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*Geo-politics, Democratization and External Influence:
The Bangladesh Case*

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Abstract

Bangladesh's strategic importance is enormous as it is located at the heart of two very important regions of the globe and might turn out to be a hub in South and Southeast Asia. Recognizing the country's strategic significance, a number of influential nations are now vying for influence over the country for strategic access and economic resources. This paper focuses on some key interests of the external actors especially important regional and global powers as they try to reap the benefits of Bangladesh's strategic location in their favour. In fact, Bangladesh has attracted keen interest from the United States, China and India in recent times. These powers compete with each other for a variety of reasons to influence Bangladeshi politics with convergent as well as contradictory interests. The paper examines how geography shapes the nature of external actors' influence in this part of the world. The strategically important Chittagong port offers both economic and potential military opportunities for the aforementioned powers. Apart from that, the rise of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh, trade and connectivity has made it an area of immense interest among big powers to exert their influence. The paper would explore how lack of democratic consolidation in a country creates the room for external forces to intervene in the internal affairs. The paper develops a conceptual framework to analyze drivers of external influence in Bangladesh. It builds on Lee's (1966) 'Push-pull theory' of migration studies. Since the restoration of democracy in the 1990s, Bangladesh has conducted four free and fair national elections. Bangladesh's democratic transition has not been smooth and still the country is in the process of consolidating its fragile democracy. The future of Bangladesh's democratic consolidation is far from predictable considering its weak democratic institutions and repugnant political culture enabling the external actors to play an important role in its politics and policy making.

Keywords: Democracy, Geo-politics, External influence, 'Zero-sum' game

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Geography is the determinant of a country's importance to the actors beyond its territory.

The strategic location of Bangladesh has attracted keen interest from many of the global and regional powers especially - the United States, China and India. These powers compete with each other for a variety of reasons to influence Bangladeshi politics and pattern of economic development with convergent as well as divergent motives and interests. The geography of Bangladesh has made it the gateway to Bay of Bengal with a maritime boundary of 45000 sq. miles which is enriched with valuable marine resources such as hydrocarbon, fisheries etc. The strategically important Chittagong port offers both economic and potential military opportunities for the main sea powers and littoral states. Trade, connectivity and energy have turned Bangladesh as an area of strategic interest among big powers to exert their influence. On the negative front, the potential rise of Islamist militancy in recent times has attracted attention of external actors that poses a threat to stability in this part of the region.

Given that the strategic location of Bangladesh is very important and the economy of the country is thriving with a solid GDP growth of 5-6 percent for more than a decade, some of the regional and global powers became increasingly interested about Bangladesh. The paper would predominantly explore the political interest of external actors and the kind of influence they wield in Bangladesh's policy process. The paper also shows whether external influence is detrimental to the interest of the nation or mutually gainful. The research also attempts to unearth how lack of democratic consolidation and non-accommodative political culture of Bangladesh invites external actors to play a role in the country's domestic affairs.

Conceptual Issues

The paper develops a conceptual framework to analyze drivers of external influence in Bangladesh. It builds on Lee's (1966) 'Push-pull theory' of migration studies. The paper argues that external influence transpires in Bangladesh's internal affairs for a variety of reasons. Domestic actors at times provoke such influence to take place owing to domestic political instability which has been termed as pull factor. On the other hand, when external actors impose their influence on countries like Bangladesh due to geopolitical and other grounds are termed as push factor. The paper looked into both push factors and pull factors of external influence in Bangladesh. The resultant impact of such influences in Bangladesh's governance process has been critically analyzed in the paper. The research is predominantly based on secondary sources. Relevant books, articles, journals and reports have been consulted. Apart from reviewing secondary literature, several experts have been interviewed. This paper focuses on the penetrating grounds of the external actors as the strategic location of Bangladesh has attracted keen interest from many of the global and regional powers. It has also been examined how geography shapes the nature of external actors' influence in this part of the world. The research explores how lack of democratic consolidation in Bangladesh creates room for external forces to operate in the internal affairs of the country.

Pull Factors of External Influence

Domestic actors at times invite external intervention when there are unbridgeable differences among political parties in Bangladesh. Almost all the political parties in Bangladesh have their external backers who tend to provide their support to the clients in Bangladesh during

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a political turmoil. The paper attempted to identify the '*pull factors*' of external influence in Bangladesh.

Malfunctioning of Democratic Institutions

Since the restoration of democracy in the 1990s, Bangladesh has conducted four free and fair national elections. Bangladesh's democratic transition has not been smooth and still the country is in the process of consolidating its fragile democracy (Barkdull, 2007). The outcome of Bangladesh's democratic consolidation is far from predictable considering its weak democratic institutions, a dysfunctional parliament, a not so credible Election Commission (EC), lack of a truly independent Judiciary, and continuous rivalry between the two main political parties. The external actors, at times, exploit the opportunity to intervene in the country's internal political affairs because of the failure of the above mentioned democratic institutions. The process of democratic consolidation is lingering in the country for the reluctance of the two major political parties to allow the democratic institutions to function properly. Unlike other vigorous democracies, the stakes of the opposition in Bangladesh are too little in the governance process and the ruling party tries to perpetuate power by any means. This compels the opposition to adopt practices that are hardly consistent with democratic norms and principles. The culture of 'zero-sum' game in Bangladesh's politics invites external actors to play a role in the middle and this is where *pull factors* of external influence applies. The events of 1/11¹ in Bangladesh are a classic case to demonstrate how internal political unrest brings external forces to play a role in a country's domestic political affairs.

¹ The political violence that led to the resignation President Iajuddin Ahmed as the head of caretaker government (CTG) and the formation of military backed CTG in January 11, 2007 is popularly known as 1/11.

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Interference of External Actors during 1/11 External influence does not take place in abstraction unless the grounds are prepared by the internal actors for such to come about. The ‘winner-takes-all’ politics of Bangladesh led to the incidents of famous 1/11 that culminated in the formation of military backed caretaker government (CTG) in January 11, 2007. Before the Ninth Jatiya Sangsad election, political crisis reached its peak as the government and the opposition had unbridgeable differences over a number of key issues concerning elections and neither side was prepared to compromise. As Datta (2009) has also mentioned that the then ruling party made all the arrangements to rig the upcoming election with fraudulent voters’ list and appointed partisan people in the election commission. President Iajuddin Ahmed concurrently appointed himself as Chief Adviser to the Caretaker Government, ignoring the disapproval of the opposition. His unwavering decision to hold the scheduled January 22, 2007 elections led to a protracted political chaos, public protests and an impending civil war situation. Under such circumstances, the second CTG headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed was formed on 12 January 2007 which lasted for two years to hold the freest ever elections in the history of Bangladesh along with undertaking many other political reforms. There are reports that many of the political decisions undertaken during that tumultuous period were heavily influenced by external actors. The paper examines some of those events.

There was widespread rumour that the military might declare martial law owing to the intransigence of the major political parties to arrive at a compromise and concurrent political violence during that period. International community was observing the events unfolding in Bangladesh and ultimately intervened in the midst of exacerbating political crisis of the country. Political analysts believe that it was the intervention of the election monitoring missions and the

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United Nations (UN) as well as the public and private efforts of the various diplomatic missions in Dhaka that brought about Iajuddin Ahmed's decision to step down as the Head of CTG and postpone elections (Fair, 2007). When Iajuddin Ahmed postponed the election and declared an army-backed state of emergency on 11 January, no foreign governments termed it as "coup".

The allegations of election rigging made by the then opposition AL were taken seriously by the international community as it was reflected in the withdrawal of support for the election by the European Union (EU) and the UN, as reported by the Economist on January 20, 2007. Fearing the army's involvement in aiding President Iajuddin Ahmed to hold January 22 elections, the UN also cautioned them to stay away from partisan intervention in politics, adding that this might jeopardise their lucrative role in UN peacekeeping operations. The same has been reflected in the book of the then army chief General Moeen U Ahmed. The army chief mentioned in his book *Shantir Swapne* (Dream for Peace) that he received a phone call on January 11, 2007 from UN Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping, Mr. Jean-Marie Guéhenno, who made it clear to him that the elections without participation of all political parties would not be acceptable to the international community. He further mentioned quoting Guéhenno, "if the army plays any role in such elections, the UN will consider with due importance with the withdrawal of Bangladeshi armies from the UN peacekeeping missions" (The Daily Star, 2010a). There were also reports that the UN sent a 'special letter' to the then Bangladesh government that apparently led to the postponement of January 22, 2007 election and hence the declaration of state of emergency.

In the face of a looming breakdown in civil order, it is believed that international community was instrumental behind the formation of the military backed caretaker government.

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International community, especially the ambassadors of the EU member countries extended their support to the military backed CTG in carrying out the electoral reforms and the anti-corruption drive. In the words of the then EU Ambassador to Dhaka Dr Stefan Frowein, it was quite clear that military backed CTG had their support, “indeed, we would like to see Bangladesh return to democracy and elected government, provided the conditions have to be there for free, fair and credible elections” (Kumar, 2007). British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury also shared the same view, pronounced his support for the caretaker government for holding credible elections. The diplomats of the western governments made a last minute attempt to resolve the political crisis of Bangladesh even before the formation of the military backed CTG led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. They had separate meetings with senior AL and BNP leaders at the residence of the Canadian high commissioner on January 11, 2007 (The Daily Star, 2010b).

It is quite obvious even from the Wikileaks revelations that the systemic important countries had their grip over the military backed CTG and continued to influence its decisions. It has been exposed by Wikileaks that a meeting was held among foreign diplomats which include the joint secretary of the Indian ministry of external affairs, Mohan Kumar, the political counsellor of the US embassy in Delhi, Ted Osius and the British High Commission's political counsellor in Delhi, Alex Hall who shared the respective countries' thoughts over the '1/11' political changeover in Bangladesh. The diplomats of the US, UK and India agreed that their respective countries would send “a core message” to the Fakhruddin government, pressing for elections and voter list reforms, while making clear that military needs to stay out of politics (The Daily star, 2010d).

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Religious Factors

Bangladeshi society is still very much divided over the question of identity. The major political parties in Bangladesh have either pro-Islamist or pro-secular agendas and are said to have their foreign backers. Bangladesh adopted a secular constitution after gaining independence from Pakistan, as nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism were the pillars of constitution. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the country's constitution lost its secular character. In an effort to receive economic support from the Gulf States, the subsequent military regimes General Ziaur Rahman (1977-1981) and General H.M. Ershad (1982-1990), wrapped the country's constitution in the mantle of Islam. General Ziaur Rahman began the gradual process of Islamization by removing secular principles and replacing them with religious ones such as, 'Bismillahi-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim' was added in the preamble of the constitution, and 'Secularism' was replaced with 'total faith and belief in Almighty Allah' in Article 8 (1) of the constitution. He went ahead by adopting an additional clause in Article 25 "to stabilize, preserve and strengthen fraternal ties with Muslim states on the basis of Islamic solidarity" (Rahman, 2010). Their effort has been well responded by the Gulf States with extended economic assistance to Bangladesh and in return they created conditions for the emergence of various Islamist groups to operate their activities more openly who were in hibernation during the Mujib era. By allowing the Islamist parties a free pass, they not only altered the terms of political discourse in Bangladesh by being a determinant factor in the electoral politics of the country but also paved the way for the rise of militant Islam in Bangladesh (Ganguly, 2006). Political analysts believe that parochial versions of Islam have powerful backers in the Gulf States. The Middle Eastern countries have funded heavily both in

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public and private Islamist initiatives in the country, effectively exporting their brand of Salafist Islam to Bangladesh. The money channeled from Gulf States, has enabled many Bangladeshi Islamists to run financial institutions, schools, hospitals, industries etc. and dictate terms in the political process because of their strong economic background (Hossain, n.d.).

It is undeniable that the Gulf States exert some influence in Bangladeshi politics as those states employ half of Bangladesh's labour export globally. Political commentators come to believe that Bangladesh's labour export, the country's second biggest source of foreign exchange, has fallen by 21 percent, as some of the Gulf States like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait have stopped recruiting Bangladeshi labours over the last three years, showing their displeasure to the ongoing war crime trials committed during 1971 (Thaindian News, 2010). The same is reflected in the words of Opposition leader Khaleda Zia's allegation in the parliament, "Bangladeshi workers are returning from different countries including Saudi Arabia due to the failure of the government" (The Daily Star, 2010c). Bryan and Baer (2005) also mentioned that allegations are there against countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan who directly provide funding to the political parties in Bangladesh advocating their brand of Islam.

Push Factors of External Influence

Bangladesh's strategic importance is enormous as it is located at the heart of two very important regions of the globe and might turn out to be a hub of South Asia and East Asia. Recognizing the country's strategic significance, a number of influential nations put forth their influence over the country for diverse reasons which are discussed in detail below.

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Transit/Connectivity

The geographical location of Bangladesh has literally separated India from seven of its North Eastern states known as the 'Seven Sisters'². The North Eastern states of India are effectively landlocked by Bangladesh except a 13 mile wide narrow strip known as Shiliguri Corridor or the *chicken's neck*. The northeastern region was connected to the mainland through broad roads, rails and inland waterways till the 1965 war with Pakistan (Dutta, 2010). With the emergence of Bangladesh things hardly changed except the fact that India was allowed to use river and air transit. The loss of centuries old transit routes through Bangladesh caused northeastern states of India to suffer from continuing isolation and economic backwardness as the distance between Kolkata and Agartala were extended to 1600 km from the earlier distance of 400 km (Pukhrem, 2011). India has long tried to pursue the Bangladesh government to allow transit for its economic activities, but the various Bangladeshi regimes have turned down India's plea on grounds of security. There is a deep division on the issue between the two major political parties in Bangladesh. BNP thinks India does not serve Bangladesh's interest, hence, it should not be allowed transit. On the other hand, Awami League argues that it is in Bangladesh's interest to be in good terms with India and Bangladesh can gain economically by providing transit. India did reap the opportunity as they pushed the Awami League government to agree on providing transit to India. It was agreed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in January 2010 that Bangladesh will allow use of Mongla and Chittagong sea ports for movement of goods to and from India through road and rail. Bangladesh also conveyed its intention to give Nepal and

² North East India comprises of seven states commonly known as the "Seven Sisters". They are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

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Bhutan access to Mongla and Chittagong ports (GoI, 2010). This would allow the Northeast to break out of its land-locked status and trade with the outer world. Bangladesh also agreed to provide transit routes to connect mainland with northeast but abstained from signing the deal as the two countries failed to ink an accord on sharing Teesta river water during Indian Prime Minister's Dhaka visit in September 2011 (BBC News, 2011).

The geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh has not been overlooked by Asia's another power China as both the countries have agreed to further develop and use the Chittagong port and build up a deep sea port at Sonadia Island. During Sheikh Hasina's trip to China following her New Delhi visit in 2010, Bangladesh gained financial assurance from China for the construction of road and rail links from Chittagong through Burma to Yunnan province in China, although not mentioned specifically in the joint statement between the two countries (Kumar, 2010). India seems to be worried at China's growing influence in Bangladesh as has been expressed in the words of an Indian defense analyst, Anand Kumar, "a Chinese role in the development of Chittagong port is particularly worrisome to India, since it would be similar to China's involvement in the development of Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Baluchistan" (DeSilva-Ranasinghe, 2011). He also argued that China has access to the Myanmar naval base on Hanggyi Island and has established a monitoring station on Coco Island, north of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Through these ports, China is trying to fulfill two objectives – encircle India as part of its 'string of pearls', and gain other openings to sea which would reduce its dependence on Malacca Straits.

It seems that Bangladesh is leveraging the country's increasingly important geostrategic position vis-à-vis Asia's two rising powers. This may be a win-win situation for both

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Bangladesh and China but India is concerned at China's growing interest in Bangladesh - India's traditional sphere of influence. The same was reflected in the statement of Kanwal Sibal, a former Indian foreign secretary who is now a member of the government's National Security Advisory Board, "this kind of effort is aimed at counterbalancing and undermining India's natural influence in these areas" (The New York Times, 2010). There seems to have a consensus between Awami League and BNP in terms of leveraging Bangladesh's strategic position to China which is not in the case of India.

Rise of Militancy/Extremism

Bangladesh has generally been heralded as a moderate Muslim state to the outer world. The country never really had a tradition of militant Islamism, has indeed moved in that direction in late 1990s as attacks by Islamist militants was on the rise and targeted opposition politicians, scholars, journalists, members of the judiciary, religious minorities, and members of the Islamic Ahmadiyya sect (Griswold, 2005). Bangladesh earned international attention during the rule of four party alliance led by BNP as the country was marred by militant attacks.

The growing activities of Islamist militant groups operating in Bangladesh and their possible ties to Al-Qaeda and other international terrorist outfits had become an international concern among the policy circles in the United States, India, and United Kingdom. The U.S. policymakers feared that the rise of militant activities in Bangladesh could easily turn it into a fertile ground for various radical groups to take root and operate with impunity, given the country's weak governance and inability to maintain political order. The U.S. security interests would be seriously jeopardized if Bangladesh becomes a safe haven for terrorists, and Islamist militants from Southeast Asia and the Middle East might flock in as they are facing U.S. pressure

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in Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the regional level, the policymakers in India were alarmed by the rise of radical Islamist elements in Bangladesh. India has alleged the government of Bangladesh of exacerbating tensions in India's Northeast by turning a blind eye to growing Bangladeshi illegal immigration into India and by cooperating with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI-D) in nefarious designs against India. India also accused that terrorist groups operating in Bangladesh were "directly or indirectly" linked to Pakistan in the event of bomb blasts in Mumbai that killed approximately 200 persons while wounding some 500 others on commuter trains in July 11, 2006 (Merchant and Johnson, 2006). Indian intelligence officials also claimed that explosives had come from Bangladesh although the bombers were from Pakistan based terrorist groups.

Initially, BNP led coalition backed by two Islamist parties, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and the Islamic Oikye Jote (IOJ) vigorously denied the existence of Islamist militancy in the country by saying these allegations as "hostile propaganda", designed to besmirch Bangladesh's reputation to the outer world. There were growing international pressure on Bangladesh to curb militancy as India was constantly alleging that Bangladesh was becoming a safe haven for Islamist militants operating against it (Fair, 2007). India enhanced its pressure on Bangladesh by pulling out from the scheduled regional economic summit – South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), due to be held in Dhaka in 2005, without any prior notice, citing security concerns, compelled Bangladesh to postpone this important multilateral event (Fair, 2005).

The Four Party Alliance Government remained unmoved until the United States wielded pressure on Bangladesh through multilateral aid consortia to crush elements of Islamist militants

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in the country. The government responded instantly to this well-orchestrated, multilateral pressure put forwarded on Bangladesh, as a donors' conference held in Washington in early 2005, co-chaired by the World Bank, the European Union, and the State Department, discussed the growing militant activities in Bangladesh. The donors threatened to impose punitive measures against Bangladesh if actions were not taken to curb militancy (Ganguly, 2006; Fair 2007). The government seemed to have bowed down to the donors' pressure as it began an unprecedented crackdown on the militant groups it repeatedly had denied even existed and arrested the most notorious militants such as Bangla Bhai.

The influence of United States in Bangladesh's governance process is quite visible as the latter has turned out to be a partner of United States' 'war on terror' and made necessary legislations in countering terrorism. The United States' Department of Justice (DOJ) assisted Bangladesh in signing all the 13 international Conventions on terrorism (US Department of Justice, n.d.). Bangladesh is also a party to the SAARC Regional Convention on Terrorism including its Protocol. Necessary domestic legislations like Anti-Terrorism Act 2009 and Anti-Money laundering Act have been promulgated to adhere to the provisions of the said international instruments (Bangladesh Bank, n.d.). The Money Laundering Act has been revised to check money laundering and financing in terrorism in line with the recommendations by the US Department of Justice (Rahman, 2011). The Anti-Terrorism Act 2009 includes all international reporting requirements as well as provisions for punishment for non-compliance of such reporting by the designated reporting agencies (Momen, 2010). Recently, the Parliament of Bangladesh has passed the Mutual Assistance on Criminal Matters Act, 2012 to join a global initiative to combat terrorism and hold the trial of criminal activities (Bdnews24.com, 2012).

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Containing Insurgency to NES

Geographically, the Northeastern states (NES) of India are barely connected with the mainland through a narrow strip in between Bangladesh and Nepal called Shiliguri Corridor or the *chicken's neck*. The Northeastern states of India, adjoining Bangladesh have long experienced secessionist movements providing attractive opportunity for the external actors to exploit ongoing unrest in the region.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has long provided substantial military, economic, and moral support to these secessionist groups following its war with India. As India patched up its ties with China, the PRC ended backing these insurgent groups. Although, China stopped supporting the insurgency in NES, the Indian authorities came to believe that other nations are taking advantage of the secessionist movements against the Indian State by providing support and sanctuary to the insurgents. India claims that various Bangladeshi regimes have provided sanctuaries, weaponry, and other forms of logistical support to the insurgents that led to the exacerbation of the conflict in Northeast India. To suppress the secessionist movements, India has repeatedly deployed troops in Assam and other northeastern states using considerable force. It has been able to mitigate Mizo and Naga insurgency to some extent with the creation of two new states Mizoram and Nagaland. But, the insurgency in Assam is merely smoldering, led by United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Ignoring the shortcomings of India's policies that led to the demands for autonomy and secession, Indian policymakers allege that ULFA insurgents enjoy protection and support in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh took India's concern regarding terrorism and insurgency seriously when Awami League government came in power in 2008. During her visit to New Delhi in January

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2010, Bangladesh Prime Minister assured her counterpart that the territory of Bangladesh would not be allowed for activities inimical to India and resolved not to allow their respective territory to be used for training, sanctuary and other operations by domestic or foreign terrorist/militant and insurgent organizations and their operatives (Karim, 2010). Both the countries have signed three agreements in this regard (High Commission of India, 2010).

- a. Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters
- b. Agreement on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons
- c. Agreement on Combating International Terrorism, Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking

The present government has showed its willingness not to provide Bangladesh's territory to be used by the insurgents when it arrested several leaders of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and handed them over to India (Saurabh, 2010). Bangladesh also agreed to hand over top ULFA leader Anup Chetia to the Indian authorities immediately after the legal process involving his deportation is over (The Times of India, 2012).

Concluding Observations

The intervention of the external actors does not always go against the interest of the nation. If we analyze the events leading to the formation of the CTG on 12th January 2007, the country was marred by political violence and a civil war like situation was prevailing. The intervention of the external actors that led to the declaration of state of emergency and the formation of military backed CTG has actually salvaged the country from a protracted political unrest. In this particular case, their intervention can be termed as 'win-win' as it did not hamper the citizens' interest. But this might not be the case always.

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It is the internal political dynamics and behavior of main political actors that invite external players to play a role in Bangladesh's internal affairs. The 'zero-sum' political culture always creates a room for external forces to exploit the opportunity. Democratic consolidation is the best answer to keep away the outside actors to intervene in our political process. The political will to sustain democracy within and beyond party has to be strong, and democratic norms and procedures need to be followed. There are plenty of instances that indicate that Bangladesh is susceptible to external pressures. Although Bangladesh is no longer an aid dependent country, important countries like United States are still in a position to wield considerable influence over the government to change or undertake certain policies. The political forces within the country pave the way for the external actors to maneuver in Bangladesh affairs. It is in this context, the best deterrent to undue external intervention in politics and policy making is to create a political consensus among the political parties on vital national issues, and that public policies are driven by national interest and backed by the citizens of the country.

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