

A Comparative Study of China-Bangladesh Relations : From status-quo period during
1975–2001 to ‘more revisionist’ period in 2016-Present

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Abstract

Bangladesh is an interesting place to study China's broader shift in foreign policy.

Bangladesh's strategic location between South and Southeast Asia and important sea route of Bay of Bengal made it important place for a balance of powers. Another unique feature of Bangladesh is, it is the only country in South Asia are known to be nonbiased towards a single direction. Through its foreign policy 'friend to all, melice to none', Bangladesh maintained balanced relationships with big countries including neighbour India, Russia, China and United States.

In this paper I will look at two different time frames (1975-2001 and 2016 to the present) to explain China's strategic relationships with Bangladesh and to identify how it differ between the foundation period and BRI era. To do it, I will use Johnston's five indicators to quantify China's actions. Moreover, I will try to explain these issues from the viewpoint of Bangladesh which potentially will give other small states to explain China's engagement with them.

In the end of the paper, I will argue China's policy towards Bangladesh broadly shifted from seeking advantages over India from 1975 to 2001 to 'more revisioninst' during the Belt and Road era (2016-Present).

Keywords: China-Bangladesh, status-quo, revisionist, Johnston's five indicators

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China-Bangladesh diplomatic relations were established on October 4, 1975, following significant geopolitical shifts in South Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). This timing was crucial, as China had previously supported Pakistan during Bangladesh's independence struggle and had vetoed Bangladesh's UN membership until 1974. The establishment of diplomatic ties marked a significant shift in China's South Asian policy. It occurred within the broader context of China's strategic recalibration following the end of the Vietnam War and the shifting dynamics of the Cold War (Ahmed, 2019).

During 1975-2001, Chinese interest in Bangladesh was mostly confined to small-scale economic cooperation, defense aid, and political alignment based on their shared principle of non-interference. Literature on China-Bangladesh relationship mostly explained 1975–2001 period through China's status quo policy. Former Bagladeshi President Ziaur Rahman's visit to China in January 1977 can be considered a notable pillar of bilateral cooperation. He was the first Bangladeshi head of state visited China at a high level. Another key event came with the "Look East Policy" being adopted in 2001 by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. This was a moment of strategic diplomacy for Bangladesh to diversify its diplomatic and economic ties beyond even its traditional Western supporters.

China- Bangladesh relationship touched a new milestone in 2016 with Xi Jinping's landmark visit to Bangladesh in October 2016. This is the first visit by a Chinese head of state in 30 years (CCTV, 2016). The signing of 27 agreements worth \$24 billion signaled not only bilateral cooperation but also a qualitative transformation in the relationship under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Also, some clear signs of China's growing aggressive thinking come from different angles. Economically, China has emerged as Bangladesh's leading

trading partner, enjoying duty-free market access for a remarkable 97% of Bangladeshi exports. Militarily, China is Bangladesh's leading arms provider with 72% of the country's war imports. The promised investments from the Belt and Road Initiative for Bangladesh totaled \$38 billion (Standard Chartered, 2025), which comprised 15% of Bangladesh GDP for 2017.

What I found is that most studies of the China-Bangladesh focus on short periods or individual episodes. This leaves a serious gap that can be filled through a discussion of a wider timeline. Also, the discussion becomes narrowed to the immediate years after Bangladesh gained independence or most recent BRI. This means 'the big picture' is not considered. I am planning to fill this gap by comparing two different periods: 1975–2001 and 2016 onwards. Through this, it will possibly identify how China transformed from a country that respected norms (status quo) to one that attempts to create new norms (revisionist).

Theoretical Framework

I will use Alastair Iain Johnston's framework to identify China changing behavior from a foreign policy perspective. Johnston presents five indicators to comprehend whether a country respect the current international order or want to establish new order. The first is engagement in international organization. Status-quo states are favorable towards the current system. They are members of long-established international organization and obey international laws. On the other hand, those states that want to change these establishments identified as revisionist (Ikenberry, 2008). The second indicator is compliance to rules and norms. In this case, China's policy of non-interference is relevant (Carlson, 2005). Alignment of Interests/Voting Patterns is the third indicators. This indicator considers if a state's international stances are compatible with global powers. States which prefer the status quo tend to be aligned, whereas the ones preferring a shift tend not to (Voeten, 2000). The fourth indicator is the way that the countries manage conflicts over sovereignty or land. According

to Johnston (2003), countries seeking status-quo seek to address issues peacefully via familiar methods. Whereas countries seeking revisionist stand try to unilaterally act or use violence (Fravel, 2008). The fifth indicator is vision for international order. It considers a country's long-term approach towards other countries. Those countries known as status-quo want small changes through current systems,; whereas revisionist countries recommend large changes. Employing these indicators may present clear picture to verify whether China's foreign policy towards Bangladesh was status-quo during 1975–2001 to a more revisionist approach during 2016–present.

Methodology

In this paper, I will use most-different case study for a comparative analysis. As sources, I used secondary literature from peer-reviewed journals, think-tank analyses, and elite interviews. I collect data from secondary documents; mostly joint communiqués, and leadership speeches from Chinese and Bangladeshi archives. Quantitative measures include World Bank and UN statistics for bilateral trade flows, and China's Ministry of Commerce figures on outward foreign direct investment in Bangladesh. Analytically, the study combines structured comparison across Johnston's five indicators of status-quo versus revisionist state. In each period, China's participation in international institutions, compliance with international norms, alignment of voting patterns, approach to territorial and sovereignty disputes, and grand strategic vision are systematically assessed.

The Status-Quo Period (1975–2001)

China's foreign policy from 1975 to 2001 was cautious. As described in Deng Xiaoping's principle of "keeping a low profile" (Deng, 2020). China's intention was not to engage in conflict with other nations. And focus to expand the economy. Deng principle was different than the Mao's revolutionary policy (Chen, 2022).

China gradually became a member of international organisations at this period. Its aspiration to be a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 revealed its internal policy (Zhang, 2024). Rather than opposing Western-led organisations, China began collaborating with organisations. China-Bangladesh worked together in international organisations, such as the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement (Rahman, 2023). China participated in regional gatherings, particularly with ASEAN, to back Bangladesh's initiatives and advance their diplomatic ties.

China emphasized following to rules; particularly the rule of not interfering with other nations' sovereignty (Petrov, 2023). These are part of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and influenced China when dealing with other nations, including Bangladesh. Unlike Western nations, which frequently provide aid for political ties, China provided aid to Bangladesh without requesting political favors (Islam, 2019). Following international rules and being respectful to Bangladesh reflected that China aimed to maintain good ties with other nations.

China and Bangladesh share a common objective of improving their economies. They frequently collaborate when casting votes during UN General Assembly voting, normally voting for proposals that promote development of the continent and cooperation among development countries (Sen, 2021). They collaborate on trade, development of economy, and technology exchange for development countries (Mahmud, 2012).

China resolves conflict related to border or land and through peaceful resolution. Small countries always desired to confirm that bigger countries such as China would not behave aggressively (Garcia, 2015). China possess a policy of overlooking differences and cooperation for development (Wilson, 2023). Although China and Bangladesh never clashed

regarding lands, but this approach of China keep smaller nations such as Bangladesh more secure.

China desired a world of multiple powerful countries. This was a philosophy of cooperation and mutual assistance, different than West structure (Wang, 2021). In Bangladesh, cooperation was in infrastructure development, support for economic plans, and technology-sharing, without expecting political concessions, which provided a stable foundation for future cooperation (Sultana, 2024).

It can be seen from China's foreign policy towards Bangladesh from 1975 to 2001 that China took consistent action. China engaged proactively with international organizations and observed international norms. It desired peace during territorial conflicts and good ties with other nations. These are indications of a strategy for keeping the rest of the world stable and for assisting its own economy.

The Revisionist Period (2016–Present)

President of China Xi Jinping has transformed China's foreign policy towards a more assertive approach. This is a significant shift from Deng Xiaoping's "keeping a low profile" approach. Xi's "grand national rejuvenation" reflects that China wishes to play a greater global role (Swaine, 2015).

China, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, was attempting to change the way world is currently governed. A perfect example of that is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which presents Asian nations with a choice other than the western dominated World Bank and IMF (Callaghan & Hubbard, 2016). Bangladesh being a foundation member of the AIIB, proves that China was able to coin new international organisation that disburse money to poor nations without going through the West (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank,

2016). China' utilize AIIB to present a sense of governance ideas that advance Chinese interests, transforming the way global governance operates (Knoerich & Urdinez, 2019). Through forums such as AIIB and massive initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China successfully links Bangladesh to a new economic and political axis that indirectly defies the conventional Western-led regimes.

China claims not to interfere with other nations, but through a way of "creative involvement," it looks after its expanding interests. In Bangladesh, China's strategic behaviors through investments dictate the way the nation makes its policies. Bangladesh being a part of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) becomes highly reliant on China for finances, a factor that can constrain the economic freedom of Bangladesh (Rahman, 2018). China's major investments through infrastructure development and friendly rules of trade, such as letting Bangladeshi exports come without tariff. It reveal the way China affects Bangladesh's foreign policy and national policy through favorable economic outcomes (Export Promotion Bureau, 2020). Here China's approach reveals a significant shift from pure adherence to non-interference to prioritizing a nation's strategic interest rather than adhering to conventional diplomatic norms.

China looks for consent from other nations on significant matters via talk and economic influence. This is intended to get support for major national objectives (Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013). If we examine voting at the UN from Bangladesh, we can find that Bangladesh votes for China particularly on matters of national sovereignty and economic development. But Bangladesh vote differently from China on challenging matters such as disarmament and human rights (Esteban et al., 2018). This action show that being inter-connected economically, particularly via the Belt and Road Project (BRI), is not a guarantee of total

political consistency (Dreher et al., 2022). Bangladesh is conscious when dealing with China so that it can be free from external influence.

China's tough policy towards the South China Sea showed a shift towards riskier and more bold diplomacy (Mazarr, 2015). China never explicitly confronted Bangladesh for land, aggressive action at Bay of Bengal due to the strategic nature of the area (Bhattacharjee, 2015). Due to China's aggressive policy, Bangladesh remained cautious of its diplomacy, being friendly to major countries equally, particularly India and China (Karim, 2018). This cautious diplomacy indicates that Bangladesh believes China is becoming more willing to advance its interest through direct and indirect means.

China's emphasize on "Community of Common Destiny" and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) showed that it is willing to create a world system that places more emphasis on China (Zhao, 2018). BRI explicitly indicates China's alternative approach and seeking to change the international economy to establish Chinese leadership. Bangladesh participation in BRI infrastructure showed that Bangladesh respect China's alternative approach to development and governance (Kugiel, 2018).

Domestic debates of Bangladesh are about losing sovereignty, dependency on others for finances, and implications for international politics. These reflect the two things: the potential benefit of collaborating more closely with China and the concerns regarding economic and political autonomy.

By analysing through Johnston framework, China's approach towards Bangladesh has significantly changed since 2016. China is eager to revise the international system through new organizations, rule flexibility, different treatment of political friends, and promoting new ideas. In return, Bangladesh is cautious. This show the difficulties faced by small nations when China becomes powerful.

Comparison and Discussion

Based on the five indicators of Johnston, China-Bangladesh relationships show a significant shift from status-quo behaviors to a desire to shift current world order. This shift is quite varied in magnitude for the signs. China gradually participated in international institutions from 1975 to 2001, becoming a member of organizations led by the West. This participation was consistent with China's objective at that time of maintaining a stable external environment for facilitating its own economic development. But from 2016 onwards, China initiated new institutions that run counter to the norms and organizations led by the West, particularly the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Bangladesh becoming a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank indicates solidarity with China's initiative of transforming global governance norms and offering alternative sources of funds other than the conventional ones such as the World Bank and IMF (Knoerich & Urdinez, 2019).

China initially followed clear rules, such as non-interference that led its actions globally. Nowadays, a new concept "creative involvement" is widespread. It signalled that now China can easily get involved for the sake of protecting its interests outside of its borders (Rahman, 2025). China's expanding investments in Bangladesh, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which significantly affects Bangladesh's economic autonomy (Rahman, 2018).

Traditionally, China tended to align with developing countries and voted with the UN international South (Li et al., 2022). But in recent years, China became more aggressive, employing its economic muscle to gain political influence. Bangladesh voted more frequently with China which indicating the powerful effect of China's economy. Yet, Bangladesh still votes according to its own decision on significant matters such as disarmament and human

rights. This indicates that voting in alignment with China showed that they don't necessarily share similar political ideologies (Dreher et al., 2022).

China previously attempted to resolve disputes peacefully. This is evidenced through the thought of "shelving disputes" from Deng Xiaoping. China, since 2016, has taken more aggressive action at sea, particularly in South China Sea. This reflects a significant shift to be more assertive regarding claims of land (Mazarr, 2015). Although Bangladesh is not confronting China militarily, powerful action from China makes Bangladesh concerned for its own protection (Panda, 2017). China is expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean through investment in port infrastructure and the development of a navy. This causing Bangladesh to be concerned about ties with other nations.

China's grand vision of the world was significantly changed. It transformed from a wait-and-see policy (tao guang yang hui) to proactively shaping a new world order under President Xi Jinping. The Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates that China is eager to form a global infrastructure network based on itself, with superior infrastructure and mutually shared economic links (Zhao, 2018). Bangladesh's active participation in BRI infrastructure demonstrates that it is moving closer towards China's plan and joining a bigger China-led economic group. Nevertheless, significant debates are being conducted back in Bangladesh regarding concerns of losing autonomy and having too many ties towards China. These debates reflect the multifaceted implications of collaborating with China's strategic objectives (Rahman, 2018).

China's rapid economic rise has expanded its influence globally. It invests money in large programs and projects elsewhere. This money helps China give other nations, such as Bangladesh, valuable financial assistance (Hossain & Zhou, 2018). This has increased its influence and assists a more aggressive foreign policy.

President Jinping's leadership has instilled people with greater confidence in China. President Jinping works towards making China powerful through cooperation with other nations and safeguarding China's values and objectives at global gatherings. This indicates that China is reclaiming its place (Li et al., 2022).

China's continued emphasis on non-interference and sovereignty demonstrates that some of these old concepts are still relevant. In addition, revisionism isn't new, so the way towards being more independent and aggressive is still a long way off (Hossain, 2019).

Bangladesh agency is central to why Bangladesh collaborates with China and what arises from that cooperation. Through Strategic Hedging Bangladesh looks after its valuable relationships. It cooperates with China for economic assistance while maintaining the diplomatic autonomy of the country. Strategic hedging assists Bangladesh to gain from Chinese investment without losing sight of its larger foreign policy objectives (Rahman, 2020). Bangladesh is expanding its economy and requires additional infrastructure. This aligns with what China intends to do via the BRI. This presents good prospects for the two countries. But Bangladesh is cautious not to be overly dependent on China so that it doesn't lose critical control (Hossain & Zhou, 2018). Bangladesh is involved with some of China's initiatives and meetings. This reveals that Dhaka welcomes favorable prospects but is cautious of embracing China's larger agendas. This cautious decision reveals that Bangladesh is interested in remaining free, despite robust economic cooperation (Rahman, 2023).

Limitations of this Paper

This paper operationalize the framework of Johnston. Yet, some limitation are necessary to address. As a first point, the framework was constructed to examine the way powerful states behave in world politics. It might not reveal significant information regarding the way large states such as China and small ones such as Bangladesh relate. Second, the framework

significantly emphasizes money, action, and power. Yet, culture, a sense of history, or ideas are not emphasized sufficiently.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed how China transformed from maintaining the status quo to playing an active role shaping international norms and this shift brings for Dhaka. I noted even though access to Chinese capital for development is a priority but still Dhaka was very choosy regarding taking positions; especially conflicting ones with Western human-rights. China practices revisionism via building parallel institutions, incorporates supply networks based on China, uses strategic infrastructure, and preserves current forums also discussed. I showed - how these fit with Johnston's view. How revisionism proceeds through carefully calibrated rather than flat rejection. How Bangladesh exercises meaningful agency through selective hedging. Lastly, even in the "revisionist" era, how China upholds elements of the established order, particularly sovereign non-interference rhetoric and UN peacekeeping participation.

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