gulf nations. These countries wield considerable influence in regional and international platforms and often come without the baggage of zero-sum geopolitical rivalry in South Asia.

With Bangladesh pursuing comprehensive [360-degree-diplomacy](#), it is imperative to engage strategically with middle-power economies—many of whom have limited geopolitical ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region compared to the world’s major powers. Moreover, escalating regional conflicts and rising trade protectionism mean that Bangladesh must urgently explore diversification. In an increasingly volatile global landscape defined by fluid alliances and shifting power dynamics, no nation can remain overly reliant on a narrow circle of partners.

Italy, for instance, is one of Europe’s top industrial economies with advanced manufacturing and energy technology. Turkey straddles Europe and Asia, offering defense capabilities, regional connectivity, and a diplomatic bridge to the Muslim world. Brazil, a leader in the Global South and BRICS member, brings agricultural, energy, and environmental expertise along with a massive consumer market.

What makes these nations even more attractive is their relatively neutral stance on South Asian geopolitics. They neither possess military ambitions in the region nor are entangled in its historical disputes. By expanding diplomatic, trade, and defense ties with such middle powers, Bangladesh could reduce the strategic stress of being pulled between global giants. This is not to suggest a shift away from existing partners, but a recalibration—a foreign policy approach rooted in balance, leverage, and sovereign agency.

Avenues of cooperation: Trade, technology, and defense

At the Bangladesh Investment Summit from April 7-10, nearly [half of the](#) foreign delegates hailed from

China, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Despite being one of the greatest achievements in the country’s recent history, the summit also exposed how Bangladesh missed the opportunity to attract key middle powers to invest here. Had such nations participated, it could have opened new channels for sectorial investment—such as textile technology from Italy, defense and infrastructure cooperation from Turkey, and agro-industrial ventures from Brazil.

From a trade perspective—middle-power trade with Bangladesh hovers around the [\\$0.5–1.7 billion](#) range—small compared to trade involving India, China, or the US, which account for [multibillion-dollar](#) volumes. Trade with Turkey, Italy, and Brazil focuses on niche areas (e.g., agro-products, textiles, machinery) and lacks scale. By contrast, major powers cover broad industrial, consumer, and technology sectors. India, China, and the US bring not only trade but also development finance, security cooperation, preferential access, and global influence. Middle powers haven’t mobilized similar institutional outreach or investment at scale.

However, Bangladesh can scale trade with these middle-power countries by increasing sector-specific cooperation, pursuing bilateral trade agreements, and leveraging shared interests in technology, infrastructure, and sustainable development—areas where middle powers often offer expertise without strategic strings attached.

In particular, preferential trade agreements with middle powers could help Bangladesh [navigate](#) the post-LDC (Least Developed Country) transition. Rules of Origin (RoO) reforms and special market access arrangements will be critical to sustaining export competitiveness once current preferences are phased out.

On the defense front, Turkey has already shown [interest](#) in defense cooperation with South Asian nations, and could be a less politically fraught supplier of military hardware. In recent years, Bangladesh has significantly expanded its defense cooperation with Turkey, acquiring a range of modern military hardware. This includes [Bayraktar TB2](#) combat drones, TRG-300 multiple rocket launchers, Boran

105 mm lightweight howitzers, and Cobra II armored vehicles.

Bangladesh stands to gain much more from deepening ties with Turkey—particularly through joint defense production, technology transfer, military training, as well as collaborations in naval systems, cyber defense, and drone maintenance hubs.

And for Brazil, Bangladesh can not only [trade in](#) agricultural resources but also use growing ties with the country to position itself as a strategic bridge to BRICS—offering Dhaka greater access to emerging markets, alternative development financing, and a stronger voice in Global South cooperation. As Brazil holds significant sway within BRICS, deeper bilateral engagement can pave the way for Bangladesh to align with the group’s economic and geopolitical agenda. While not yet a BRICS member, Bangladesh’s collaboration with Brazil positions it as a credible partner in future BRICS+ expansions.

Reimagining regional and global roles

The broader aim of expanding middle-power ties is not to dilute old friendships, but create new room for maneuver. Strategic autonomy—the ability to make foreign policy decisions based on national interest rather than external pressure—is the hallmark of successful diplomacy in a multipolar world. If this is truly achievable through strengthened ties with countries like Turkey, Italy, and Brazil in areas such as infrastructure, institutions, and defense, Bangladesh could balance both Chinese and Western influence in key sectors without inviting retaliatory scrutiny.

Furthermore, middle powers are often more flexible in bilateral engagements, open to co-production, technology transfer, and joint ventures—all of which are critical for a country like Bangladesh striving for sustainable, inclusive growth. Collaborating with Turkey and Brazil as current G20 members, and Italy as a leading EU economy, deeper ties could help Bangladesh punch above its weight in global economic diplomacy.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.