

ISSN: 1683-8475
E-ISSN: 2709-9016

NDC ***E-JOURNAL***

Security Through Knowledge



VOLUME 05

NUMBER 02

NOVEMBER 2025

**A Peer Reviewed Professional E-Journal of the
National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh**

<http://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php>



Editorial Team

CHIEF PATRON

Lieutenant General Mohammad Shaheenul Haque, OSP, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc

Commandant

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Mohammad Ridhwanul Haq, Ph.D

Professor & Coordinator, Management Development Programme

Institute of Business Administration (IBA)

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Colonel Muhammad Nurul Amin, BSP, afwc, psc

Director (Research and Academic)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Lieutenant Colonel Md Badrul Ahsan Khan, afwc, psc, Engineers

Senior Research Fellow

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

EDITORIAL ADVISORS

Major General Md Masudur Rahman, ndc, psc

Senior Directing Staff (Army)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Major General A S M Bahauddin, SUP, SPP, ndc, afwc, psc, G

Senior Directing Staff (Army)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Rear Admiral Golam Sadeq, NBP, NGP, ndc, ncc, psc

Senior Directing Staff (Navy)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Air Vice Marshal M Mustafizur Rahman, BSP, GUP, nswc, afwc, psc, GD(P)

Senior Directing Staff (Air)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Major General Md Rashed Amin, OSP, rcds, ndc, psc (Retired)

Senior Directing Staff (Adjunct)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Major General Md Moshfequr Rahman, BSP, SGP, SUP, ndc, psc (Retired)

Senior Directing Staff (Adjunct)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Additional Secretary Yasmeen Parveen, ndc

Senior Directing Staff (Civil)

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

EDITORIAL THANKS

The Executive Editor would like to thank the following scholars for their precious support:

**Dr. Major General Abu Sayed Siddique,
OSP, SUP, SPP, afwc, psc (Retired)**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Shahedul Anam
Khan, ndc, psc (Retired)**
*Associate Editor, The Daily Star
Dhaka, Bangladesh*

**Brigadier General Tamjidul Haque
Chowdhury, SGP, ndc, afwc, psc (LPR)**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Mamun-Ur-Rashid,
ndc, afwc, psc (LPR)**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Gulam Mahiuddin
Ahmed, SGP, ndc, afwc, psc, PhD**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Abu Hena
Mohammad Razi Hasan, SUP, SPP,
ndc, psc**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Mohammad Sheraf
Uddin Khan, ndc, afwc, psc**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Shams Mohammad
Mamun, ndu, psc**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Raisul Islam, SPP,
ndc, afwc, psc**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Md Shafiqul
Hossain, SPP, afwc, psc**
Bangladesh Army

**Brigadier General Md Mahmudur
Rahman Minhaz, SUP, afwc, psc**
Bangladesh Army

**Colonel Mohammad Kabir Hossain,
PhD**
Bangladesh Army

**Lieutenant Colonel Md Arifur Rahman,
psc, PhD, AEC**
Bangladesh Army

Professor Anwarul Hasan Sufi, PhD

Former Professor

Department of Psychology

University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh

Professor Mohammad Tarikul Islam

Professor

Department of Government and Politics

Jahangirnagar University

Savar, Bangladesh

Dr. Muhammad Shariat Ullah

Professor

Department of Organization Strategy and

Leadership

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Professor Mohammad Mozahidul

Islam, PhD

Professor

Department of History

Jahangirnagar University

Savar, Bangladesh

Shahab Enam Khan, PhD

Professor

Department of International Relations

Jahangirnagar University

Savar, Bangladesh

Dr. Tanzimuddin Khan

Professor

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Md Kamal Uddin

Professor, Department of Psychology

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Dr. M. Fakrul Islam

Professor, Department of Social Work

University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh

Dr. Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Professor

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Dr. Md. Abdul Kabil Khan

Associate Professor and Director, MSS

Programme

Department of Journalism, Media and

Communication

Daffodil International University

Dhaka, Bangladesh

LANGUAGE EDITORS

Brigadier General K M Amirul Islam, SPP, PhD (Retired)

Director, Daffodil Institute of Languages & Culture (DILC)

Daffodil International University

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Nishat Sultana

Associate Professor

Department of English

Begum Badrunnessa Government Girls College

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Tania Tasneem Hossain

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Jahangirnagar University

Savar, Bangladesh

COPY EDITORS

Md. Nazrul Islam

Assistant Director

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Azad Rahaman Munna

Assistant Programmer

National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Foreword

In an era defined by rapid transformations, expanding security challenges, and evolving strategic priorities, the value of informed scholarship cannot be overstated. Intellectual engagement, grounded in critical analysis, empirical evidence, and creative reasoning—continues to play a pivotal role in advancing national resilience and global understanding. The National Defence College (NDC), Bangladesh, remains steadfast in its commitment to nurturing such scholarship through the NDC E-JOURNAL, a distinguished double-blind peer-reviewed academic platform dedicated to promoting multidimensional research.

Since its inception, the NDC E-JOURNAL has served as a credible and vibrant space for structured inquiry, hosting contributions from military professionals, academic scholars, policy researchers, and experts from diverse disciplines. This edition further strengthens that tradition, bringing together authors from the armed forces, retired military leaders, civil organizations, and academic institutions. Their collective insights enrich contemporary debates on national security, strategic studies, governance, development, and emerging domains of knowledge.

The articles featured in this volume reflect the breadth and depth of modern scholarship. From analyses of non-traditional security threats in the maritime frontier to examinations of cognitive readiness in military decision-making, from studies on misinformation and its implications for peace to explorations of urban planning, education, and humanitarian strategy, each contribution offers valuable perspectives relevant to Bangladesh and the wider global community. This diversity of thought underscores the journal's mission to bridge research with policy, practice, and strategic foresight.

I extend my sincere appreciation to all authors for their thoughtful and rigorous contributions. My heartfelt thanks go to the peer reviewers whose expertise and critical engagement uphold the academic integrity of this publication. I also commend the Editorial Board for their dedication, professionalism, and commitment to ensuring the quality and timely publication of this edition.

I remain hopeful that this edition of the NDC E-JOURNAL will serve as a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners, enriching national discourse and reinforcing our collective pursuit of strategic excellence.



Lieutenant General Mohammad Shaheenul Haque
OSP, BSP, ndc, hdmc, psc
Commandant, National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh
Chief Patron, NDC E-JOURNAL

The Editor in Chief's Note

The NDC E-JOURNAL, a double-blind peer-reviewed scholarly publication, remains committed to fostering rigorous research and informed debate on issues central to national and international security, development, and governance. In an era marked by complex strategic transformations and evolving non-traditional challenges, the journal continues to provide a credible platform for high-quality, interdisciplinary scholarship. All submissions undergo a stringent review process to ensure academic integrity, analytical depth, and originality.

The November 2025 edition reflects a strengthened diversity in authorship and subject matter, with contributions from armed forces officers, retired military professionals, civil researchers, and academics from various institutions. The articles explore a wide spectrum of contemporary concerns—ranging from maritime security and cognitive readiness for military decision-making to misinformation dynamics, strategic partnerships, conflict transformation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, educational strategies for sovereignty, metropolitan livability, and youth perceptions of national security threats. This breadth underscores the journal's role in integrating perspectives from security studies, governance, social sciences, and technological advancement.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the Chief Patron, Editorial Advisors, and the Editorial Team for their continued dedication. My gratitude also goes to the authors and reviewers whose contributions uphold the scholarly quality of this publication. I acknowledge with thanks the support of the NDC staff, whose assistance ensures the smooth production of each volume.

The NDC E-JOURNAL remains committed to advancing scholarly dialogue and contributing meaningfully to the strategic discourse of Bangladesh and beyond. We look forward to receiving further analytical and impactful submissions in future editions.



Mohammad Ridhwanul Haq, Ph.D

*Professor & Coordinator, Management Development Programme
Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka
Editor in Chief, NDC E-JOURNAL*

Index

ARTICLES

1. MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION: IMPACT ON PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS (CHT) 01-20
Brigadier General Gulam Mahiuddin Ahmed, SGP, ndc, afwc, psc, PhD
2. BETWEEN NEOREALISM AND HUMANITARIAN IMPERATIVES: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF BANGLADESH'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS IN RESOLVING THE FORCIBLY DISPLACED MYANMAR NATIONALS (FDMN) CRISIS 21-52
Brigadier General Ahmed Zamiul Islam, ndc, afwc, psc, M Phil
3. SECURING THE BLUE FRONTIER : ACCOUNTING FOR NON-TRADITIONAL MARITIME SECURITY CHALLENGES FOR BANGLADESH 53-73
Captain Md Zillur Rahman, (TAS), psc, BN
4. CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS: BRIDGING PEACE THEORY AND UN PRACTICE 74-105
Colonel S M Abdur Rouf, afwc, psc, G (Retired)
5. DESIGNING A MENTAL MOBILITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING DECISION-MAKING IN BANGLADESH ARMY OFFICERS 106-125
Lieutenant Colonel Md Arif Hossain, afwc, psc, G, Artillery

6. HOW UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BANGLADESH PERCEIVE NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS FROM SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY 126-148
Md. Mahbub Rahman
Associate Professor of Sociology
Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology, Saidpur
7. MODERN OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY THROUGH DECEPTION AND DETERRENCE: A STRATEGIC APPRAISAL FOR THE BANGLADESH ARMY 149-180
Major Akib Ahsan Teas, psc
8. EDUCATION AS A STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT FOR SOVEREIGNTY: BANGLADESH IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE 181-208
Major Md Akther Hossan, psc, AEC
9. SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT, DENSITY TRENDS AND LIVABILITY ASPECTS FOR METROPOLITAN PLANNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR RAJSHAHI CITY 209-238
Muhammad Waresul Hassan Nipun
Assistant Professor, Department of Urban and Regional Planning
Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET), Rajshahi and
Farhana Muna, Urban Development Specialist at Tiller, Dhaka



MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION: IMPACT ON PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

Brigadier General Gulam Mahiuddin Ahmed, SGP, ndc, afwc, psc, PhD

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 04th April 2025; Accepted: 14th September 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: Inconsistencies in reporting-truths mixed with lies, partial truths, one-sided accounts, and outright fabrications-have long shaped narratives of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) incidents, influencing perceptions, deepening mistrust, and obstructing peace consolidation, particularly where relations between Bengalis and ethnic minorities remain fragile. This study examines how misinformation and disinformation continue to undermine peace and human security in the CHT in the post-Accord period. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, analyzing key incidents and patterns of problematic information. Findings suggest that misinformation and disinformation not only intensified insecurity during episodes of communal strife but also contributed to the continued fragility of peace after the insurgency. The study argues that equal emphasis must be placed on both the “protection of people” and “empowerment of people” dimensions of the human security framework to counter these challenges.

Keywords: *The Chittagong Hill Tracts; Misinformation; Disinformation; Peace; Security.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus (525-456 BCE) observed that “truth is the first casualty of war.” Control over information has remained a central element of conflict ever since. Competing parties often seek to define events in their own terms, sometimes leading to the spread of misleading or false narratives (Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Freund, Oberauer, & Krueger, 2013). Importantly, the manipulation of information is not limited to wartime; it persists during peace, shaping perceptions and fueling insecurity.

In this context, two related but distinct terms-misinformation and disinformation-require attention. Both refer to misleading or inaccurate information and are collectively referred to as “problematic information.” They are sometimes used interchangeably. In contrast, only “intent” distinguishes one from the another. The inaccuracy of misinformation may be accidental or unintentional. On the other hand, disinformation is purposely untrue or deceptive (Jack, 2017). Moreover, Guess and Lyons (2020), who regard disinformation as a subcategory of misinformation, assert that disinformation is intentionally propagated and intended to deceive (p.11). In a similar vein, Fallis (2015) noted that disinformation “has the function of misleading someone” (p.413).

A society’s peace and security can be negatively impacted by misinformation and disinformation due to their effect on the psychological aspect of the conflict. This has been reflected in numerous incidents in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) from the beginning of the insurgency to the present. Based on an analysis of key occurrences in the CHT, it is clear that misinformation and disinformation have a cause-and-effect relationship with events that disrupted the region’s tranquility both before and after the insurgency ended. Moreover, a review of existing literature shows that while several studies examine peace and conflict in the CHT, very few focus specifically on the role of misinformation and disinformation in shaping perceptions of security and post-Accord peace. This highlights a gap that the current study seeks to address.

This study, therefore, addresses the research question: “How did misinformation and disinformation contribute to the disturbance of the peace and security situation after the signing of the CHT Accord?” In order to answer this question, this paper analyzes both past and contemporary cases of misinformation in the CHT, reviews the literature on the subject, and situates the findings within the human security framework. In doing so, the study highlights how problematic information continues to shape the region’s fragile peace and offers ways forward for reducing its negative impact.

RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

This study focuses on how misinformation and disinformation impact peace and security in the CHT. Guided by an interpretivist research philosophy, the study aims to understand human experiences in a complex and diverse context, capturing the perceptions of both Bengali and Pahari communities. The study

follows a deductive and exploratory qualitative approach, using case studies and phenomenological design to examine how people perceive the peace and security situation.

Data were collected from 1,200 survey participants, including 112 online respondents, selected to ensure diversity in ethnicity, religion, occupation, and socioeconomic status. In addition, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and content analysis of published and unpublished documents were conducted. The data were analyzed by identifying key ideas, grouping similar ideas into categories, and comparing different perspectives. Findings were validated through triangulation of multiple sources and expert opinions, ensuring that the results are credible, replicable, and provide a solid basis for recommendations to enhance peace and human security in the CHT.

PEACE AND SECURITY

A social and political environment that promotes prosperity for people, societies, and countries is considered peace. It is a combination of equality and the social or economic well-being of people. The ideas of negative and positive peace generally serve as the basis for the concept of peace. Wherein the negative peace is the “absence of personal violence” and the positive peace is the “absence of structural violence” (Galtung, 1969). In other words, the absence of violence, as well as the absence of the fear of violence, is known as negative peace. Positive peace, on the other hand, refers to the views, processes, and institutions that establish and maintain peaceful societies.¹

The idea of negative peace is widely perceived as “narrow.” The ideas of positive and negative peace are also thought to be supportive of one another. Therefore, the broader concept of peace, such as positive peace, is more appealing. Moreover, instead of static conditions, it is considered to be a dynamically envisioned goal of global and national communities. A sense of positive peace is established on the fundamental as well as unavoidable ideals of justice, peaceful dispute resolution, democracy, non-violence, development, and human rights (Rotfeld & Symonides, 1998, p. 8). Peace, for the purpose of this study, is viewed as a societal condition conducive to harmonious social, economic, and political development. As Wallensteen (2015) defines, “Quality peace means the creation of post-war

¹*In addition to the absence of violence, positive peace is linked to many other desirable social traits, such as improved economic results, wellbeing indicators, levels of inclusivity, and environmental performance. See, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/defining-the-concept-of-peace/>. Retrieved on May 20, 2022.*

conditions that make the inhabitants of a society (be it an area, a country, a region, a continent, or a planet) secure in life and dignity now and for the foreseeable future” (p. 6).

Security and peace are, on the one hand, inseparable and, on the other hand, are mostly discussed combinedly. “The term security presents the feeling of peace and harmony at the psychological level, a feeling of well-being guarded for several uncertainties” (Jaglan, 2016, p. 83). It is also said that “security involves the ability to pursue cherished political and social ambitions” (Williams, 2008, p. 5). The traditional notion of security focuses on the danger of military or armed conflicts or threats against a nation. Again, the non-traditional notion shifts the focus from nation to individuals, from state security to human security and encompasses the freedom of individuals from fear and wants.

The concept of security has altered since the conclusion of the Cold War, “from the protection of state and its borders by military means to the protection of individuals from a wider range of threats to their well-being and security” (Kapor, 2016, p. 68). Therefore, the concept of security has shifted its focus from the traditional state-centric concept to the security of an individual, their protection and empowerment. In so doing the human element of security, rights and development have been brought together.

To provide an explicit definition, the Report on Human Development of 1994 defined human security from two main aspects. “First, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life whether in homes, in jobs or communities” (UNDP, 1994, p. 23). Subsequently, the Commission on Human Security (CHS) emphasized the safeguarding of the vital core of the human in a way that improves human freedom and empowerment.

The basic elements of human security include freedom from fear and freedom from want. However, the third elements ‘Freedom from Indignity’ has been included later (UN General Assembly, 21 March 2005).

- Freedom from Fear. This focuses on the absence of violence and is a more focused facet of human security. It is a state that stands out for being free of widespread dangers to people’s safety, rights, or even lives. It refers to defence against harm, both verbal and physical. Direct violence against people, violence resulting from armed conflict, criminal activity, and political threats, which include breaches of human rights, are among the threats.

- Freedom from Want. This is a broader definition of human security that emphasizes the social and economic fronts and aims to denote freedom from poverty. It deals with non-traditional and non-military security challenges like disease, poverty, and environmental problems. It refers to defending individuals against dangers to their well-being and sense of worth. It poses a socioeconomic danger to employment, income levels, and access to key public services including housing, education, and health care.
- Freedom from Indignity. By allowing people the freedom to choose their paths and seize opportunities that will empower them, it refers to the development of a higher quality of life and greater human well-being. The CHS published its first report, *Human Security Now*, in 2003. The Freedom to Live in Dignity is now one of the essential goals of human security, according to this paper. Thus, it entails defending the core values of democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedoms.

Peace and security are closely connected. Peace means living without fear or violence, where people and communities can enjoy social, economic, and political well-being. Security is the absence of threats—whether war, crime, poverty, or human rights abuses—that allows people and the state to function safely and effectively. In this way, peace and security support each other: a secure environment helps create peace, and a peaceful society strengthens overall security. Security also includes protecting individuals’ freedom from fear, want, and indignity, so that they can live with dignity, pursue opportunities, and exercise their rights. Together, peace and security create the conditions for a stable and thriving society.

The threats to human security have been classified into seven categories. These are personal security, economic security, health security, food security, environmental security, political security, and community security (HSU, 2009, p. 7). Considering the post-conflict situation in the CHT, the non-traditional notion of security is considered in this study, where it primarily addresses the individual. Therefore, this study limits ‘security’ within an individual’s safety and freedom from both direct and indirect threats of violence. To be more specific, the focus of this study is specifically on the personal, community, and political aspects of human security.

In analyzing the post-conflict situation in the CHT, Matthew Wilkinson (2013) employed human security as an analytical framework, breaking it into two fundamentals. The first addresses direct and immediate threats to individuals,

while the second refers to emancipation, empowerment, and participation in the community, the absence of which constitutes insecurity (pp. 42-43). This study adopts these fundamentals but narrows the focus to threats shaped or intensified by misinformation and disinformation (Figure 1).

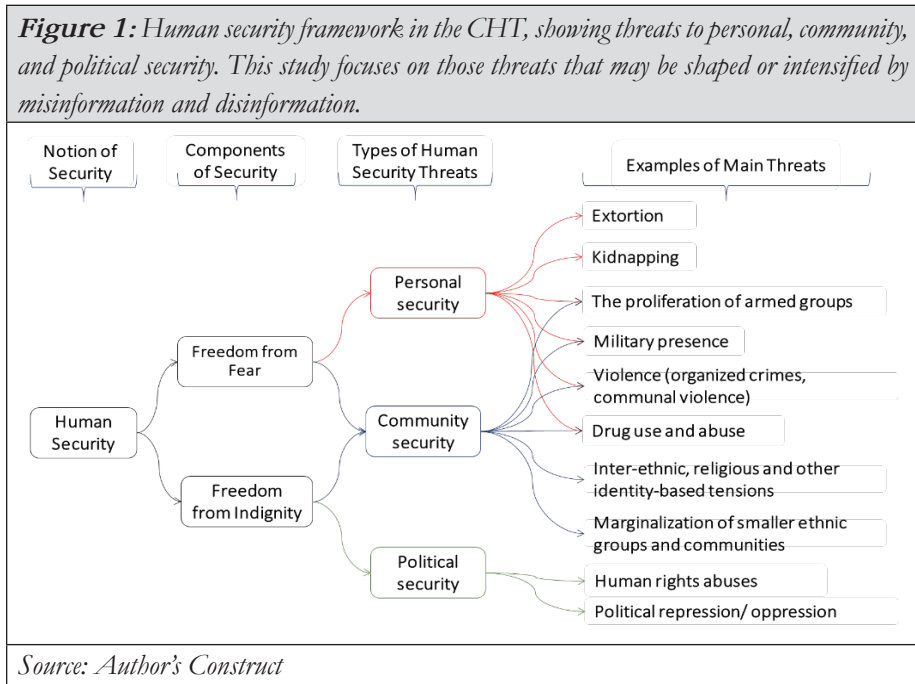


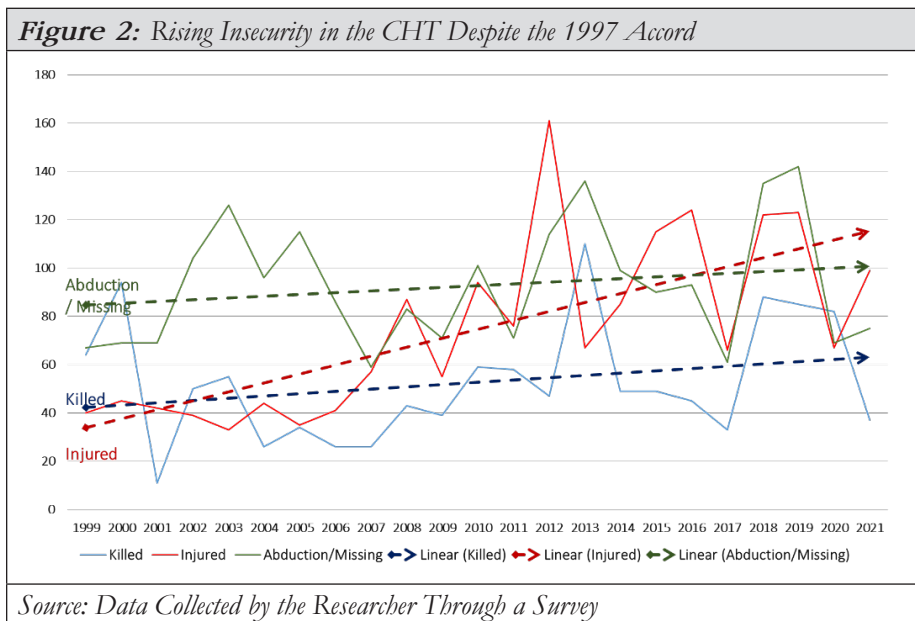
Figure 1 illustrates the human security framework applied in the CHT. Human security is divided into two fundamentals: freedom from fear and freedom from indignity. Freedom from fear is linked to personal and community security, which are threatened by issues such as extortion, kidnapping, armed groups, violence, drug abuse, and inter-ethnic tensions. Freedom from indignity relates to political security, where threats include human rights abuses and political repression. The analysis concentrates only on those threats that misinformation and disinformation may exacerbate.

THE CURRENT STATE OF PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE REGION

The signing of the CHT Accord in 1997 signified the end of the insurgency while also ushering in a new period of peace for people from all walks of life in

the region. However, even after two decades, the sound of dissatisfaction over the peace and security conditions in the CHT, though not loud, but does exist. As John Tripura has commented, “peace is still elusive” (Tripura, 2019). In the same vein, Mangal Kumar Chakma commented, “the situation in the region is still overwhelmingly fragile”. He went further to explain the situation, “Anarchy has been created in the area by allowing conflicts, fighting, killings, abductions, extortions, etc., through sheltering and indulging Anti-Accord elements and fundamentalist groups” (Chakma M. K., 2021) .

In this context, Figure 2 shows trends of killings, injuries, and abductions in the CHT since the 1997 Accord. Killings have stayed relatively low, but injuries and abductions have increased over time, with abductions remaining the highest. These patterns suggest that violence has persisted despite the peace agreement, keeping insecurity high. The study, which included respondents from all communities-ethnic minorities as well as Bengali-found that only around one-tenth of people feel safe and secure all the time. Most individuals reported experiencing insecurity mainly during periods of communal unrest. Interestingly, a similar proportion believe that a person’s threat level may be linked to their occupation or political affiliation, with those engaged in trade or business considered more at risk than those involved in armed cadres.



ORGANIZING INSURGENCY: MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

During the partition of 1947, the tribal leaders made significant efforts to secure the inclusion of the CHT in India. Their actions may be seen as an expression of their dislike towards the Muslim communities in the region, given the historical and geographical connections between the CHT and the Chittagong area, as well as the fact that the majority of its residents were not Hindus. Subsequently, the Pakistan government's constitutional and administrative reforms, inadequate compensation for the Kaptai Project, and the mischievous conduct of a few Bengali people caused the anti-Muslim feeling of the late 1940s to transform into animosity toward the Bengalis in the 1960s.

Against this backdrop, the concept of armed struggle was first conceived in the 1960s by the local leaders who had been indoctrinated by the communist ideology. The educated youths committed themselves to foster political consciousness among the local populace under the pretense of social welfare initiatives, operating under the auspices of the Welfare Association. The collective efforts of the CHT Welfare Association, CHT Teachers Association, and Pahari Chhatra Parisad (Hill Tracts Students Association) helped MN Larma, a young leftist leader, win the general election for the provincial legislature in 1970. In the meantime, he formed a clandestine organization, named the Rangamati Communist Party (RCP). The RCP had a military wing called Gana Mukti Fauz (Peoples Liberation Army). Following the election of 1970, JB Larma, alias Santu Larma, the younger brother of MN Larma, began recruiting members for the RCP, which would be the vanguard of the movement for self-determination of the local inhabitants in the region.

The RCP emerged as a regional political party named Parbattya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) in 1972. The Liberation War, which continued for nine months left Bangladesh in the middle of many grave challenges. The leftist leaders of the CHT utilized the contemporary challenges of the newly-born Bangladesh government and capitalized on some of the happenings of the CHT to motivate people to support their movement and join the armed cadre of the PCJSS. In so doing, the facts have been distorted through fabrication and even complete exaggerations have also happened on some occasions. Furthermore, they disregarded the government's sincerity and efforts to promote the welfare of the populace and its good intentions.

Once discussing psychological operations, Melissa Dittman (2003) offered the opinion that “one side may try to demonize the other by using cognitive stereotypes and simplifications while making their own side appear just” (Mandel, 2006, p. 130) and PCJSS’s efforts were comparable to this type of psychological operation. As in the case of CHT, in most cases, misinformation and disinformation existed while disseminating various incidents in support of the rationales for taking up arms against the government (Table 1). The trend did not stop even after the beginning of the insurgency and continued thereafter as well.

<i>Table 1: Misinformation and Disinformation in the Origin of Insurgency</i>	
Disseminated Information²	Other Side of the Coin
“The demand of regional autonomy was taken as a secessionist movement and a massive military operation was carried out in the district”	The demand for hill people was not met by the military response. ³
“The army and Rakkhi Bahini (Paramilitary Force) went from one village to another to search out illegal arms”	Military operations conducted against Mizo, Razakars, armed miscreants, Sarbahara Party etc. All the operations were conducted in specific areas for a specific period only. Moreover, the Rakkhi Bahini was never deployed in the CHT.
“Repatriated Bengalis were rehabilitated in different parts of the Hill Tracts”	The government never rehabilitated any Bengalis in the CHT before the commencement of the insurgency.

²Revolt in Chittagong Hill Tracts. (1978). *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13(17), p.723-727.

³Professor Khairul Chowdhury (2002) has concluded, “I have consulted number of books that I have used in this study [research on Jumma Nationalism]. I have not come across any mention that the demands of the hill people were met by military response.” (p.107). See, *Articulation and Dynamics of “Jumma Nationalism”: the Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, an unpublished thesis submitted to Dalhousie University, Halifax for the degree of M.A.*

Table 1: Misinformation and Disinformation in the Origin of Insurgency	
Disseminated Information²	Other Side of the Coin
<p>“The policy of Sheikh Mujib’s government was to force the tribal people to lose their identity in the greater Bengali society of the country”</p>	<p>Sheikh Mujib assured the delegation of CHT on 29 January 1972, “full protection of tribal way of life with its own tradition and culture as well.”⁴ Subsequently, through his call to “become Bengalees”, he urged the hill people to accept the reality of an independent Bangladesh. He used Bengali identity to signify citizenship in the state, not ethnic identity. Considering the different communities, ethnic characteristics, and historical background of the local people, it is clear that the then Prime Minister wanted to strengthen national unity without creating political conflict in the new state.</p>
<p><i>Source: From Various Sources, as Indicated in the Footnotes</i></p>	

CONTRIBUTION OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION TO THE DISTURBANCE OF PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE REGION AFTER SIGNING OF THE CHT ACCORD

In the context of CHT, misinformation and disinformation have several manifestations. The overwhelming majority of the time, among the varying sorts of inconsistencies involving misinformation and disinformation, the truth is mixed with lies. By doing this, the chosen narrative of the incident typically replaces the real version. In addition, the victim and the culprit are occasionally be switched around in the story.

Reporting incidents from a single point of view, usually ignoring the other side, is another hallmark of misinformation and disinformation. In such cases, only part of the truth is shared, and the group involved rarely gets the opportunity to know the full reality. Most people remain unaware of the other side because information is often shaped to fit societal beliefs or biased toward a particular group. Ironically, there have even been occasions when entire false accounts were spread.

⁴*The Bangladesh Observer, Hill Tracts tribal team calls on Sk. Mujib, 30 January 1972, p.8.*

There are also cases where the actors who were there during incidents have an impact on how their stories are reported. As with the foregoing discussion, the misinformation and disinformation in the context of the CHT may be put under four broad categories as follows:

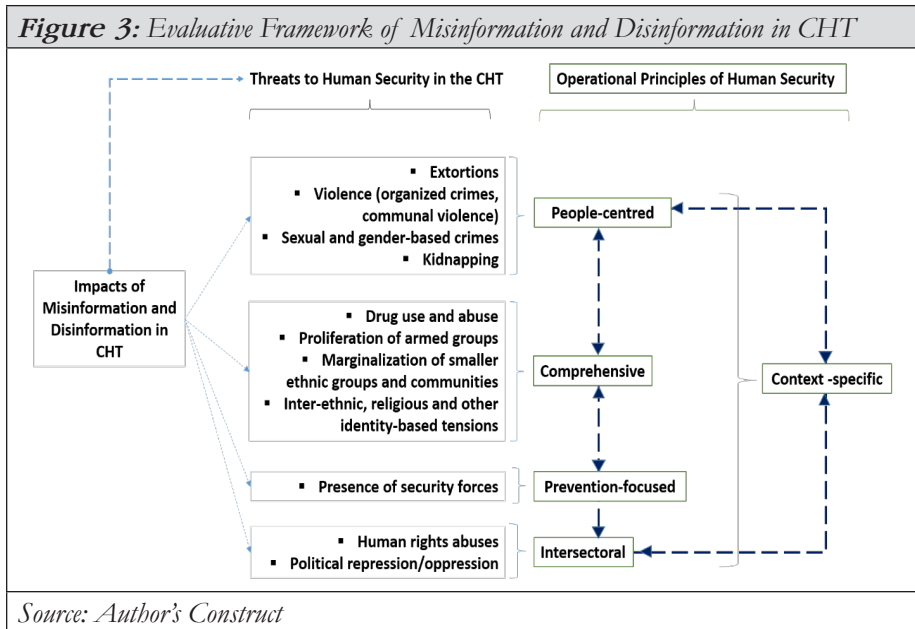
- Lies and truth are mixed.
- Some truths have only been partially told.
- Reports of incidents are presented from a single perspective.
- A complete fabrication has been spread.

IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE CHT

Five principles - people - centred, intersectoral, prevention - focused, comprehensive, and context-specific-guide the operationalization of human security (Kubo, 2017). Applied to the CHT, they provide a framework for understanding how misinformation and disinformation exacerbate threats to peace and security, as shown in Figure 3. Beyond direct threats, several underlying factors contribute to human security challenges in the CHT. Misinformation and disinformation, for example, affect multiple aspects of daily life, showing why human security must be addressed in an integrated way.

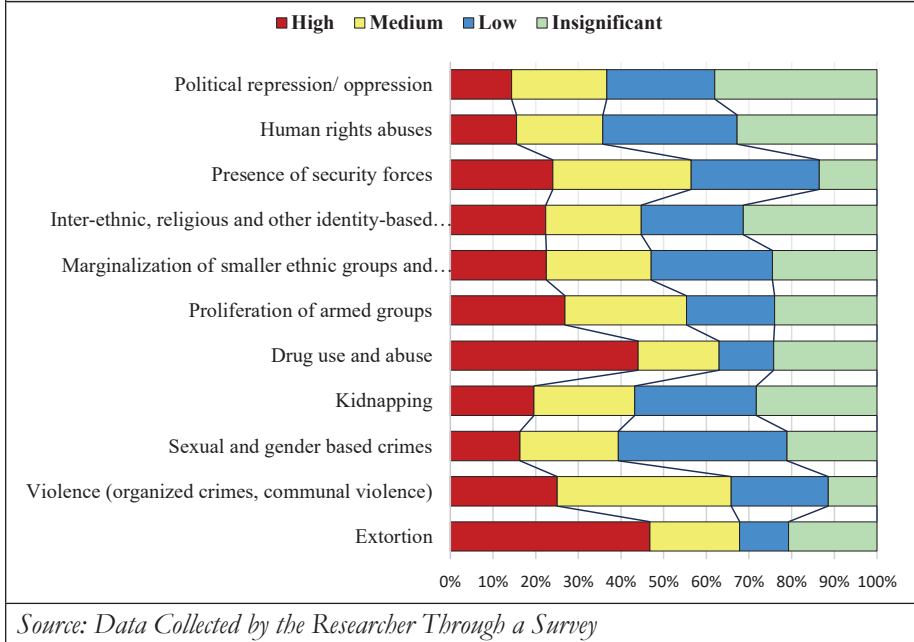
A human security approach is the most effective way to tackle these problems. It is people-centred, focusing on individual safety and addressing threats like extortion, violence, sexual and gender-based crimes, and kidnapping. It is comprehensive, recognizing that issues such as drug abuse, armed groups, and discrimination against ethnic minorities are interconnected and require coordinated strategies. It is prevention-focused, aiming to address the root causes of insecurity rather than relying solely on military responses. It is intersectoral, acknowledging that threats like human rights abuses and political oppression are worsened for certain groups because of ethnicity or beliefs. Finally, it is context-specific, with solutions tailored to the CHT's unique history, culture, and political situation, making interventions more effective and sustainable. Figure 3 illustrates how these five principles are interconnected and mutually reinforcing in practice: a people-centred focus requires comprehensive strategies, which in turn depend on intersectoral cooperation and preventive action, all adapted to the specific context. This integrated approach is particularly relevant to the CHT, where the overlapping effects of misinformation and disinformation cut across social,

political, and security domains, demanding responses that are both holistic and locally grounded.



The general population in the CHT feels the effects of extortion, crimes against women and girls, kidnapping, organized or communal violence, and other threats most strongly. Figure 4, titled “Degree of Impacts of Misinformation and Disinformation,” shows how misinformation and disinformation are perceived to influence these security concerns, with extortion, drug abuse, and the proliferation of armed groups seen as most affected, while political repression, sexual and gender-based crimes, inter-ethnic and religious tensions, marginalization of smaller groups, human rights abuses, and the presence of security forces are generally affected to a lesser degree. Overall, misinformation and disinformation act as key aggravating factors. Together, these issues create a complex security challenge that requires responses beyond military or diplomatic measures, highlighting the importance of understanding the links between security, development, and human rights, as well as the role of security personnel in mitigating risks.

Figure 4: Degree of Impacts of Misinformation and Disinformation



VIOLENT INCIDENTS ATTRIBUTED TO MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

According to the study conducted by the researcher, due to the direct or indirect effect of misinformation and disinformation in general, one in every four violent incidents occurred in the CHT. Besides, about one in every seven persons in the CHT considers that more than 50% of the violent incidents in CHT could be attributed to misinformation and disinformation.

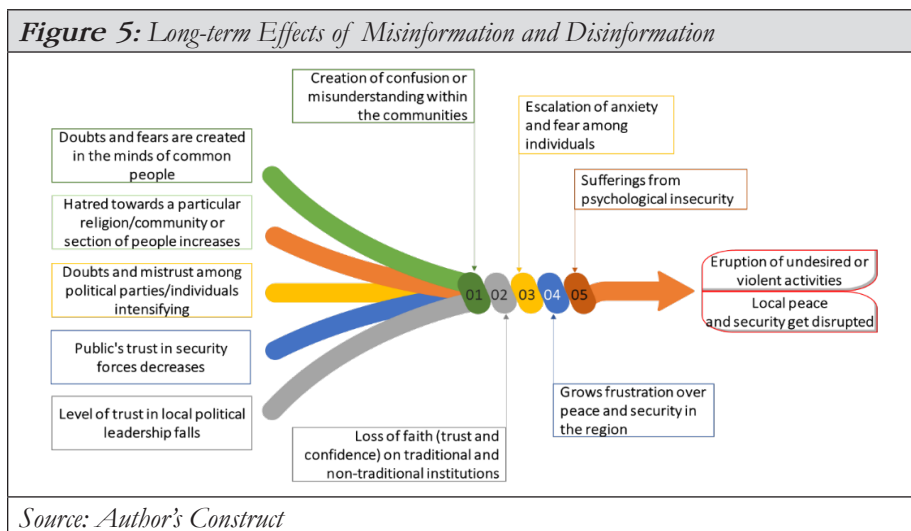
However, in comparison to physical or financial harm, misinformation and disinformation cause more harm in the psychological domain of the populace. It has a great deal of contribution to creating insecurity in the psychological sphere of the populace in the CHT. The most significant effect, as perceived by the local people, is the creation of confusion or misunderstanding within the communities. Additionally, it erodes trust and confidence in the social, political, and administrative structures of the area while simultaneously increasing mistrust and distrust among the local communities. As such, frustration keeps on growing over the peace and security situation in the region. As a whole, anxiety and fear

escalates not only among those involved in armed activities or those who have some sort of political affiliation but also among ordinary people. Therefore, misinformation and disinformation are upsetting the inhabitants and causing psychological insecurity.

Long-term Effects of Misinformation and Disinformation

Negativity predominates when considering the long-term consequences of misinformation and disinformation in the CHT, as detrimental effects are more conspicuous than positive outcomes. The most severe consequence is the creation of confusion, doubts, and fear in the minds of ordinary people, as shown in Figure 5. These feelings escalate over time, generating mistrust among political parties and affiliated individuals, reducing public confidence in security forces, and diminishing trust in local political leadership. The cumulative effect is a loss of faith in both traditional and non-traditional institutions, laying the groundwork for long-term instability.

As anxieties and psychological insecurities intensify, frustration grows over the state of peace and security in the region. Hatred toward specific religions, communities, or social groups may also increase, further destabilizing communal relations. Together, these dynamics contribute to the eruption of undesired or violent activities, ultimately disrupting local peace and security (Figure 5).



Despite these negative outcomes, the dissemination of incorrect information can occasionally have positive effects. It can raise awareness among ordinary people about protecting their culture, language, and heritage, inspiring advocacy and participation in political movements. Such events may also elicit sympathy and cooperation from within and beyond the community, motivating initiatives that advance social welfare and strengthen collective interests.

WAY FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The signing of the CHT Accord marked the formal end of armed conflict in the region. In this sense, the present peace and security situation may be described as a post-conflict scenario, since open insurgency has ended, yet tensions remain. A post-conflict situation has been defined as a “conflict situation in which open warfare has come to an end. Such situations remain tense for years or decades and can easily relapse into large-scale violence” (Junne & Verokren, 2005). The CHT does not currently show signs of a return to large-scale violence, but the challenges lie in sustaining peace, addressing insecurities, and building trust. In such settings, the human security approach emphasizes both the protection of people—particularly the vulnerable groups—and their empowerment to manage their own lives. Protection requires a top-down role by the state, through institutions, processes, and norms, while empowerment is a bottom-up process that strengthens the capacity of individuals and communities to make choices and act on their behalf (CHS, 2003). The Human Security Unit of the United Nations also identifies “Protection” and “Empowerment” as the two building blocks for achieving human security (HSU, 2009, p. 8).

Misinformation and disinformation had contributed to the origin of insurgency in the region. Furthermore, it has a considerable amount of contribution to a set of security threats in the context of the current peace as well as the security situation in the region. Thus, considering the current situation of peace and security in the region as well as the background of the insurgency, emphasis may be laid on both the “protection” and “empowerment of people” of the human security approach. Therefore, the mitigation measures may be hinged upon the protection and empowerment of people as well as the prevention of the causes of vulnerabilities in the CHT. In so doing, focus area could be justice system, capacity of the local government, land dispute, economic empowerment of the locals, women empowerment and cross-sectorial network, involvement of civil society and academic community, and protection against disinformation.

The human security approach, as advocated by the CHS, may be applied in the CHT. While doing so, it is necessary to place equal emphasis on the “protection of people” and the “empowerment of people” components of the human security strategy, taking into account the current peace and security situation in the CHT and the context of the insurgency in the CHT. Protection and emancipation of individuals as well as avoiding the conditions that lead to vulnerabilities in the CHT may, therefore, form the basis of the mitigation strategies. Therefore, the following measures may be applied towards this end:

- Adapt the CHT’s traditional system of community justice and integrate it into the legal system of Bangladesh.
- Strengthen the capacity of local government in the CHT to effectively respond to the psychological insecurity of residents.
- Resolve land disputes through a continuous process that keeps local communities informed while working with the Land Commission.
- Establish a financial support system to help individuals from all communities, regardless of ethnicity, creed, or caste, start new businesses and achieve economic empowerment.
- Enable law enforcement, local communities, and NGOs to work together to empower women and address domestic and sexual violence.
- Establish an inclusive body with representatives from local communities, civil society, media, academia, and government to monitor, verify, and counter misinformation and disinformation, provide reliable information, engage communities, and build public capacity to identify and respond to false information.

CONCLUSION

Disinformation and misinformation are fundamental features of violent conflicts, with all sides seeking to frame narratives in their favour. In the CHT, these often appear as a mix of truth and falsehood, partial truths, one-sided reporting, or outright lies. This pattern can be traced back to the beginning of the insurgency, when PCJSS leaders took advantage of the challenges faced by newly independent Bangladesh and certain events in the CHT to gain popular support and encourage people to join their armed groups. In doing so, they disregarded the government’s

genuine efforts to improve local welfare and instead advanced manufactured narratives that distorted reality. How incidents were reported often depended on the perspectives of actors present at the time, further shaping misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation and disinformation have a serious impact on peace and security in the CHT, especially on human security, which emphasizes protecting vulnerable groups. The public is most affected by extortion, crimes against women and girls, kidnapping, organised crime, inter-ethnic violence, drug abuse, the spread of armed groups, and the marginalisation of smaller communities. These challenges require more than a military solution, demanding a holistic approach linking security, development, and human rights. Presence of armed groups, political oppression and rights abuses further compound the problem. While the deployment of security forces reflects recognition of threats and vulnerabilities, the spread of false or misleading information continues to intensify insecurity and undermine peace.

The negative effects of inaccurate information dissemination in the context of CHT always spring to mind first, simply because they are more readily apparent than the benefits. It creates public anxiety, fosters distrust among political groups, erodes confidence in the state's ability to provide security, and weakens trust in political representation. It also fuels hostility between communities and religions, contributing to the disruption of local peace and security. Although there may be occasional side effects that seem beneficial, the harms clearly outweigh them.

The human security approach to post-conflict contexts highlights both protection and empowerment. Protection requires state-led institutions, processes, and norms to shield people from evolving threats, while empowerment is a bottom-up strategy that strengthens skills and resources so communities can take charge of their own futures.

In the CHT, misinformation and disinformation not only shaped the insurgency but continue to aggravate current threats. Mitigation strategies must, therefore, combine protection and empowerment, addressing vulnerabilities through justice and fairness, stronger local governance, land dispute resolution, economic and women's empowerment, civil society and academic engagement, and safeguards against disinformation. These measures would greatly strengthen peace and human security in the region.

REFERENCES

Brigadier General Md Ali Reza, SGP, afwc, psc. Ex Commander, Khagrachhari Region. Date: June 28, 2022.

Brigadier General Mohammed Iftequr Rahman, psc. Ex Commander, Rangamati Region. Date: June 27, 2022.

Chakma, M. K. (2021, December 2). 24th Anniversary of Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord: Why is peace still missing in the CHT? Dhaka, Bangladesh: The Daily Star.

Chowdhury, M. K. (2002). Articulation and Dynamics of “Jumma Nationalism”: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. Halifax.

CHS. (2003). Human Security Now: Protecting and Empowering People. Commission on Human Security. New York: Commission on Human Security.

Dr Anand Bikash Chakma, Associate Professor at the Department of History, Chittagong University. Date: June 5, 2022.

EPW. (1978, April 29). Revolt in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Economic and Political Weekly, 723-727. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4366569>

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. Journal of Peace Research, 6(3), 167-191.

Gyanendu Bikash Chakma, a lawyer by profession who was deeply involved in the political activities in the CHT since the 70s, authored Oitihashik Prekkhapote Parbattya Sthanio Sarkar Parishad. Date: March 12, 2019.

HSU. (2009). Human Security in Theory and Practice. Human Security Unit. New York: Human Security Unit, United Nations.

Jaglan, S. K. (2016). Peace and Human Security: An Analysis in Different Perspectives. In R. Garg (Ed.), Global Violence, Peace and Security (pp. 79-88). New Delhi: Regal Publications.

Junne, G., and Willemijn Verkoren, eds. 2005. Post-conflict Development: Meeting New Challenges. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Kapor, S. (2016). Security Without Violence: A Gandhian View. In R. Garg (Ed.), Global Violence, Peace and Security (pp. 69-78). New Delhi: Regal Publications.

Kubo, H. (2017). Operationalising Human Security: A Brief Overview of the United Nations. In M. McIntosh, & A. Hunter (Eds.), *New Perspective on Human Security* (pp. 31-47). New York: Routledge.

Larsson, J. (2007). Organized Criminal Networks and Terrorism. In J. J. Forest (Ed.), *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives* (pp. 163-177). Westport: Praeger Security International.

Major Khandker Badrul Hasan (Retd.). Ex-Staff Officer at Rangamati Tactical Headquarters in 1977-1981. Date: April 30, 2022.

Mandel, R. (2006). *Security, Strategy, and The Quest for Bloodless War*. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited.

Pallab Chakma, Executive Director of Kapaeeng Foundation. Date: May 30, 2022.

Tripura, J. (2019, December 2). CHT Accord: 22 Years of Promises Not Kept. CHT Accord: 22 Years of Promises Not Kept. Dhaka: The Daily Star.

UNDP. (1994). *Human Development Report 1994*. New York: Oxford University Press.

UN General Assembly. (21 March 2005). In larger freedom : towards development, security and human rights for all : report of the Secretary-General. A/59/2005. UN General Assembly. Retrieved from <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a54bbfa0.html>

Wallensteen, A. D., & Symonides, J. (1998). *Peace, Security, and Conflict Prevention : SIPRI-UNESCO Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wallensteen, P. (2015). *Quality Peace: Peacebuilding, Victory and World Order*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wilkinson, M. (2013, November). *Contested Hills: Power-Sharing and Human Security in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*. Sydney: University of New South Wales.

Williams, P. D. (2008). *Security Studies: An Introduction*. In P. D. Williams, *Security Studies: An Introduction* (pp. 1-13). New York: Routledge.

AUTHOR

Brigadier General Gulam Mahiuddin Ahmed, SGP, ndc, afwc, psc, PhD holds a Master of Science in Military Studies and a Master of Security and Defence Studies from the Bangladesh University of Professionals, Dhaka. He also earned a PhD from Jahangirnagar University, focusing on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). He has served as a Directing Staff at the National Defence College. He has commanded both the Khagrachari Region and the Bandarban Region in the CHT. As a dedicated researcher on the CHT, he has authored several articles on the region's conflicts and security-related events.

E-mail: 4893mahi@gmail.com



BETWEEN NEOREALISM AND HUMANITARIAN IMPERATIVES: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF BANGLADESH'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS IN RESOLVING THE FORCIBLY DISPLACED MYANMAR NATIONALS (FDMN) CRISIS

Brigadier General Ahmed Zamiul Islam, ndc, afwc, psc, MPhil

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 16th August 2025; Accepted: 23rd October 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: Strategic partnerships have emerged as a cornerstone of modern foreign policy, offering a flexible, non-binding framework for sustained bilateral cooperation in a multipolar world. The paper contends that Bangladesh's current strategy is insufficient and disjointed and analyses the effectiveness of its strategic partnerships in resolving the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) crisis. Through the use of an integrated theoretical framework, the analysis shows that, although neoliberalism explains Bangladesh's institutional engagement and neorealism highlights the structural barriers of power asymmetry and conflicting interests, especially those of China and India, collective action theory best explains implementation gaps in burden-sharing. An assessment of potential partners identifies China and India as a geopolitically vital, but self-interest ally, the US as a crucial humanitarian ally with potentially conflicting political objectives, and Türkiye as a very useful but underutilized middle-power mediator. The crisis ultimately validates neorealism as the dominant explanatory lens, demonstrating that strategic partnerships cannot transcend power politics but are instead essential instruments for navigating them. The study explores the idea that in order to achieve a sustainable solution, Bangladesh must embrace a complex, multifaceted approach that skilfully balances its humanitarian goals with the strategic interests of a diverged international community. It must actively promote middle-power partnerships to create a more robust and successful coalition while utilizing major powers for their influence.

Keywords: *FDMN, Neorealism, Neoliberalism, Collective Action, Strategic Partnerships of Bangladesh.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of contemporary global politics is increasingly characterized by a complex network of bilateral relationships that goes beyond the sphere of traditional alliances. Of them, the concept of a “Strategic Partnership” has become a crucial, but inadequately defined diplomatic instrument. Strategic partnerships are a privileged bilateral relationship between two international actors that aims to pursue shared strategic goals and complementary interests without the formal binding commitments of a traditional alliance. They have evolved from informal collaborations into a more structured form of engagement. It is commonly believed to be a flexible, comprehensive, and long-lasting arrangement covering collaboration across multiple domains like security, economy, and technology, yet a clear consensus on its description is still elusive (Struver, 2016).

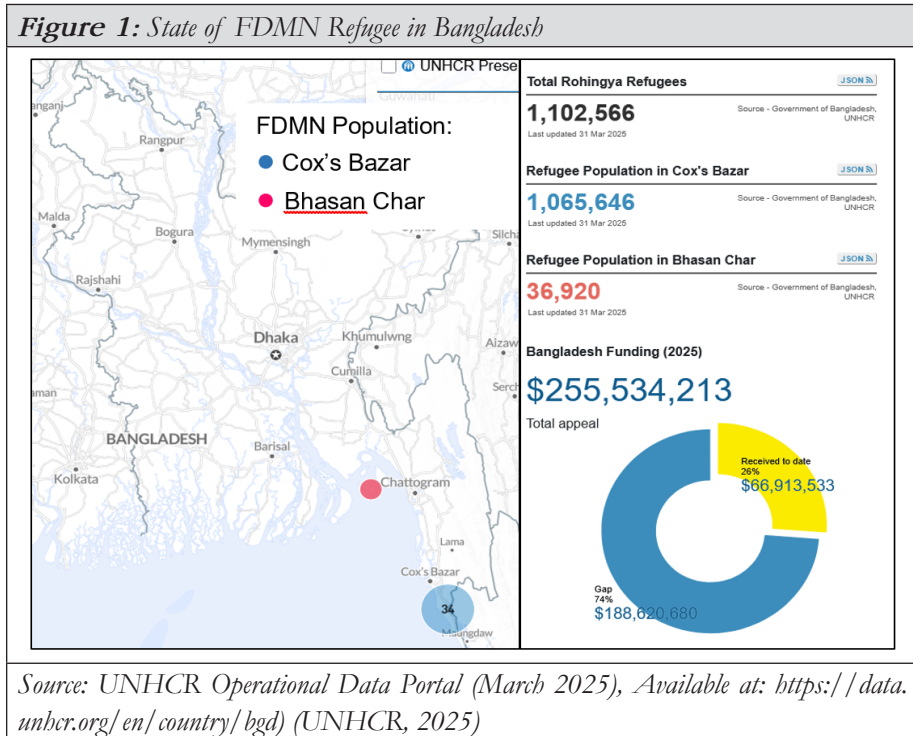
The FDMN crisis has drawn significant attention (Watch, 2022) from global actors like US, EU, ASEAN, and OIC, who are consistently condemning Myanmar for genocide. Gambia has lodged a complaint, ICC has launched investigations, while ASEAN and OIC are providing humanitarian aid. Myanmar is strategically important to China and India, with China generally supporting the government. Despite international condemnation of Myanmar’s military regime for alleged genocide and ethnic cleansing, a sustainable solution remains elusive (Zaman, 2023). More so, the rise of the Arakan Army raises uncertainties about coexistence or divisions in Rakhine’s future (Banerjee, 2025).

For Bangladesh, the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) problem has put the effectiveness of this contemporary diplomatic instrument to the test. Bangladesh, being the primary host, has been shouldering a significant burden since 2017 when the massive plight of FDMN refugees took place (Figure 1 shows a detail state of the FDMN refugee in Bangladesh), resulting in a significant humanitarian, economic, and environmental burden (UNHCR, 2025). This crisis is a prime example of a problem that requires a strong and constant international cooperation in order to overcome it, because it is practically impossible for any single state to handle alone. Bangladesh has therefore actively participated in bilateral dialogues and international forums in an effort to find answers through regional institutions such as ASEAN, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the United Nations.

However, a critical analysis reveals significant limitations in these efforts. While multilateral initiatives have been successful in increasing awareness but have not

been able to produce any tangible repatriation, existing bilateral relationships frequently lack the depth and common goals to be characterized as true strategic partnerships. Even though Bangladesh has followed a foreign policy that is in line with neoliberal and collective action principles with a focus on humanitarian norms, international law, and multilateral participation through the UN, the results have dwindled over time. The government of Myanmar has shown a strong resistance to sanctions and normative pressure, resulting in “diplomatic fatigue” and a lack of progress with conventional instruments. Thus, in addition to examining previous tactics using these theoretical frameworks, this research also recognizes their shortcomings. It makes the case that in order to break the strategic inertia, a theoretical shift is necessary. This involves adding a more neorealism-derived, interest-based calculus to the conventional framework in order to find new, more powerful forms of leverage. While Bangladesh’s traditional approach, grounded in neoliberal institutionalism and collective action, has been logically sound, it has proven insufficient due to geopolitical realities. Therefore, a new, complementary framework is needed that integrates neorealist leverage and transactional diplomacy to break the current deadlock. The humanitarian and political aspects of the FDMN situation have been well documented in the literature to date, but one important gap remains: a methodical examination of how the neorealist imperatives of Myanmar and the competing strategic interests of major powers (China, India, and the US) constrain Bangladesh’s ability to forge effective partnerships and achieve a sustainable solution to the FDMN crisis.

This paper seeks to fill this void by investigating the role of strategic partnerships in navigating the FDMN crisis. It asserts that resolving the current political impasse requires the skillful application of this diplomatic tool. In order to diagnose the power dynamics, institutional opportunities, and collective action issues inherent in the crisis, the study will attempt to develop an integrated theoretical framework that incorporates Neorealism, Neoliberalism, and Collective Action Theory.



Additionally, it will compare and assess the neorealist goals, humanitarian needs, and overall strategic value of Bangladesh's potential strategic partners, such as China, India, the United States, and Turkey. The ultimate goal of this study is to develop a paradigm that is grounded on geopolitics rather than merely describing the issue. This framework will illustrate how Bangladesh can strategically navigate the harsh realities of international power politics to build effective coalitions that translate diplomatic engagement into a sustainable solution for the FDMN population. This framework will outline how Bangladesh may effectively forge partnerships that transform diplomatic engagement into a long-term solution for the FDMN population while navigating the harsh reality of global power dynamics.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Defining Strategic Partnerships

Strategic partnership is a new concept of diplomatic relationship in International Relations that has evolved in the current changing pattern of global politics.

The concept gradually developed from the informal collaboration between states to more specific nature in recent days. So far, there is no evidence of a concrete consensus about the definition of strategic partnership (Struver, 2016). Anna Michalski of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs attempted to define this as a specific form of bilateral engagement between two actors in the international system with the purpose of creating privileged bilateral relations (Michalski, 2017). Like other forms of international alignment, strategic partnership provides a cooperative nature of the states' behavior. Nankarni described strategic partnership as a “diplomatic instrument that allows for hedging against all eventualities while allowing for common pursuit of mutual interests” (Nadkarni, 2010).

Emergence of the Concept

The emergence of strategic partnerships became a prevalent diplomatic tool for state and organizations' foreign policy (Papageorgiou, 2024). The actors of this type of diplomatic relations are either two states, or a state and a non-state actor who attempts to pursue shared interests and strategic goals. In International Relations, the terms strategic alliance and strategic partnership are interchangeably used. However, a strategic partnership generally implies a broader, more comprehensive and long enduring relations that covers various fields of cooperation, while an alliance is more formal, typically focused on specific goal, often related to security (Roulo, 2019). For example, NATO is a classic example of a military alliance, while the relation between China and Pakistan is often considered as a strategic partnership. Strategic alliance was present throughout the history. But due to a shift in global political framework after the Cold War era, the world experienced possibilities of complex interdependence in a multipolar framework. It is difficult to trace the origin of this concept, but the term was perhaps coined for the first time by Russia in the 1990s (Kay, 2000) and later it was adopted by the US.

Elements of Strategic Partnerships

There are also disagreements amongst the scholars about the exact elements that constitute the characteristics of strategic partnership. However, most of the political analysts contended that the strategic agreement of 1994, between former US President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, can be seen as the most appropriate form of strategic partnership (Iyushka, 2019). In fact, that partnership was based upon on equality and recognition of mutual strategic

interests that set forth the ideal characteristics of strategic partnership (Barbara, 1994). In general, the main elements of strategic partnership are converging interests, shared vision, enduring relationship for mitigating challenges while capitalizing opportunities, fostering a sense of interdependence and adaptability (Mousavi, 2024). Lucyna mentioned that those in leadership who adhere to both liberal and realist ideologies can benefit from the strategic partnership. Its fundamental component is collaboration amongst those who have similar objectives, whether they are dictated by the external environmental structure or the inclinations of the primary lobbying group (Czechowska, 2013). The concepts of “strategic alliance,” “strategic coalition,” “strategic partnership” and “strategic competition” has also been used by political scientists as other forms of ‘strategic relationship’ (Mousavi, 2024). However, the term strategic partnership covers a broader area of cooperation in the domain of security, military, technology, politics, economy, etc. While strategic alliance is a more formal term, strategic partnerships are flexible, non-binding arrangements that prioritize cooperation over confrontation.

Strategic Partnerships in Practice

In recent decades, several strategic alliances have been formed. Amongst them US and China are two prominent strategic builders, who have forged more than hundreds of strategic partnerships (Michalski, 2017). Other important actors are Russia, Japan, India, Brazil and the EU. These strategic partnerships take different forms, having different purposes ranging from general cooperation (US-Brazil 2012, EU-Canada 1996), economic and political engagement (India- South Korea 2017, India-Brazil 2006), through security and military cooperation (US-South Korea, US-India 2001) to regional stability (India-South Korea 2017, Canada-South Korea 2007). Most of the strategic partnerships utilized existing strategic platforms, e.g. BRICS, SCO, NAFTA and so on. They significantly contribute in accomplishing strategic and foreign policy objectives by offering a forum to engage in ongoing discussions. There are also differences in the nature and level of engagement. The US, which sees them as complementary to continued diplomatic engagement, has adopted a less strategic approach than China. In contrast, EU opted for less but more extensive form of strategic partnership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing Framework of Bangladesh's Strategic Partnerships

Bilateral Engagements

Bangladesh attempted to resolve the FDMN crisis through its diplomatic engagement with different countries bilaterally. Bangladesh had engaged with Myanmar through bilateral dialogues and signed a repatriation agreement in November 2017, though the repatriation attempts of 2018 and 2019 could not see success due to absence of safe and dignified environment for their return (Hoaasin, 2019). Because of the FDMN crisis, Bangladesh and Myanmar's bilateral relations have not yet reached their full potential (Banerjee, 2023). Partnerships with countries like China and India have been explored, given their influence over Myanmar and regional geopolitics, but their geopolitical interests limit their effectiveness as both countries maintained strategic ties with Myanmar (Akkas Ahamed, 2020) (Chakma, 2021). In true sense, these bilateral engagements cannot be categorized as strategic partnership due to lack of partnership characteristics (shared objective).

Multilateral Partnerships

Bangladesh has actively pursued multilateral partnerships with the United Nations (UN), particularly UNHCR and IOM, ASEAN, OIC and other international entities (ICC, ICJ) to pressure Myanmar, to ensure humanitarian assistance to refugees and to seek sustainable solutions (UNHCR, 2020). The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has supported Bangladesh diplomatically, advocating for the FDMN cause on global platforms (Ahmed, 2021). The efforts were successful in raising global awareness, initiating legal actions against Myanmar and limited humanitarian support, but failed to achieve any tangible objective for repatriation of FDMN refugees due to emphasizing legal accountability over diplomatic talks.

Regional Partnerships

Bangladesh has sought support from ASEAN to facilitate repatriation and to encourage further support from regional members on the FDMN crisis. Although ASEAN leaders agreed on a five-point consensus to end violence in

Myanmar, its non-interference principle has limited its role (Shukri, 2021). The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has been identified as a potential platform for regional collaboration (Bhattacharya, 2022), but Bangladesh is yet to forge strategic partnerships with BIMSTEC or other regional actors like ASEAN on the FDMN issue.

Options for Strengthening Strategic Partnerships

Engaging Global Powers

Scholars suggest that Bangladesh should leverage its relationships with the US, EU, and UK to exert pressure on Myanmar and secure international funding (Mohammad Fakhru Salam & Shohana Abedin Lamisha, 2024). However, there is no discussion of how these partnerships may be sustained or the difficulties Bangladesh is likely to face.

Strengthening Regional Alliances

Enhanced cooperation with ASEAN and BIMSTEC could provide a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. The synergy between ASEAN and BIMSTEC can enhance strategic cooperation for addressing shared geopolitical challenges (Promit Mookherjee, 2024). However, there is no study as to how partnerships with ASEAN and BIMSTEC can be unutilized for addressing the FDMN crisis.

Public-Private Partnerships

Engaging international NGOs and private sector actors could help address resource gaps and improve service delivery (Karim, 2022). However, challenges of Bangladesh in maintaining these partnerships were not explored.

Digital Diplomacy and Advocacy

Utilizing digital platforms to raise global awareness and mobilize support for the FDMN cause (Triwibowo, 2023) (Hossain, 2022).

Challenges in Forming and Maintaining Partnerships

Geopolitical Constraints

The strategic interests of major powers like China and India often conflict with Bangladesh's goals, limiting their support (Shuvo, 2021)

Resource Limitations

Bangladesh's limited resources and capacity hinder its ability to sustain long-term partnerships. The country faces several challenges, including economic constraints, environmental pressures, and social tensions, which strain its ability to manage the crisis effectively (ICG, 2023). However, other aspects of resource limitations (donor fatigues, free riding, etc) and how such evolving challenges were not explored.

Myanmar's Intransigence

Myanmar's refusal to acknowledge the FDMN as citizens and its lack of cooperation in repatriation efforts remain significant obstacles (Mohajan, 2020). There were several occasions when Myanmar agreed on repatriation terms, although it eventually failed. But there is no specific study that explored the factors that worked well in Myanmar's consent of taking back FDMN.

Donor Fatigue

Declining international funding and attention to the crisis pose challenges for sustaining humanitarian efforts (UNHCR, 2021).

Host Community Tensions

Rising tensions between FDMN refugees and host communities in Bangladesh complicate efforts to build local and international support (Anas, 2020). However, how these tensions effect Bangladesh in maintaining its strategic partnerships were not explored.

Gaps in the Literature

While there is considerable research on the FDMN crisis and Bangladesh's role, there is a lack of in-depth analysis on the importance of strategic partnerships

that Bangladesh has formed or could form to address the crisis. Existing studies often highlight the humanitarian and political aspects of the FDMN crisis, but do not thoroughly explore the challenges Bangladesh faces in maintaining and leveraging strategic partnership. Not only have existing literatures not explored the application of strategic partnership as a tool to resolve FDMN crisis in Bangladesh's bilateral engagements, but the perspectives of FDMN refugees and host communities are often underrepresented in the literature. Furthermore, the role NGOs and international humanitarian organizations play in forming strategic partnerships to resolve the FDMN crisis is underexplored.

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: KEY CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

The operationalization of any theoretical framework for resolving the FDMN crisis must be grounded in the region's intractable geopolitical realities. Bangladesh's strategic partnerships cannot be formed in isolation but should be shaped and constrained by the interests of major regional and global actors and the internal dynamics of Myanmar itself. The geopolitical situation is shaped by three factors: the strategic calculus of China as a key supporter of Myanmar, India's complex diplomatic balancing act and Myanmar's internal political situation.

China's role is the most significant external enabler and constraint for any partnership. China is an essential actor in Myanmar because of its main strategic objectives, which include protecting its BRI corridors, gaining access to the Indian Ocean, and preserving a friendly, stable buffer state (Islam, 2024). China has unrivaled power over the Tatmadaw as Myanmar's main arms supplier and diplomatic shield in the UNSC. This patronage has two drawbacks, though. Despite having helped Dhaka and Myanmar engage in dialogue, China is unlikely to use coercive pressure that could topple the junta or jeopardize its own economic and security interests because of its strategic engagement in the state of Myanmar (Aung, 2025). However, recently China pushed forcefully to Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) to handover Lashio back to the Myanmar regime while Myanmar used diplomatic pressure and incentives (Mizzima, 2025). As a result, any framework must view China as a participant with varying goals for repatriation accountability, but shared interests in regional stability, rather than as a neutral mediator.

India serves as both a major facilitator and a major impediment for Bangladesh, illustrating a situation of strategic discord. Driven by its counter-China strategy, “Act East” policy, and the necessity to control insurgencies in its northeastern regions (Nguyen Tuan Binh, 2024), India has strong economic and security relations with the Myanmar regime (Krishnan, 2022). It requires a careful balancing act. Although India shares concerns about the long-term refugee situation and has given Bangladesh vital economic aid, its geopolitical interests prohibit it from fully supporting Bangladesh’s stance against Myanmar. As the possibility of a united regional front is so limited, Bangladesh must take into consideration that India is a potential partner whose assistance is fragmented and conditional, useful for bilateral aid but unreliable for exerting coordinated diplomatic pressure on Myanmar.

The internal fragmentation of Myanmar seriously undermines the viability of repatriation (RK, 2025). In vast regions of the country, notably Rakhine State, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) challenge the authority of the central government. This fact puts any repatriation strategy based on a single, independent partner under a challenging constraint. In a combat zone, returnees’ safety and security could not be ensured even if a bilateral agreement were struck with the junta. Because of this fragmentation, repatriation becomes a complicated governance and security issue rather than just a diplomatic endeavor. Since a top-down approach from Myanmar is not feasible, any applicable framework must go beyond a state-centric model and take into account the need to interact with strategic partners and provide conditions for stable localized security.

AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ANALYZING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS IN THE FDMN CRISIS

The FDMN crisis is a crucial test for Bangladesh’s foreign policy, requiring it to look for strategic partnerships to address an issue beyond its scope of unilateral action. This paper uses three theoretical lenses, namely, Neorealism, Neoliberalism, and Collective Action Theory to analyze the dynamics, motivations, and intrinsic constraints of this partnership-seeking strategy. To be more specific, it is essential to see how the strategic partnerships are formed, why superpowers would help Bangladesh, and what are the challenges of maintaining these partnerships. These

lenses are not meant to be mutually exclusive explanations, rather they can be a complementary tool for pursuing partnership strategies. Neorealism emphasizes the structural limitations of power asymmetry (Waltz, 2001) and Neoliberalism shows the way for institutional collaboration (Nye, 2012), whereas Collective Action Theory explains why burden-sharing is still difficult to maintain (Olson, 2002). Other theories like Functionalism and Dependency Theory offer useful frameworks for structural inequalities, they have significant weaknesses when applied to the FDMN crisis. For example, insufficient focus on humanitarianism, inability to address complex interdependencies and neglect of non-state actors may limit Bangladesh's objective of pursuing strategic partnerships as an instrument of resolving the FDMN crisis.

The Structural Imperative vis-à-vis The Cooperative Pathway: Conflicts Between Neorealism and Neoliberalism

Bangladesh's pursuit of strategic partnerships is seen by neorealists as a direct result of anarchic international law, where self-interest is the main rationale and security is of utmost importance. As a smaller state and directly threatened by Myanmar on both a security and economic level, Bangladesh is forced to strike a balance against its more powerful neighbor. Strategic partnerships with China, India, or the US are more about attaining complementary strategic objectives than shared principles. For example, the US wants to contain Chinese influence in Myanmar (Sun, 2024), while India wants to stabilize and secure its Northeastern regions. Partnerships will be transactional and brittle, according to this theory, and will change when power dynamics change. The main weakness, according to neorealists, is that no partner has a compelling national interest in repatriation of FDMN refugees back to Myanmar that overrides their other regional geopolitical or commercial objectives. However, Myanmar's stubbornness to cooperate with international actors is another dimension of neorealism. Neorealism explains that Myanmar's refusal to cooperate is not a failure of diplomacy, but a logical outcome of an international system where might makes right, survival is the ultimate goal, and powerful states can ignore the demands of weaker ones when it serves their interests.

In contrast, the neoliberal institutionalist contends that the region's complex interdependence opens up opportunities for collaboration that neorealism ignores. Bangladesh has effectively employed multilateral organizations like UN, OIC, ASEAN to portray the situation as a threat to regional stability (Standard,

2025) and an infringement of international standards, rather than merely a bilateral disagreement. This framework establishes a win-win situation in which collaboration benefits everyone by maintaining humanitarian standards for the West and regional stability for ASEAN and India. Bangladesh employs traditional neoliberal strategy to lessen anarchy, such as using diplomatic channels, interacting with transnational advocacy networks, and using international law. However, Myanmar's military regime sees the Rohingya as a local security concern (Zahed, 2023). For this reason, the neorealist security dilemma that characterizes Myanmar's military regime cannot be resolved in the face of international pressure, undermines neoliberalism's optimism.

The Implementation Challenge: Collective Action Theory as the Bridge

Collective Action Theory explains why accomplishing concrete achievements is so challenging, especially in the presence of a neoliberal logic of collaboration. For the cooperation failures that neorealism frequently assumes, it offers the micro-foundations. One of the best examples of a large-group collective action problem is the global response to the FDMN situation. The issue is a concern, according to many states, but each has an incentive to take advantage of others, making them pay for diplomatic efforts, aid, and apply pressure on Myanmar. Bangladesh's challenge is to overcome this by creating selective incentives. This can be done in many different forms. While regional partners like China and India are motivated by economic and strategic access (e.g. BRI influence, regional leadership), Western partners are motivated by upholding the normative architecture of the Responsibility to Protect and human rights (Gerrit Kurtz, 2016). However, the risk of regional instability (trafficking, radicalization) is an inhibitor for everyone. The Collective Action Theory suggests that Bangladesh's strategy must focus on moving from a "large group" (the entire international community) to smaller, more effective coalitions where contributions are more visible and free-riding is harder.

An Integrated Framework: Power, Cooperation, and Collective Action in the FDMN Crisis

When combined, these theories offer a precarious but comprehensive framework. Formation of a strategic partnership can be driven by both power calculations (Neorealism) and institutional cooperation (Neoliberalism), while facing

problems of free-riding (Collective Action Theory) simultaneously. Myanmar's stubbornness and the harsh limitations of power politics are explained by Neorealism. Bangladesh can use institutions, diplomacy, soft power and other instruments and avenues, according to Neoliberalism. The ongoing burden-sharing implementation gap is identified by Collective Action Theory. The geopolitical realities are directly related to this integrated lens. All three theories interact in the context of the transactional character of diplomacy, regional power imbalances (the central neorealist difficulty) and Myanmar's internal instability makes it a challenging partner for any theory. Therefore, Bangladesh's quest for strategic partnership is a multifaceted game: a neoliberal project of institutional engagement, a neorealist effort for leverage, and an ongoing struggle against the collective action dilemma of the global refugee response.

APPLYING THEORY TO PRACTICE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POTENTIAL PARTNERS

Bangladesh needs to take a methodical and strategic approach to its international interactions so it can navigate the protracted FDMN problem. Consequently, in order to approach the FDMN issue utilizing strategic partnerships, Bangladesh needs to find out appropriate partners. For determining appropriate partners, a framework of analyzing the potential partners have been adopted. In this framework, China, India, the US and Türkiye are examined along three lines, namely, neorealist calculus of converging and diverging interests, humanitarian imperatives and assessment of strategic value for Bangladesh. Basic factors i.e. geopolitical stakes, security interests, strategic gains, normative commitments, and institutional engagements are considered for this analysis based on secondary data. By analyzing the capabilities and interests of potential strategic partner along these three interrelated dimensions, a framework for determining characteristics of potential strategic partners can be developed. In order to determine a country's geopolitical stakes, immediate security concerns, and the strategic benefits of collaborating with Bangladesh, firstly it looks at the neorealist calculus of converging or diverging interests. Secondly, it assesses the humanitarian and neoliberal imperatives, looking at a nation's position in multilateral institutions, its ethical commitments, and its actual record of aid and resettlement. Finally, by combining these results, the framework offers an evaluation of strategic value for Bangladesh, highlighting the most likely contributions of a partner, whether they

be financial, military, or diplomatic, as well as an assessment of the associated risks and opportunities.

Applying Framework to Selected Countries

India

India has a strong interest in a stable Northeast, curbing insurgency, and countering Chinese influence in Myanmar (Meitei, 2024). However, its own complex relationship with Myanmar and domestic politics in border states create a divergence of interests, making a forceful repatriation push less likely. India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2025) and its policy is largely driven by strategic, not humanitarian, concerns. These suggest that while India remains an indispensable stakeholder due to shared geopolitical interests, its capacity to act as a decisive partner is constrained by its own complex bilateral dynamics with Myanmar (Sehgal, 2024). Consequently, Bangladesh's strategy must incorporate engagement with New Delhi while simultaneously diversifying its diplomatic portfolio to mitigate this inherent unpredictability.

China

China's primary interests lie in protecting its massive investments in Myanmar (BRI) and maintaining a stable corridor to the Bay of Bengal. It has leverage over the Myanmar's leadership but has low priority in solving Bangladesh's refugee problem related to FDMN (Faye, 2021). UNSC has been deadlocked on Myanmar, in part because of China's application of veto power on Myanmar issue. China's foreign policy is strictly non-interventionist (Elgebeily, 2017). It views the crisis as an internal Myanmar affair. These suggest that, China is an indispensable but self-interested mediator. Bangladesh's strategy should be to convince China that a prolonged crisis threatens its own economic and strategic assets in Myanmar, making resolution a shared interest.

USA

The US sees the crisis as part of a broader democratic backslide and human rights catastrophe in Myanmar, which challenges their vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (Harsh V. Pant and Kaush Arha, 2025). This precept possibly leads them to seek to counter Chinese influence. They are the largest donors of humanitarian aid and, strong proponents of refugee rights and accountability for the Myanmar

junta. Accordingly, the US is regarded as a key partner for humanitarian funding and diplomatic pressure on the current military regime of Myanmar. However, their focus on sanctions and regime change can sometimes be at odds with the pragmatic goal of securing repatriation from the current powers in Naypyidaw.

Türkiye

Türkiye is pursuing a policy of strategic expansion into South and Southeast Asia, seeking new markets and political influence (Aslan, 2022). It maintains a unique, balanced relationship with both Bangladesh as a Muslim-majority democracy, and Myanmar with which it has significant business ties, especially in construction, air transportation and flight operation (Myanmar Business Today, 2014). This positions Türkiye not as a major power, but as a potential middle-power mediator or a balancing partner for Bangladesh, offering an avenue distinct from the India-China rivalry. In regard to the humanitarian imperative aspect, Türkiye is a global leader in humanitarian diplomacy, heavily involved in refugee crises from Syria to Afghanistan. It has already provided aid to the FDMN (TIKA, 2023). Its actions are framed within a discourse of Islamic solidarity (Çoban, 2024), which resonates powerfully in the context of the Rohingya's plight. As such, Türkiye is considered as a highly valuable and underutilized partner. Türkiye can offer alternative humanitarian aid channels, act as a credible diplomatic mediator with Myanmar due to its balanced ties, and provide Bangladesh with a form of strategic diversification.

<i>Table 1: A Comparative Analysis of Potential Strategic Partners</i>			
	Neorealist Calculus Indicator	Humanitarian Imperatives Indicator	Assessment
India	High Convergence but with Risks	Low	A strategy of diplomatic diversification might be beneficial for Bangladesh, considering the structural constraints of its relationship with India. In order to address the problem, it is still imperative to engage India, but an over reliance on it should be reduced by having subsidiary strategic partners.

Table 1: A Comparative Analysis of Potential Strategic Partners

	Neorealist Calculus Indicator	Humanitarian Imperatives Indicator	Assessment
China	Divergence, but Leverageable	Very low	China is an indispensable mediator. Even if China's mediation is clearly shaped by its own strategic considerations, it is nevertheless an important avenue for communications. Bangladesh's strategy should be to convince China that a prolonged crisis threatens its own economic and strategic assets in Myanmar, making resolution a shared interest.
USA	Medium Convergence	High	Key partners for humanitarian funding and diplomatic pressure on the junta. However, their focus on sanctions and regime change can sometimes be at odds with the pragmatic goal of securing repatriation from the current powers in Naypyidaw.
Türkiye	Emerging Convergence	High & Ideological	A highly valuable and underutilized partner. Türkiye can offer alternative humanitarian aid channels, act as a credible diplomatic intermediary with Myanmar due to its balanced ties, and provide Bangladesh with a form of strategic diversification.

Source: Author

In general, the application of dominant theories of International Relations and Humanitarian Studies under consideration generates an interesting outcome while utilizing the value of strategic partnerships. Neorealism explains the constraints

with India and China while Neoliberalism and Collective Action Theory explain the Western and Turkish engagement. Please refer to Table-1 for a summary of comparative analysis of potential strategic partners of Bangladesh.

TOWARDS FORMULATION OF A GEOPOLITICALLY-GROUNDED FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING FDMN CHALLENGES

This framework positions Neorealism as the primary, dominant lens for diagnosing the root causes of the political stalemate. Neoliberalism and Collective Action Theory are then repositioned to that and eventually rendered ineffective by the very power dynamics that Neorealism exposes. This creates a compelling tension between “what is” and “what ought to be.”

Applying Neorealism for Explaining the Political Stalemate

Myanmar's Strategic Posture: Sovereignty, Security and Power as a Shield

Neorealism explains Myanmar's reluctance to address the FDMN issue as a rational assertion of sovereignty. The principle of non-intervention is the ultimate legal and political shield for a weak state against stronger external actors (Bull, 1977). Any admission of guilt or acceptance of international oversight is perceived as a catastrophic loss of sovereignty, creating a dangerous precedent. From Myanmar's point of view, the Tatmadaw's actions are not irrational brutality but a calculated internal security policy (Than, 2013). From their perspective, the Rohingya are a demographic and security threat—a potential fifth column with ties to transnational extremist groups. Ethnically homogenizing the Rakhine state is seen as consolidating territorial control and national security. Their power and legitimacy are intrinsically tied to this nationalistic and security-first paradigm. Under these circumstances, Myanmar skillfully plays great powers against each other. It understands that its strategic location and natural resources make it a valuable actor for China and, to a lesser extent, India. This allows it to resist pressure from Western powers and ASEAN, knowing it has powerful patrons who will block any decisive action by UNSC.

Strategic Interests of China, India and the USA: A Classic Balance of Power Game and Asymmetric Intents

China: As the classic neorealist actor, China's main objective is to protect its economic and geopolitical interests, which include resources, a stable, friendly neighbor, and access to the Indian Ocean for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (Mansoor, 2023). Certainly, it will not adopt a strategy that undermine Myanmar's interest or that strengthens the Western power. As a result, it ensures Myanmar stays within its sphere of influence and serves as a strategic counterbalance to the US and India by offering Myanmar economic support and diplomatic cover, may be through its UNSC veto.

India: The philosophy of *realpolitik* is the driving force behind India's careful balancing act (Jaishankar, 2020). Limiting Chinese influence in its own backyard is its main security priority. Engagement with the Myanmar government, particularly military collaboration, is required for this. It also worries about the possibility of Islamic radicalism (Bhattacharjee, 2025) and the spread of intercommunal conflict into its own vulnerable northeastern states. India's stance is therefore schizophrenic: it prioritizes strategic competitiveness with China over a consistent humanitarian policy, giving Bangladesh some economic funding while refusing to provoke Myanmar.

USA: The conflict between the United States' liberal identity and strategic objectives is reflected in its position. Although it condemns the crimes and sanctions the Tatmadaw, competition with China restricts its strategic options. A strong intervention may not be a viable option. So, it may not be willing to take risk of confrontation by tackling of the primary reasons of the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. Accordingly, its objectives are to restrain Chinese growth, fight for democracy and handle the humanitarian problem as a matter of regional stability.

Asymmetries in Strategic Intents. Geopolitical reality forces Bangladesh and Myanmar to move with diverse political intents. Bangladesh intends to solve the refugee crisis whereas Myanmar intends to consolidate ethnic control and assert sovereignty. These political intents are not symmetrical which creates complexities in resolving the FDMN issue.

Impediments for Unified Collective Action

The main impediments to achieving the objectives of sustainable solution through unified collective action are basically three-fold. These are: divergent national interests, focus of the main actors on relative gains and perceived security dilemma. China, India, and the US have essentially diverse and frequently conflicting geopolitical objectives with regard to Myanmar. They are not united by a shared threat. Even if a solution were proposed, these powers would be less concerned with the absolute gain of a resolved crisis and more concerned with the relative gains. For instance, in case of a Chinese-mediated solution to FDMN Crisis, India would consider it to be a significant strategic setback. Likewise, the US might view it as a win for the authoritarian paradigm. As such, even a viable solution may prove ineffective due to focus on relative gains. It is perceived that any action by one great power delivers a corresponding security threat to another. For instance, if the US renders sanctions on Myanmar, it may be perceived by China as a threat, prompting a counter-action by increased Chinese support for Myanmar (Marston, 2025). This cycle creates an impediment for any sustainable solution and makes coordinated action impossible.

Applying Neoliberalism and Collective Action Theory in Explaining Their Effectiveness

Institutional Failure of ASEAN and the UN

- **ASEAN's Limitations.** According to Neoliberalism, ASEAN is the ideal regional organization to mediate this intra-regional conflict. However, its downfall is directly related to neorealist power politics' breach of its core principles. Myanmar uses the "ASEAN Way" consensus decision-making and non-interference as a weapon, with shadow support from Chinese. This illustrates how a strong state-actor supporting a member state's sovereignty renders an organization intended to promote collaboration ineffective.
- **The UN's Limitations.** The highest form of liberal institutionalism, the UN, is structurally unable to take action. The interests of its permanent members immobilize the UNSC. This demonstrates that the collective security mechanism breaks down when any major powers' fundamental national interests are under risk. The General Assembly and UNHCR are powerless to force Myanmar to comply; they can only provide humanitarian assistance and non-binding condemnation.

Gaps in Burden-Sharing and Coordination

Collective Action Theory's "free-rider" problem is much visible in FDMN Crisis. In this case, Bangladesh is bearing a disproportionate burden, while the international community's contributions are insufficient and unreliable. This burden-sharing failure is just accidental but a direct result of power dynamics and conflicting interests. When China, India, and the US are the main strategic winners or losers, why should other actors like Japan or Germany make significant investments in a solution? Instead of using a common normative commitment to human rights or burden-sharing (a neoliberal logic), states are evaluating the costs and benefits in light of their limited national interests (a neorealist logic).

Ideal Solution vis-à-vis The Realpolitik Reality: Framing the Sustainable Solution

The Ideal Solution (Neoliberal/Collective Action)

A suggestive framework would involve:

- **A Unified International Coalition.** China, India, the US, and ASEAN aligning on a common set of demands for Myanmar.
- **Credible Incentives and Sanctions.** A coordinated package of targeted sanctions against Myanmar coupled with economic incentives for a democratic Myanmar.
- **Robust Institutional Role.** A UN-led verification and monitoring mechanism for safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation, guaranteed by the international community.
- **Equitable Burden-Sharing.** A global compact to systematically share the financial and resettlement responsibilities, moving beyond ad-hoc donations.

The Realpolitik Reality

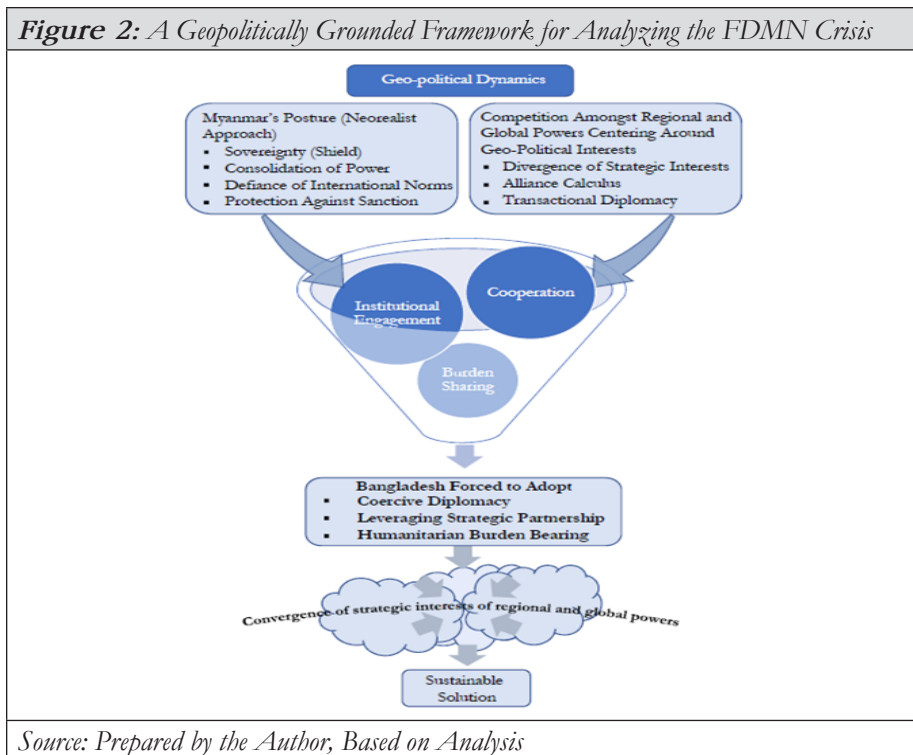
In reality, failure to solve the Rohingya crisis is not due to a lack of good ideas or plans, but because the fundamental, self-centric nature of world politics that makes cooperation very difficult. It is a clash between the world as people think it would work (neoliberalism) and the world as it actually works (neorealism). Probable reasons are given as follows:

- **Asymmetries in Strategic Intent.** Basically, the asymmetries in strategic intent lie at the very heart of the FDMN issue. Bangladesh's primary objective is humanitarian and security-driven, i.e. to achieve the safe, dignified, and sustainable repatriation of the FDMN and, thereby alleviating massive domestic burden. Myanmar's strategic intent, however, is fundamentally different and rooted in a neorealist logic of state consolidation. For Myanmar, the FDMN are not citizens, rather a demographic and security threat. As such, Myanmar's probable objective is to establish ethnic dominance, exercise total sovereignty, and thwart any international narrative that would undermine their government rather than to address the refugee problem. The conflict between one actor seeking a cooperative end and another whose strategic win is defined by the other's failure, rather than a negotiation between two parties seeking a common solution, creates a fundamental asymmetry.
- **Erosion of Normative Leverage.** It is evident that traditional tools of international pressure have proven ineffective against Myanmar. External insulation and internal resilience are the two key reasons why sanctions and UN resolutions fail to render desired coercive effect. In order to counteract the impact of sanctions, Myanmar aligns its objective with China and draws strategic and financial support, which also offer diplomatic cover at the UNSC. Therefore, Myanmar has developed a kind of political insulation internally. Myanmar is prepared to accept economic suffering and international criticism in exchange for maintaining its fundamental national identity, rendering pressures for normative changes ineffective.
- **Adoption of Transactional Diplomacy by Bangladesh.** Under the prevailing geopolitical scenario, Bangladesh has adopted a transactional nature of diplomacy. Its relations with regional superpowers like China and India are founded on strategic value exchanges, rather than on humanitarian values. It anticipates that in exchange, these nations will use their leverageable special influence over Myanmar to promote repatriation. Bangladesh, for example, participates in BRI in the hopes that China will exert its significant influence on Myanmar. Simultaneously, it strengthens its energy and security relations with India in the hopes that India will pay attention to Bangladesh's problem with the FDMN influx. The subsequent result is that Bangladesh remains engaged in a series of strategic agreements rather than cooperation.

The Sustainable Solution

In the context of the FDMN crisis, strategic partnerships can be the art of the possible solutions. They acknowledge the neorealist reality that a grand, universal coalition is unattainable, so they pursue a neoliberal collective action agenda through smaller, more agile groupings. Strategic partnerships can help by fractionalizing the problem into smaller, manageable components, building trust more ambitious cooperation, and creating a pathway for a long-term achievable goal. However, in order to accomplish these goals, pre-conditions such as convergence of interests in maintaining relation with Myanmar are essential. Ultimately, a sustainable solution depends upon a strategic interest convergence of major powers, instead of maintaining the status quo and focusing on respective gains. Bangladesh needs to sort out certain issues which are very common to all nations. For example, framing the FDMN issue as a potential hotbed for extremism and regional instability. Only when their strategic interests conclusively converge on the necessity of a FDMN-free Bangladesh, a requisite pressure can be applied to break Myanmar's defiance.

Figure 2: A Geopolitically Grounded Framework for Analyzing the FDMN Crisis



Source: Prepared by the Author, Based on Analysis

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a strategic partnership is a modern, flexible, and multifaceted diplomatic instrument that has become a cornerstone of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. While a precise, universally accepted definition remains elusive, it is broadly understood as a privileged bilateral engagement aimed at pursuing mutual interests across a comprehensive range of fields—from security and economy to technology and politics. Distinct from the more formal and narrowly-focused traditional alliance, a strategic partnership is characterized by its non-binding nature, long-term horizon, and adaptability, serving as a dynamic tool for states to hedge against uncertainty, capitalize on opportunities, and foster interdependence. As evidenced by the numerous partnerships forged by major powers like the US, China, and the EU, this form of relationship provides a vital and versatile framework for sustained cooperation and strategic dialogue in an increasingly complex and multipolar world.

Bangladesh's existing framework of strategic partnerships to address the FDMN crisis has proven to be fragmented and fundamentally inadequate in achieving a sustainable resolution. Bilateral engagements with Myanmar have failed due to a lack of genuine cooperation, while partnerships with influential neighbors like China and India are constrained by their competing geopolitical interests in Myanmar, preventing the formation of a true, shared-objective partnership. Multilateral and regional efforts, though successful in raising awareness and providing humanitarian aid, have been hamstrung by institutional paralysis—exemplified by ASEAN's principle of non-interference and the UN's limited enforcement capabilities. Furthermore, proposed options for strengthening partnerships remain underdeveloped, failing to address the profound challenges of geopolitical constraints, Myanmar's intransigence, donor fatigue, and resource limitations. Ultimately, a significant gap persists in the literature and, by extension, in Bangladesh's strategic approach: a failure to systematically leverage and sustain a cohesive, multi-level partnership strategy that can translate diplomatic and humanitarian efforts into tangible progress on repatriation.

The FDMN crisis reveals Bangladesh's quest for strategic partnerships as a complex, multi-faceted endeavor best understood through an integrated theoretical framework. While Neorealism exposes the structural impediments of power asymmetry and the transactional nature of alliances, it cannot fully account for the cooperative pathways that Neoliberalism highlights through institutional

engagement and complex interdependence. However, the persistent gap between diplomatic cooperation and tangible outcomes is precisely explained by Collective Action Theory, which identifies the inherent challenges of burden-sharing and free-riding in a large-group setting. Consequently, Bangladesh's strategy cannot rely on a single theoretical approach but must navigate a precarious reality: it is simultaneously a neoliberal project of institutional diplomacy, a neorealist struggle for leverage amidst great power competition, and an ongoing battle against the collective action problems that plague the international response. The ultimate test for Bangladesh's foreign policy lies in its ability to skillfully maneuver within this tripartite challenge to convert theoretical partnerships into a sustainable, on-the-ground solution.

The application of the analytical framework to India, China, the US, and Türkiye reveals a spectrum of potential partnerships for Bangladesh, each with distinct strategic value and inherent limitations. India and China, while indispensable due to their geopolitical leverage over Myanmar, are constrained by their own strategic interests, making them unpredictable and self-interested partners. The US emerges as a key ally for humanitarian aid and diplomatic pressure, though its agenda of regime change may conflict with the pragmatic goal of repatriation. In this complex landscape, Türkiye stands out as a highly valuable and underutilized partner, offering a unique combination of credible mediation through its balanced ties, robust humanitarian channels, and an avenue for strategic diversification away from the major power rivalry. Therefore, a successful Bangladeshi strategy necessitates a nuanced, multi-pronged approach: engaging with the major powers for their leverage while actively cultivating partnerships with middle-power mediators like Türkiye to build a more resilient and effective coalition for resolving the FDMN crisis.

The protracted FDMN crisis ultimately serves as a critical case study validating an integrated theoretical framework where Neorealism provides the dominant explanatory power. While Neoliberalism illuminates the cooperative pathways, Bangladesh pursues through multilateral institutions, and Collective Action Theory explains the implementation gaps in burden-sharing, it is the neorealist logic of state-centric interest and power asymmetry that ultimately accounts for the political stalemate. Myanmar's intransigence, underpinned by the principle of non-intervention, and the competing geopolitical games of China, India, and the US, systematically undermine neoliberal institutional efforts and exacerbate collective action failures. Therefore, the quest for a solution must be grounded in this realpolitik reality. Strategic partnerships, in this light, is not a tool to transcend

power politics, but a necessary instrument for navigating them, requiring Bangladesh to artfully align its humanitarian objectives with the calculated strategic interests of a fragmented international community.

REFERENCES

Akkas Ahamed, M. A. C. M. S. R., 2020. IJSRP. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ijsrp.org/research-paper-0620.php?rp=P10210094> [Accessed 19 February 2025].

Anas, A., 2020. COVID-19 Fuels Tensions between Rohingya Refugees and Bangladeshi Hosts. [Online] Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/07/27/Bangladesh-Rohingya-refugee-host-coronavirus-aid> [Accessed 18 February 2025].

Aslan, Ö., 2022. The Evolution of Turkey's 'South Asia Policy': Continuities and Ruptures in Outlook, Roles, Actors and Constraints. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, pp. 1-43.

Aung, K.H., 2025. China Decides How Far the Resistance Can Go in Myanmar. [Online] Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/china-decides-how-far-the-resistance-can-go-in-myanmar/> [Accessed 15 October 2025].

Banerjee, S., 2023. Issue Briefs: The Rohingya Crisis and its Impact on Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations. [Online] Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-rohingya-crisis-and-its-impact-on-bangladesh-myanmar-relations> [Accessed 6 May 2025].

Banerjee, S., 2025. Arakan Army's Growing Influence in Myanmar: Implications for the Rohingya. [Online] Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/arakan-army-s-growing-influence-in-myanmar-implications-for-the-rohingyas> [Accessed 17 May 2025].

Barbara, U. S., 1994. Moscow Declaration. [Online] Available at: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/moscow-declaration> [Accessed 28 March 2025].

Bhattacharjee, D., 2025. Strengthening of Islamic Radicalism in Bangladesh. [Online] Available at: https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&cls_id=12693&lid=7771 [Accessed 12 October 2025].

Bhattacharya, S., 2022. Contiguity, Connectivity and Access: The Importance of the Bay of Bengal Region in Indian Foreign Policy. First ed. London: Routledge.

Bull, H., 1977. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. 2nd ed. New York Columbia: University Press.

Çoban, M., 2024. An Analysis of the Religious Solidarity Discourses Regarding the Syrian Refugees in Türkiye. *Religions*, 15(10), pp. 1-19.

Colander, D., 2008. *Macroeconomic Policy And Collective Action*, Middlebury College, Department of Economics: Middlebury College Working Paper Series 0332.

Czechowska, L., 2013. The Concept of Strategic Partnership as an Input in the Modern Alliance Theory. *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, 2(4), pp. 36-51.

Elgebeily, S. A., 2017. How China's foreign policy of non-intervention is all about selective action. [Online] Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2091502/how-chinas-foreign-policy-non-intervention-all-about> [Accessed 10 October 2025].

Enemuwe, C. A., 2025. *International Affairs Forum*. [Online] Available at: https://www.ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document.cfm?contenttype_id=5&ContentID=12006 [Accessed 15 April 2025].

Faye, M., 2021. A forced migration from Myanmar to Bangladesh and beyond: humanitarian response to Rohingya refugee crisis. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 6(13), pp. 1-7.

Gerrit Kurtz, P. R., 2016. The Evolution of Norms of Protection: Major Powers Debate the Responsibility to Protect. *Global Society*, 30(1), pp. 3-20.

Harsh V. Pant and Kaush Arha, 2025. *A Global Vision of Free and Open Spaces: Creating Connectivity in the Modern World*, Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation.

Hoasain, S. H. a. S., 2019. SSRN. [Online] Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3380877 [Accessed 19 February 2025].

Hossain, A. N. M. Z., 2022. Recent Development and Emerging Trends of Research on Rohingya Refugee Crisis (1993-2020): A Bibliometric Analysis. *International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning*, 17(3), pp. 849-862.

ICG, 2023. Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh. [Online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/335-crisis-mounts-for-rohingya.pdf> [Accessed 27 February 2025].

Islam, A. Z., 2024. Understanding Global and Regional Interests in Myanmar and Options for Bangladesh for Resolving Rohingya Crisis Through Strategic Partnership. NDC e-Journal, 4(1), pp. 1-30.

Jaishankar, S., 2020. The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World. 1st ed. Noida: Harper Collins Publishers India.

Kay, S., 2000. What is Strategic Partnership?. Taylor & Francis, 47(3), pp. 15-24.

Krishnan, M., 2022. What is India's relationship to Myanmar's military junta?. [Online] Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/india-walks-diplomatic-tightrope-on-myanmars-military-junta/a-62685316> [Accessed 15 October 2025].

Maizland, E. A. a. L., 2023. Council on Foreign Relations. [Online] Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/rohingya-crisis> [Accessed 24 April 2025].

Mansoor, S. I. U., 2023. China's Geopolitical Strategy: Crafting a New World Order. China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies, 9(01), pp. 337-359.

Marston, H., 2025. Rethinking US Myanmar Policy in a Second Trump Administration. [Online] Available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2025/rethinking-us-myanmar-policy-in-a-second-trump-administration/> [Accessed 12 October 2025].

Meitei, K. S., 2024. Reassessing India's Look East Policy: Insurgency, Strategic Engagement and Regional Security. ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, 5(4), pp. 2348-2356.

Michalski, A. a. Z. P., 2017. Unlikely Partners? China, the European Union and the Forging of a Strategic Partnership. 1st ed. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mizzima, 2025. MNDAA to hand over administration of Lashio Town to Myanmar junta in April. [Online] Available at: <https://eng.mizzima.com/2025/04/06/21069> [Accessed 15 October 2025].

Mohajan, H., 2020. Munich Personal RePEc Archive. [Online] Available at: <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/108266/> [Accessed 26 February 2025].

Mohammad Fakhrus Salam, M. R. M. & Shohana Abedin Lamisha, M. B. U. H., 2024. Embracing Opportunities: Bangladesh's Foreign Policy Amid Geopolitical Challenges. *Malaysian Journal of International Relations*, 12(1), pp. 96-122.

Mousavi, M. A. a. S. A., 2024. The Strategic Relations and Its Forms: An Attempt at Conceptualisation. *International Studies*, 15 March, 61(1), pp. 20-45.

Musopole, I., 2017. The Influence of Incentive Structures on Collective Action: The Case of Anti-Corruption Collective Action in Malawi, Laxenburg: International Anti-Corruption Academy.

Myanmar Business Today, 2014. Turkey, Myanmar Sign Civil Aviation Agreement, Yangon: Myanmar Business Today.

Nadkarni, V., 2010. *Strategic Partnerships in Asia: Balancing without Alliances*. London: Routledge.

Nations, U., 2025. ILO Supports First-Ever Competency-based skill Development for Rohingya Refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. [Online] Available at: <https://bangladesh.un.org/en/292591> [Accessed 5 May 2025].

Nguyen Tuan Binh, L. H. K. D. Q. H. C. N. K. H. a. T. X. H., 2024. Geopolitical Competition Between India and China in the Indian Ocean Region: the Case of Myanmar. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 13(6), pp. 59-76.

Nye, R. O. K. a. J. S., 2012. *Power and Interdependence*. 4th ed. New York: Longman.

Olson, M., 2002. *The Logic of the Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. 20th ed. London: Harvard University Press.

Papageorgiou, M., 2024. Strategic Partnerships and the Promotion of Bilateralism: The Case of Sino-Russian Relationship. In: F. J. B. L. a. C. R. Yichao Li, ed. *The Palgrave Handbook on China-Europe-Africa Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 139-158.

Promit Mookherjee, A. A. a. A. K., 2024. ORF. [Online] Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/asean-bimstec-synergy-bringing-together-global-south-forces> [Accessed 20 February 2025].

RK, 2025. No Safe Ground: Why Repatriation to Myanmar Remains a Distant Dream for Rohingya Refugees. [Online] Available at: <https://rohingyakhobor>.

com/no-safe-ground-why-repatriation-to-myanmar-remains-a-distant-dream-for-rohingya-refugees/[Accessed 15 October 2025].

Roulo, C., 2019. U.S. Department of Defence. [Online] Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/1684641/alliances-vs-partnerships/>[Accessed 28 March 2025].

Sehgal, S., 2024. Strategic Interactions: Assessing The Geopolitical Landscape Between India And Neighbouring Countries. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(5), pp. 1898-1917.

Shukri, S., 2021. The Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Southeast Asia: ASEAN's Role and Way Forward. *Journal of the International Studies*, 17(1), pp. 239-263.

Shuvo, M. M. R. a. M. K. R., 2021. China and India's Comparative Response to the 2017 Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh. *Indonesian Journal of Innovation and Applied Sciences*, 2(1), pp. 113-123.

Standard, T. B., 2025. ASEAN urged to act as Rohingya crisis deepens, parliamentarians' network warns of regional instability. [Online] Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/asean-urged-act-rohingya-crisis-deepens-aphr-warns-regional-instability-1228776> [Accessed 10 October 2025].

Struver, G., 2016. *International Alignment between Interests and Ideology: The Case of China's Partnership Diplomacy*. Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

Sun, S. R. a. Y., 2024. To Counter China, U.S. Must Do More in Myanmar. [Online] Available at: https://www.stimson.org/2024/to-counter-china-u-s-must-do-more-in-myanmar/#elementor-toc__heading-anchor-0 [Accessed 10 October 2025].

Than, T. M. M., 2013. Myanmar Security Outlook: Coping with Violence and Armed Resistance. [Online] Available at: https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/joint_research/series9/pdf/14.pdf [Accessed 12 October 2025].

TIKA, 2023. Humanitarian Aid from TIKA to Myanmar, Ankara: TIKA.

Triwibowo, A., 2023. The Characteristics of Indonesian Digital Diplomacy. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 11(1), pp. 167-196.

Tyushka, A., 2019. Strategic partnerships, international politics and IR theory. *States, International Organizations and Strategic Partnerships*, 26 July, pp. 8-43.

UNHCR, 2021. UNHCR. [Online] Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Underfunding-Report-2021.pdf> [Accessed 26 February 2025].

UNHCR, 2025. Operational Data Portal. [Online] Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/bgd> [Accessed 24 April 2025].

UNHCR, 2025. Operational Data Portal. [Online] Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar> [Accessed 25 April 2025].

UNHCR, 2025. States Parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. [Online] Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/3b73b0d63.pdf> [Accessed 10 October 2025].

UNHCR, I. a., 2024. Joint Response Plan: Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis. [Online] Available at: <https://rohingyaresponse.org/project/2024-jrp/> [Accessed 5 May 2025].

Waltz, K. N., 2001. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press.

Watch, H. R., 2022. Burma: End 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Rohingya Muslims. [Online] Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/22/burma-end-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims> [Accessed 25 April 2025].

Zahed, I. U. M., 2023. Myanmar's military coup: The Rohingya caught "Between the devil and the deep sea". *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 23(2), pp. 213-231.

Zaman, M., 2023. Six years on, a solution to the Rohingya crisis is still elusive. *The Daily Star*, 6 August, pp. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/six-years-solution-the-rohingya-crisis-still-elusive-3387131>.

AUTHOR

Brigadier General Ahmed Zamiul Islam, ndc, afwc, psc, MPhil is a graduate of National Defence College, Mirpur and Defence Services Command and Staff College, Mirpur. The officer was commissioned from the Bangladesh Military Academy on 20 December 1992. He attended several professional courses both at home and abroad. He is a graduate of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Dhaka and obtained Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering. He also obtained Master of Arts in Defence Strategy from National University, Bangladesh and completed Master of Philosophy in Strategy and Development Studies from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Dhaka. He is pursuing his PhD in International Relations from BUP. Currently, he is serving as a Project Manager of Construction Supervision Consultant, Padma Bridge Rail Link Project.

E-mail: azislam72@yahoo.com



SECURING THE BLUE FRONTIER: ACCOUNTING FOR NON-TRADITIONAL MARITIME SECURITY CHALLENGES FOR BANGLADESH

Captain Md Zillur Rahman, (TAS), psc, BN

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 04th April 2025; Accepted: 22nd May 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: Bangladesh's maritime domain, commonly known as the nation's blue frontier, has grown in importance from a strategic and economic standpoint. Fisheries, offshore energy, maritime trade, and coastal tourism are all areas of the Bay of Bengal's blue economy that have enormous potential to boost national and regional economic growth. However, trans-border, multi-sectoral risks known as non-traditional security (NTS) are becoming a greater challenge to the region. These include human trafficking, piracy, maritime pollution, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, rising sea levels brought on by climate change, and the deterioration of coastal ecosystems. Bangladesh must now simultaneously address these multifaceted risks as it seeks to capitalize on the economic potential of its maritime resources. The challenge in the domain is to keep balance between security and sustainable economic growth. Effective management of NTS threats is further hampered by inadequate maritime governance, conflicting institutional mandates, a lack of data, and modest technological capability. In addition to analyzing national responses in relation to regional cooperation frameworks like IORA, BIMSTEC, and SAARC, this journal offers a critical examination of the evolving aspects of maritime security in Bangladesh. Case examples such as the oil disaster in the Sundarbans, the marine trafficking of Rohingya, and the reaction to cyclones demonstrate the urgent need for coordinated maritime policies. The journal will endeavor to necessitate an all-encompassing strategy that incorporates interagency coordination, environmental resilience, and international collaboration. In addition to proactive diplomacy, enhancing Bangladesh's maritime capabilities will be essential to transforming the blue frontier into a hub for sustainability, peace, and shared prosperity.

Keywords: *Non-Traditional Security, Blue Economy, Maritime Security, South Asia, Human Trafficking, Climatic Change and Piracy.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Compared to traditional military challenges, security paradigms have changed significantly in the twenty-first century. The state's monopoly over security, which is mostly centered on territorial and armed disputes, has grown proportionately to include both non-traditional and global threats to security in the post-cold war era, which has resulted in a transnational and complicated network. These dangers are not territorially specific, are frequently non-military, and include organized crime, pandemics, environmental harm and climate change. The difficulties presented by NTS are harmful to human security, regional collaboration, development goals, and national stability. They are particularly pernicious because they frequently carry out their work covertly, progressively destroying ecosystems, communities, and systems without obvious signs of conflict.

Bangladesh, a low-lying deltaic nation, sits on the northeastern edge of the Bay of Bengal with strong maritime history and direct access to important international shipping lanes is exposed to NTS hazard in many ways. By resolving maritime boundary disputes with India (2014) and Myanmar (2012), Bangladesh has also formally expanded its claim to around 118,813 square kilometers of maritime territory, an area rich in marine resources and economic potential leads to nation's transition into the blue economy era. Blue economy refers to sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and the health of ocean ecosystems. For Bangladesh the focus areas include fisheries, maritime trade, offshore renewable energy, port infrastructure, marine biotechnology, and coastal tourism. With the potential to diversify the economy, alleviate coastal poverty, and increase climate resilience, it is now considered as the next frontier for national growth. If properly and sustainably implemented, Bangladesh's blue economy has the potential to boost the nation's annual GDP by up to US\$5 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA, 2020)). However, this optimistic golden passage is obscured by a multitude of non-traditional security threats that undermine the economic capacity and environmental sustainability of the maritime domain. These threats include climate change, which compounds sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and salinity intrusion; illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which depletes fish stocks and threatens food security; maritime piracy and transnational crime, which endangers commercial shipping and coastal safety; and human trafficking, frequently including vulnerable Rohingya populations escaping persecution and economic hardship. Marine pollution from industrial waste, plastic debris and oil spills also degrades marine ecosystems and increases risks to biodiversity and human health.

Bangladesh's current institutional framework and maritime governance mechanisms are still evolving and often struggle to effectively monitor, respond to, and mitigate these diverse threats. Institutional overlaps with limited technological capacity, inter-agency coordination, and a lack of real-time maritime data create vulnerabilities that external and internal actors can exploit. At the same time, regional cooperation while present in forums like IORA, BIMSTEC, and SAARC remains fragmented and largely reactive. The absence of cohesive regional maritime security architecture in the Bay of Bengal impairs the ability to coordinate joint surveillance, disaster response, and transnational crime prevention.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research aims to answer the following key questions:

- What are the main non-traditional security threats existing in Bangladesh's blue frontier, and how do they affect the nation's security and economic growth?
- How can Bangladesh enhance its maritime governance framework addressing NTS challenges while safeguarding economic development through blue economy and environmental sustainability in the blue frontier?
- What are the barriers to effective management of NTS in Bangladesh's maritime domain and what role can regional cooperation through frameworks like IORA, BIMSTEC, and SAARC play in overcoming these challenges?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The evolving concept of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) has reshaped global security paradigms, moving away from state-centric, territorial concerns to include transnational, non-military threats like climate change, organized crime, and pandemics. These challenges undermine both human security and national stability, requiring comprehensive governance strategies. Bangladesh, with its vast maritime domain, faces numerous NTS risks that hinder its transition to a blue economy, such as climate change-induced sea-level rise, illegal fishing, and marine pollution. Despite resolving maritime boundaries with India and Myanmar, the country faces difficulties with fragmented institutional frameworks, weak enforcement, and limited technological capacity to manage these threats. Regional cooperation remains disjointed, exacerbating vulnerabilities. Literature emphasizes

the need for integrated maritime governance, technological advancements, and stronger regional collaborations to balance economic development and security (MoFA, 2020; Rahman, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODS

This is an exploratory qualitative research that studies Bangladesh's maritime domain which is confronting Non-Traditional Security (NTS) challenges. The study is mostly based on secondary data analysis which includes a literature review, policy analysis, expert interviews, case studies, and data collection on marine pollution, fishery depletion, and climate impacts. Synthesis of the results will lead to a collection of recommendations for a composite governance design for enhanced regional cooperation, policy coherence, technology, and community resilience to ensure both economic growth and security.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study highlights Bangladesh's maritime domain awareness (MDA) and technological surveillance systems are still developing, which hinders effective monitoring and response to NTS threats. The lack of coordination between various national agencies and stakeholders creates inefficiencies in addressing NTS issues. Despite international and regional frameworks like BIMSTEC and IORA, the lack of cohesive maritime security architecture in the Bay of Bengal region hampers effective cooperation and response to maritime security threats. These limitations suggest areas that require further study and development, especially in terms of governance structures, regional collaboration, technological enhancements, and policy coherence.

A NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY APPROACH TO THE BLUE FRONTIER

Non-Traditional Security (NTS) is a broad concept that came to realization in the wake of traditional security not being able to cope with the general changes occurring around the world, where the sense of security transcended the borders of the state and militarized threats to encompass issues such as human and environmental security amongst others. In response to the end of the Cold War, scholars and policy practitioners gradually expanded the concept of security to

include non-military, transnational, and often human-centric threats. These are environmental degradation, pandemic diseases and health threats, food and water insecurity, forced migration, without a doubt climate change, and transnational crime (Caballero-Anthony, 2008).

One of the key theoretical pillars of NTS is the Human Security framework. Economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security are all aspects of human security, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994). This comprehensive approach encourages multifaceted threat evaluations and encourages proactive rather than reactive measures. Another important theoretical framework is the Securitization Theory of the Copenhagen School, which holds that a problem only qualifies as a security threat when it is presented as such by powerful individuals rather than by the issue's inherent material characteristics (Buzan et al., 1998). Environmental degradation and illicit fishing may not initially be viewed as dangers in the maritime realm, but they become security issues when they are linked to food insecurity, economic collapse, or national sovereignty.

NTS THREATS IN THE MARITIME CONTEXT

The nature of oceanic spaces being porous, expansive, and interconnected renders maritime domain NTS threats especially complex. These threats don't stop at borders and often require cooperation between regions as well as technological surveillance and robust legal frameworks to be properly dealt with. The major NTS threats in the Bay of Bengal and confronting Bangladesh maritime space with India, Myanmar and other Indian Ocean Rim countries includes:

Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise. Low-lying coastal areas of Bangladesh are disproportionately affected by rising sea levels, cyclones and storm surges. In addition, they cause economic damage and displacement of populations, giving tensions to internal unrest and cross-border (IPCC, 2021).

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing. The foreign and local trawlers often encroached into the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Bangladesh, thus threatening the livelihoods of millions of highly dependent coastal fishers and compromising the sustainability of marine resources (Islam & Haque, 2018). IUU fishing undermines food security and marine sustainability and is frequently associated with organized crime and corruption.

Marine Pollution. The Bay of Bengal is one of the most polluted marine ecosystems, impacted by oil spills, plastic pollution and chemical effluents. The need for such measures is evident through events such as the 2014 Sundarbans oil spill, where threats to the environment can lead to a socio-eco crisis (Kabir et al. 2015).

Human Trafficking and Smuggling. Smuggling of migrants, drugs, and contraband are increasingly using maritime routes. The Rohingya crisis has worsened the problem, with thousands venturing out to sea in perilous circumstances, threatening both human security and regional stability (UNODC, 2018).

Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea. While piracy and armed robbery at sea are not as dangerous as in the Gulf of Aden or Strait of Malacca where it is ‘disorganized crime’ because the attacks are not highly organized and can only take place using low-level speedboats (Chowdhury, 2017).

BLUE FRONTIER CONCEPT - OCEAN GOVERNANCE AND MARINE BOUNDARIES

The phrase “blue frontier” describes a nation’s marine domain and its prospects for socioeconomic and environmental, and strategic growth. For states coastal and island alike such as Bangladesh, the blue frontier is not simply a space of geographic consideration; it is a strategic asset and a domain of security. One of the main pillars of the “blue frontier” is the establishment of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a maritime management area where states claim rights to exploit and utilize marine resources located within 200 nautical miles from their coastline, according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982). Bangladesh’s EEZ is a legally established byproduct of maritime boundary arbitration with India and Myanmar that covers 118,813 square kilometers, which is a major resource if the country can leverage deep-sea fishing, seabed mining, offshore oil and gas, and marine conservation.

However, working in the blue frontier requires sound ocean governance covering:

- Clear maritime laws and enforcement mechanisms
- Surveillance and monitoring of maritime activities
- Disaster preparedness and climate resilience
- Regional coordination for joint resource management and crisis response

Through legislation (for example the Marine Fisheries Act 2020), institutional development (for example Bangladesh Navy modernization), and participation in regional forums (for example IORA, BIMSTEC), Bangladesh has started creating the structures of such governance. But in some ways ocean governance lags behind systems for governing it. The blue economy strategy recently announced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA, 2020) provides a sustainable development vision and urges engagement in public-private partnerships, investment in research and projects piloted along regional cooperation. Yet the interplay of economic growth with environmental viability and national security is an ongoing and sensitive balancing act.

BLUE FRONTIER OF BANGLADESH

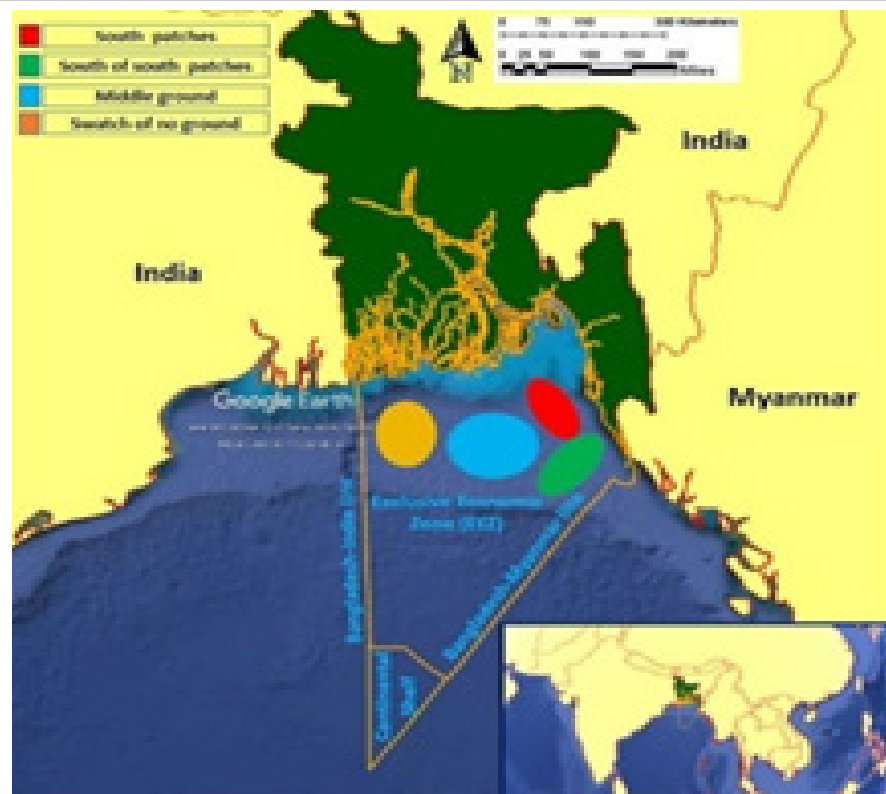
Bangladesh's Maritime Claims Post- UNCLOS Ruling. Over the past ten years, Bangladesh has amicably resolved long-standing maritime boundary disputes with India and Myanmar, drastically changing its maritime boundaries. Under the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Bangladesh's maritime boundaries in the Bay of Bengal were delineated by the historic decisions rendered by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2014 and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in 2012. These decisions split into a sizable portion of Bangladesh's maritime domain. Bangladesh was granted rights to a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea, 200-nautical-mile EEZ, and a continental shelf that extended 354 nautical miles from baseline as a result of the 2012 ITLOS ruling on Myanmar. One of the 2014 PCA verdicts resolved overlapping areas of jurisdiction and supported India's claims. Bangladesh currently has official sovereignty over approximately 118,813 square kilometers of ocean territory, which is abundant in fish, hydrocarbons, marine biodiversity, and other resources. Which have given Bangladesh a previously unheard-of chance to strategically utilize its maritime domain. For the first time, there is no diplomatic ambiguity and no threat of confrontation with neighboring coastal governments, allowing the nation to freely explore and exploit maritime resources. However, maintaining and protecting this vast marine region also presents difficult security and governance issues that call for new capabilities and cooperation systems.



Marine Resources and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The most important area under Bangladesh's blue frontier is the EEZ. (UNCLOS, 1982) A coastal state has the right to sovereignty under UNCLOS Article 56 in order to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage natural resources, whether living or non-living, in the EEZ's water column, seabed, and subsoil. This encompasses more than simply fisheries; it also covers genetic resources, minerals, and oil and gas reserves. Nearly 2 million people are employed directly or indirectly by marine fisheries, which have long been an essential part of the coastal economy (DoF, 2021). However, due to infrastructure and technological limitations, most of the fishing is still limited to shallow waters. The recently acquired EEZ still has a large amount of untapped fishing potential. Particularly in deeper oceans, there are several underfished economically viable species like squid, mackerel, and tuna (MoFL, 2022; Bangladesh Marine Fisheries Capacity Building Plan). The Bay of

Bengal's hydrocarbon exploration is the new frontier for economic potential, aside from fishing. According to seismic surveys conducted by Petrobangla and foreign businesses, there are potential gas blocks in the EEZ. However, because of financial limitations, regulatory restrictions, and logistical difficulties, progress has been sluggish. Although they aren't often discussed, marine genetic resources (MGRs) are becoming a highly valued global industry. MGRs generated from microorganisms and marine plants are used in industry, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals. Bangladesh should embrace this new bio-economy frontier by collaborating internationally and building the necessary maritime research infrastructure. Additionally, there is untapped marine tourism potential in the nation's coastal and marine regions, particularly in locations like Saint Martin's Island and Kuakata. However, over-tourism, weak regulation, and environmental degradation remain challenges to sustainable development in this area (Hossain, 2020).

Figure 2: Various Zones and Important Maritime areas of Bangladesh



Source: Research Gate by M M Haque

Policy Focus on the Blue Economy. The potential of blue economy for development is recognized even in the national policy discourse of Bangladesh. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) defines the blue economy as the sustainable use of ocean resources for ecosystem health, economic growth, and better livelihoods. It resonates with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-14): "Life Below Water." Indeed, shortly after the maritime verdict in 2014, the Government of Bangladesh set up its Blue Economy Cell in the MoFA for the purpose of deriving a strategic framework for maritime development. These include fisheries, renewable energy, marine biotechnology, shipbuilding, port development, seabed mining, marine tourism, and others (MoFA, 2020); 26 priority sectors are outlined in the Blue Economy Strategy (MoFA, 2020). Encouraging such public-private partnerships (PPPs) from foreign parties to promote investments, technology, and knowledge transfer is another key area of policy concentration. Bangladesh has signed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with nations like as Norway, India, and Japan to collaborate on port infrastructure, fisheries development, and maritime research (MoFA, 2022). Furthermore, the national development priority for the 8th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) specifically mentions the blue economy. Prioritising the capacity building of the Bangladesh Navy, Coast Guard, and Department of Fisheries to improve maritime zone governance, the plan aims to mainstream ocean governance into larger development frameworks (GED, 2020). Despite this progress, policy implementation faces several challenges:

- Overlapping institutional mandates among maritime authorities
- Lack of real-time data and marine scientific research capabilities
- Limited enforcement against illegal fishing and marine pollution
- Underdeveloped port infrastructure for deep-sea exploration and trade

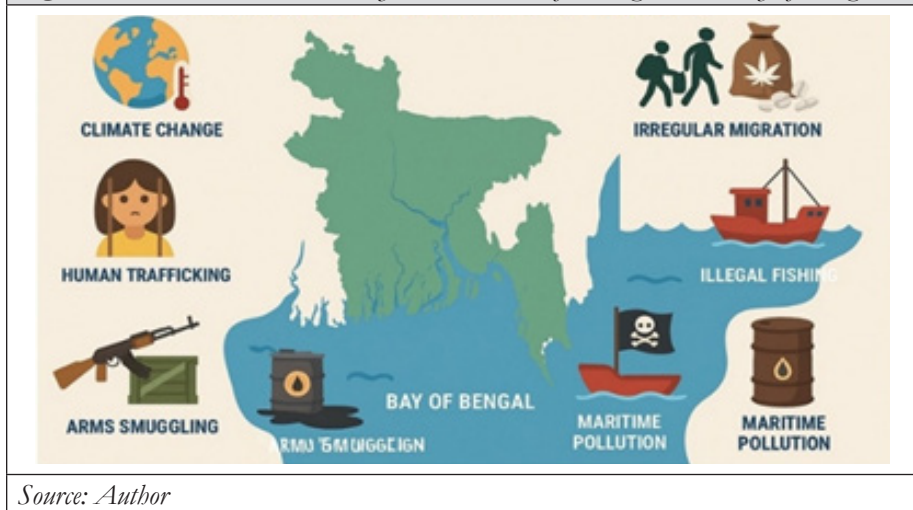
Strategic Significance and Prospects. Bangladesh's blue frontier has crucial geopolitical importance in addition to economic ones. Bangladesh is situated next to important sea lines of communication (SLOCs) connecting South and Southeast Asia, in the middle of the Bay of Bengal. Increased maritime traffic raises the possibility of environmental mishaps, international crimes, and possible security flashpoints. All of this implies that ocean diplomacy, regional collaboration, and marine domain awareness (MDA) will be crucial for protecting national security as well as economic interests. Ultimately, in order to transform its blue frontier into a region of peace, prosperity, and resilience, Bangladesh must continue to expand its marine capabilities, conduct scientific research, and

form collaborations. A whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategy will be necessary to integrate their policy domains and make sure that marine development doesn't come at the expense of ecological deterioration or strategic vulnerability.

Key Non-Traditional Security Risks in Bangladesh's Maritime Domain.

Bangladesh's blue economy potential and marine sovereignty are under risk due to a multitude of non-traditional security (NTS) threats to its maritime domain. Because these dangers are interconnected and to address it a cross-sectoral response is required. Based on facts and professional evaluation this, section outlines the five main risks that are most significant to the nation's maritime boundary.

Figure 3: Non-Traditional Security Threats Nexus for Bangladesh in Bay of Bengal



Sea-Level Rise and Climate Change. Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. Rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, coastal erosion, and more frequent cyclones are all problems facing its island and coastal residents. Sea level rise is a significant issue; the Bay of Bengal is rising more quickly than the rest of the world, endangering large swaths of the southern shoreline, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021). According to BCCSAP (2009), a one-meter rise in sea levels would submerge around 17% of the nation's area, forcing up to 30 million people to relocate. Resource conflicts, claims over maritime boundaries, and internal and cross-border migratory movements are all directly impacted by this enormous relocation. Cyclone Amphan (2020) and Cyclone Sidr (2007) are two

recent examples that demonstrate how storms' growing severity affects coastal infrastructure and economic activity. Resilience and growth plans are significantly weakened when ports, mangroves, and fishing fleets are damaged. Experts assert that integrating climate adaptation strategies into marine governance is crucial (Paul & Rahman, 2020).

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing. Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is a significant and severe concern in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Bangladesh. IUU fishing depletes fish stocks, destroys the marine ecosystem and threatens the livelihoods of small-scale fishers. (FAO, 2020) claims that IUU fishing constitutes up to 30% of the global catches; so, Bangladesh is not an exception. In the past five years alone, the Department of Fisheries (DoF, 2021) reported over 2,000 illegal fishing incidents in the Bay of Bengal. In recent years, foreign trawlers, particularly from bordering nations have engaged in fishing beyond the limits set by authorities, taking advantage of the insufficient technology and maritime surveillance capability of the Bangladeshi authorities. In response, Bangladesh changed the Marine Fisheries Act in 2020, increasing fines and giving law enforcement more authority. However, there are still gaps in capacity and weak implementation. According to Hossain (2022), greater IUU tracking and deterrence may result from enhanced regional collaboration through organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the incorporation of satellite-based vessel monitoring systems (VMS).

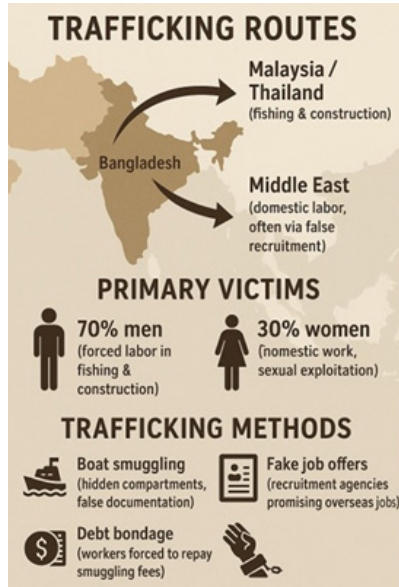
Table 1: IUU Fishing Incidents in Bangladesh's EEZ (2015-2022)

Table 1: IUU Fishing Incidents in Bangladesh's EEZ (2015-2022)			
Year	Reported Incidents	Foreign Trawlers Detained	Estimated Economic Loss (USD Million)
2015	320	45	85
2016	290	38	78
2017	410	62	110
2018	380	55	95
2019	350	50	90
2020	420	70	120
2021	400	65	115
2022	450	80	130

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)

Figure 4: Maritime Migration and Human Trafficking



Source: Author

Maritime Migration and Human Trafficking. Due to its closeness to the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh has become a hub for both maritime migration and trafficking, particularly in relation to the Rohingya refugee crisis. Transnational human trafficking networks have often enabled the dangerous sea journeys of thousands of Rohingyas escaping conflict in Myanmar. Bangladesh serves as both a source and a transit nation for forced labor trafficking (UNODC, 2018). Traffickers use marine routes and the absence of efficient coastal surveillance to transfer victims to Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Middle East. Over a million refugees reside in the Cox’s Bazar region, which has become a hub for sea smuggling. The tragic event in May 2020, in which a boat carrying more than 300 Rohingyas was abandoned to float in the ocean for weeks, resulting in the deaths of many of them, brought attention to the security and humanitarian threats posed by maritime trafficking. Stronger has to be done, including stronger law enforcement, regional collaboration, and victim care networks, even though the Bangladesh Coast Guard is registering and increasing patrols with the help of international organizations (Riaz, 2021).

Table 2: *Reported Incidents of Petty Thefts and Piracy*

Year	Petty Thefts	Piracy
2015	8	1
2016	6	0
2017	5	0
2018	4	0
2019	3	0
2020	5	1
2021	4	0
2022	3	0

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)

Petty Thefts and piracy. Although not as well-known as regions plagued by piracy, such as the Gulf of Aden, the Bay of Bengal has witnessed a low-level marine crime, such as petty thefts, and piracy. This is particularly true during the monsoon, when boats are most at risk. Another growing issue is the trafficking of illegal commodities. Numerous pirate groups have been apprehended in the waters close to Chittagong and the Sundarbans because of the Coast Guard and Bangladesh Navy's increased patrols. Cooperation in maritime security can be improved by utilizing regional forums like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) (BN, 2022).

Environmental Degradation and Marine Pollution. The coastal and marine habitats of Bangladesh are under tremendous stress due to heavy industrial pollution, oil spills, plastic trash, and shipbreaking operations. One such instance was the 2014 Sundarbans oil spill in Bangladesh, where two oil tankers collided and over 350,000 litres of furnace oil leaked into a mangrove ecosystem, killing thousands of species and negatively impacting local communities' livelihoods (Kabir et al., 2015). A significant amount of marine pollution is caused by untreated leftover projects that are released from Chattogram's shipbreaking facilities and coastal urban settlements. Coral reefs, seagrass beds, and fish nurseries are harmed by plastics and chemical runoff that enter the Bay due to a lack of central marine waste management. In order to preserve fish supplies and biodiversity, ecosystem-based management (EBM) and marine protected areas (MPAs) may be established.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS: SOUTH ASIAN COOPERATION AND CONFLICTS

Maritime Boundary Disputes and Cooperation. South Asian maritime dynamics are characterized by both collaboration and conflict. International arbitration has historically been used to address Bangladesh's unresolved maritime border disputes with India and Myanmar. The 2012 ITLOS ruling with Myanmar and the 2014 PCA verdict with India were significant milestones in regional maritime diplomacy (Rahman, 2014). To ensure cooperative maritime governance in the domain, confidence-building measures (CBMs) and communication protocols within countries may be established.

Regional Associations: IORA, SAARC, and BIMSTEC. Regional Institutions in handling NTS Threats in the Bay of Bengal play a mixed role. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has started talking about a number of topics, such as disaster risk reduction, climate resilience, and maritime connectivity, but political disagreements and a lack of funding often impede progress. Although its attempts to adapt to climate change and prepare for disasters are encouraging, maritime cooperation is still lacking. However, IORA has also made strides in promoting environmental preservation, marine security, and the expansion of the blue economy. Bangladesh has been a vocal supporter of ASEAN's collaborative frameworks on IUU fishing, oil spill response, and capacity building as a member of the regional group (IORA, 2021).

Security Architecture and Gaps in Regional Collaboration. There is no overarching maritime security architecture for the Bay of Bengal region. Unlike for the Western Pacific where there exists a ReCAAP or for Africa where there was a Yaoundé Code of Conduct, there is no centralized information-sharing mechanism or a coordinated response for maritime threats in South Asia. The existing frameworks such as the IONS, MILAN naval exercises and bilateral MoUs are fragmented. Although these mechanisms are useful in establishing trust as well as facilitating naval diplomacy, they are inadequate for implementation through joint patrols, surveillance systems, and harmonization of legal institutions. Analysts have advocated for the creation of a Bay of Bengal Maritime Security Forum (BBMSF) that is exclusively focused on NTS risks in order to close these gaps. Such a conference would enable the institutionalization of crisis communication channels, bring together relevant legislative frameworks, and promote joint training and environmental monitoring projects (Ahmed, 2022).

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES AND POLICY GAPS

While Bangladesh's maritime objectives and claims have developed greatly over the last few years and the potential of the blue economy has been well enunciated, governance of the maritime domain continues to struggle from policy and institutional barriers. A legal jurisdiction is insufficient to respond to non-traditional security (NTS) threats; rather, integrated, coherent, and capable governance structures must exist. Here are few areas of institutional weakness that demand attention:

Governance Structures and Coordination Between Agencies. Despite being a maritime nation, one of the significant challenges for the maritime administration of Bangladesh is the lack of a comprehensive governance framework on ocean affairs. Ministries such as MoFA, MoS, MoEFCC and MoFL have overlapping jurisdictions. This fragmentation results in duplication of efforts. It is essential to have seamless coordination among civil, military and scientific agencies to conduct effective maritime governance. Bangladesh Navy and Coast Guard plays an active role in maritime surveillance, interdiction and coordination with other stake holders like Department of Fisheries, shipping, energy and minerals, environment, Marine Police etc. However, due to absence recognized coordinating infrastructure this sometimes cause time delay, thus establishing a maritime task force would make this task easier and less time consuming. In this regard "International partners such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and UNDP have consistently encouraged Bangladesh to set up inter-agency maritime task forces in order to facilitate coordination."

Limited Technological Deployment and Monitoring. Bangladesh's maritime domain awareness (MDA) is still in its growing stage. Its lateral surveillance systems do not have the technical rigor to keep an eye on the vast activity in its EEZ. The only practical option for ocean monitoring is manned patrol, which is costly and less effective for covering deep-sea operations. This sometimes exposes the portion of the EEZ to NTS threat. Moreover, Bangladesh faces significant challenges due to the absence of comprehensive oceanographic data infrastructure and a limited fleet of marine research vessels. The development of effective marine spatial planning and climate resilience strategies is hindered by the scarcity of real-time environmental and hydrographic information.

Policy Issues. Bangladesh's maritime policy framework is yet to be established, to govern the domain. There are multiple policies in effect, which result in a fragmented governance structure. While the Blue Economy Strategy sets forth

objectives for the sustainable development of maritime resources, it endorses shipbreaking yards which is environmentally hazardous. The absence of a comprehensive National Maritime Policy (NMP) further exacerbates these issues. Research underscores the urgent need for a cohesive policy framework that integrates national security, environmental sustainability, economic growth, and international cooperation (Rahman & Chowdhury, 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS: A BALANCED SECURITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Bangladesh requires a well-balanced, forward-looking, people-centered approach to grapple with the growing nexus of development and nontraditional security in its vast maritime frontier. The following recommendations focus on community resilience, governance, capacity building, regional cooperation, and economic sustainability.

Strengthening Maritime Governance. Bangladesh may set up a National Ocean Governance Authority (NOGA) to coordinate all activities at sea with legal, administrative and financial powers as soon as possible. This body could unify the fragmented landscape of existing agencies, ensuring policy harmony, minimizing bureaucratic competition and expediting response time to any NTS challenge. A National Maritime Policy (NMP), guided by scientific knowledge base and stakeholder consultations, would pave the way for a long-term strategy covering areas of security, economic development, environmental protection and international cooperation.

Strengthening Naval and Coast Guard Capabilities. In order to secure its expanded EEZ and deal with maritime threats such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, smuggling, and human trafficking, Bangladesh May invest in the modernization of its naval and coast guard fleets comprising, inter alia, offshore patrol vessels, surveillance drones, and satellite-based tracking systems. Training in domains specifically related to maritime law enforcement, search and rescue, and environmental protection may be institutionalized in joint efforts with international naval forces and maritime academies. This would lead to greater operational preparedness and adherence to universal standards like UNCLOS.

Frameworks for Regional Cooperation. Bangladesh may play a proactive role in strengthening and institutionalizing regional maritime cooperation through IORA and BIMSTEC and the proposed Bay of Bengal Maritime Security Forum (BBMSF). These are platforms can help with:

- Joint patrols and maritime surveillance
- Data and intelligence sharing
- Legal harmonization and standard operating procedures (SOPs)
- Coordinated disaster response and climate resilience efforts

Sustainable Exploitation of the Blue Economy. Development of blue economy must be scientific, inclusive and ecologically sound. A marine spatial planning (MSP) framework needs to be adopted by Bangladesh to minimize conflicts between areas of fisheries, tourism, shipping, and conservation zones. Investments in public-private partnerships (PPPs) in marine biotechnology, renewable energy and sustainable aquaculture should be promoted to ensure mutual benefit through enhanced development of new products and services. Conversely, policing must be installed to combat overexploitation and pollution. Bangladesh must also invest more in marine research infrastructure, such as oceanographic institutes and data-sharing platforms, to facilitate innovation and evidence-based policymaking.

People-Centered Security Strategies. Vulnerable coastal populations are disproportionately affected by non-traditional threats. Hence, human security needs to place at the core of maritime policy. Recommended actions include:

- Expanding cyclone shelters and early warning systems
- Providing climate-resilient housing and alternative livelihoods
- Ensuring access to healthcare, clean water, and sanitation in coastal zones
- Supporting community-based resource management and local marine conservation

Incorporating local knowledge and empowering communities through participatory governance will strengthen both social resilience and environmental stewardship.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh's blue frontier, despite having economic potential and strategic promise remains exposed to a variety of non-traditional security challenges. Sea level rise brought on by climate change, illicit fishing, human trafficking, piracy, and environmental degradation are a few of these issues that endanger both the integrity of the nation's maritime domain and the livelihoods of millions of people. These dangers are transboundary in scope, inherently linked, and

exacerbated by governance and regional coordination. Fixing these will take more than piecemeal reform. It calls for a whole new alignment of national priorities that understands the need for equilibrium between national interest, maritime security, and human rights. Unwise overreliance on economic exploitation without regard to sustainability and equity can only aggravate existing vulnerabilities. What's required is a comprehensive, multilateral strategy—one that brings domestic institutions together under coherent policy frameworks, harnesses regional alliances for collective action, and positions coastal communities at the center of maritime resilience planning. Bangladesh needs to take bold steps to integrate development with security and diplomacy with inclusivity.

Adopting a balanced, forward-thinking approach to ocean governance is the only way to preserve our blue frontier, where the ocean is viewed not just as a resource-rich area but also as a foundation for regional peace, prosperity, and sustainable growth into the twenty-first century.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, M. (2022). Regional Maritime Security Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Maritime Affairs*, 14(2), 118-132.
- Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute (BORI). (2021). *Marine Data and Hydrographic Surveying in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: BORI.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & De Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Caballero-Anthony, M. (2008). Non-Traditional Security in Asia: A Regional Public Goods Perspective. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 19(1), 1-22.
- Chowdhury, M. A. H. (2017). Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea: The Threats and Responses in the Bay of Bengal. *Bangladesh Journal of Maritime Affairs*, 5(1), 42-59.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2020). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020: Sustainability in Action*. Rome: FAO.
- Hossain, M. I. (2020). Marine Tourism in Bangladesh: Opportunities and Challenges. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(3), 56-72.
- Hossain, M. I., & Karim, M. R. (2019). Maritime Governance and the Role of Bangladesh in Sustainable Fisheries Management. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 8(2), 101-114.

- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2021). *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- International Maritime Organization (IMO). (2021). *The Role of IMO in Combating Maritime Pollution*. London: IMO.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Bangladesh. (2020). *Bangladesh's Blue Economy Strategy: A Vision for Sustainable Development*. Dhaka: MoFA.
- Rahman, M. Z. (2014). Maritime Boundaries of Bangladesh: Implications and Challenges. *Maritime Journal of South Asia*, 6(3), 18-34.
- Rahman, M. Z., & Chowdhury, S. (2021). Institutional Challenges in Maritime Governance in Bangladesh. *Journal of International Security Studies*, 9(2), 43-61.
- Riaz, A. (2021). Human Trafficking and Smuggling in the Bay of Bengal: The Rohingya Crisis. *Asian Journal of Migration Studies*, 15(1), 23-38.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (1994). *Human Security: A New Approach to Global Security*. New York: UNDP.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2018). *Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: A Maritime Perspective*. Vienna: UNODC.
- World Bank. (2020). *Bangladesh's Blue Economy: A Path to Sustainable Growth*. Dhaka: World Bank.
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2021). *Health Impacts of Climate Change on Coastal Populations in Bangladesh*. Geneva: WHO.
- World Wildlife Fund (WWF). (2015). *Marine Pollution and Its Effects on Coastal Ecosystems in the Bay of Bengal*. Dhaka: WWF.

AUTHOR

Captain Md Zillur Rahman, (TAS), psc, BN was commissioned in Executive branch of Bangladesh Navy in 2000. He did his specialization on Torpedo Anti-Submarine (TAS) from Bangladesh. He served in various capacities on board smaller and medium crafts, Frigates and bases of BN. He has served as OIC Torpedo Anti-Submarine School and has commanded various Smaller, Medium and Capital platforms of Bangladesh Navy and Coast Guard. He took part in UN Peace Keeping Mission in United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). He is a graduate of DSCSC, Mirpur and is currently perusing MPhil in Development Studies at BUP, Mirpur, Dhaka. Presently the officer is serving as Chief Staff Officer to Commander Khulna Naval Area (COMKHUL). He is happily married and blessed with two sons and a daughter.

Email: shomoy119@yahoo.com



CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS: BRIDGING PEACE THEORY AND UN PRACTICE

Colonel S M Abdur Rouf, afwc, psc, G (Retired)

Civilian Staff Member in UNMISS

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 31st March 2025; Accepted: 24th October 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has long been experiencing insurgency and low intensity conflict situation. Despite signing of Peace Accord in 1997, a comprehensive solution to the problems could not be reached, and continued violence kept threatening the peace potential in the area. Erstwhile insurgent groups still maintain strong military wings; even the looming risk of “insurgency revival” could not be ruled out. A host of unresolved issues made the situation more complex over the period; discontents persist over the core issues. Arguably the management of CHT conflicts was not necessarily been successful as evident from the continued violence and instability. There are incompatible goals of the conflicting parties (Government and the ethnic minorities) that are yet to be resolved. This warrants conflict transformation, which deals with the incompatible goals in transforming relationship between the conflicting parties. Addressing the root causes, it simultaneously tackles attitudes, behaviours, and problems of the parties for a sustainable solution. This study explored conflict transformation theories wherein “Transcend/Peace Approach” found to be relevant for CHT situation. It also examines the relevance of UN peacekeeping lessons in the conflict transformation of CHT. However, the paper does not seek to establish a one-size-fits-all approach. Some common approaches with UN are assessed to be compatible for transforming the CHT conflict. Few functional recommendations are provided that may bring in peace and stability in the CHT.

Keywords: *Conflict Management; Conflict Transformation; Insurgency; CHT Peace Accord; Peacekeeping.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the War of Liberation, independent Bangladesh experienced an insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)¹ for nearly three decades. The decades-long insurgency had been tearing apart the peace and stability of this region. The situation warranted the deployment of forces to maintain law and order in the area. Unrest and violence caused the loss of many ethnic minorities,² Bengalis³, and Security Forces⁴ personnel. Although the CHT Peace Accord was signed in 1997, insurgent factions continued their armed struggle, demanding a separate “Jumma Land.” While the scale of violence reduced, different conflicting issues, such as land and ethnic identity, kept the CHT in chaos and disorder. In the prevailing low-intensity conflict (LIC) situation in CHT, some parties are warning that they should take up arms⁵ should the agreement not be fully implemented expeditiously, even threatening a revival of insurgency. The challenge is that managing the CHT conflict has not been as successful as hoped, as evidenced by the persistent conflicts in the area.

Conflict management presumes that “conflict can somehow be contained, controlled, and possibly ended” (Butler, 2009, p. 1). Conflict transformation, on the other hand, simultaneously addresses attitudes, behaviors, and problems to transform or change them positively (Dayton, 2009). Conflict transformation is a process that changes the relationships between parties in a conflict and aspires for fundamental social and political changes to rectify inequalities and injustices. So far, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has managed the CHT conflict. Now, there is a need to review the approach, identify what went wrong, and resolve the issues through a conflict transformation process.

UN peacekeeping has learned from its failures and successes, and by adopting contemporary theories and practices, it has developed a systematic approach to conflict management and transformation. These approaches are better accepted and standardized since they follow universal norms. Therefore, common

¹The Chittagong Hill Tracts formed as single district in 1860 until 1984, when divided into three districts: Khagrachari, Rangamati and Bandarban. Covering 13,295 square kilometers in southeastern Bangladesh, it is home to around 13 ethnic groups with a population including Bengalis 18,42,811 (2022 census). (bbs.portal.gov.bd)

²The CHT Accord of 1997 retains the word ‘tribal’ in addressing the ‘small ethnic group’, a term indicating the stance of GoB as opposed to calling them ‘indigenous’. In maintaining objectivity, a more neutral term ‘ethnic minorities’ has been used in this paper including the literature review.

³Bengalis are the oldest inhabitants in CHT. There were mass settlements from plain land during late 1970s and early 1980s. All these non-tribal people residing in CHT are addressed in this paper as ‘Bengali’.

⁴Security Forces deployed in the CHT include Army, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Police, and Ansar.

⁵Shantu Larma warned that the Jumma people might “take up arms again if their rights are not established” (The Daily Star, 11 November 2004).

strategies with the UN may provide a solid foundation for conflict transformation in CHT. It is essential to consider whether a peaceful approach can lead to sustainable solutions in CHT rather than relying on enforcement or forceful methods. Accordingly, the research had the primary question: What could be a comprehensive approach from the experience of UN Peacekeeping operations for a meaningful conflict transformation in CHT? The study also tried to find answers to the following secondary questions: 1) How does the UN deal with intrastate low-intensity conflicts coping with contemporary peace and conflict theories? 2) How can the lessons from the UN peacekeeping experience be applied to transform the low-intensity conflict in CHT?

In this context, the broad objective of the research was to identify conflict transformation approaches from the UN peacekeeping experiences that may address the current trend of LIC in the CHT. The specific objectives were 1) to study the current state of CHT in the backdrop of conflict management and 2) to see how the experience of UN peacekeeping may be complementary to conflict transformation in CHT. “Experience of UN peacekeeping is complementary in devising approaches to conflict transformation in the CHT region” was taken as a research hypothesis. Accordingly, “Imperatives for a stable CHT” and “UN peacekeeping lessons” were the independent variables, while “Conflict transformation approaches for CHT” was the dependent variable. A notional connection has been established with UN peacekeeping for conflict transformation in CHT, as the situations in UN peacekeeping and CHT are often not comparable.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

“An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.”

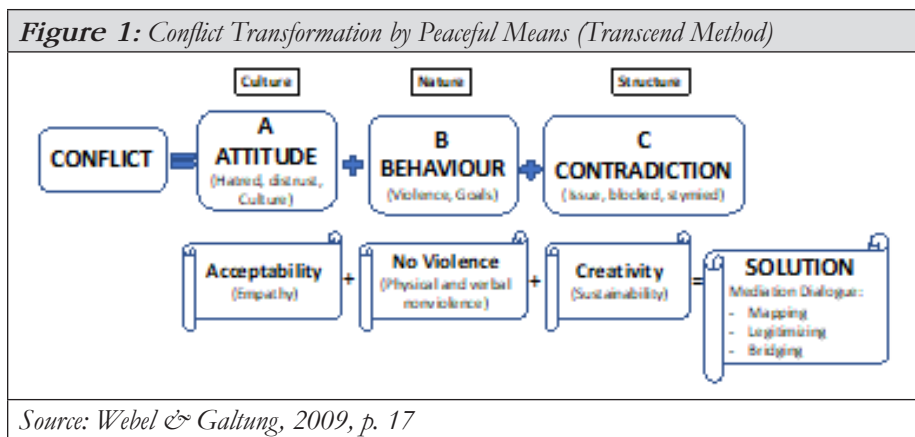
- Mahatma Gandhi, Indian lawyer and activist

Theoretical Framework: Galtung’s Transcend Approach

John Paul Lederach, Johan Galtung, and Thania Paffenholz have been prominent thinkers and researchers in conflict transformation since the 1980s. Lederach’s three lenses in one frame analyze conflict transformation through the immediate situation, underlying patterns, and context (Lederach, 2014, pp. 6-7). The peace theories offer a lens and a prism for exploring different aspects of the conflict.

The “peace approach” described by Johan Galtung focuses on achieving peace that depends on transforming the relationship between parties, transcending their goals, and creating a new reality in which to live and develop together. This is the Transcend theory, which views conflict as having three main components, as illustrated in Figure 1: Attitudes (A), Behaviors (B), and Contradictions (C), with an equal focus on all three.

The peace approach works through acceptable and sustainable outcomes. Here, conflict is not perceived the same as violence. The emphasis is on dialogue to remove the prejudices, ignorance, or differences - the root of conflict. In YouTube (2011a), Johan Galtung describes the method as a one-on-one mediation dialogue through the stages of mapping, legitimizing, and bridging. Mapping identifies the parties and their goals. Subsequently, after discarding some illegitimate goals, legitimate goals are identified based on fundamental laws, ethics, civil and political rights, human rights, and human needs, among others. Thereafter, bridging



progresses with the legitimate goals. The parties must not face each other, criticize, or attribute blame, which remains the rule of the game. The trained mediators should be constructive, concrete, and creative - showing there is a way out and not being afraid to propose solutions. The Transcend approach aims to end violence and transform negative relationships between conflicting parties, achieving positive peace. It seeks to change the political, social, or economic structures that foster such negative relationships. Conflict transformation empowers people to engage in nonviolent change processes themselves, fostering sustainable conditions for peace and justice. Today’s UN conflict management strategy broadly aligns with the peace/transcend approach as proposed by Galtung: “The

conflict between security and peace approaches can itself be transcended by soft peacekeeping” (Webel & Galtung, 2009, p. 25).

Literature Review

The conflict in CHT is deeply embedded in the region’s colonial and post-colonial history. The tribal ethnic minority peoples’ claim to political recognition and regional autonomy traces to both colonial-era institutionalization and immediate post-1971 reactions to Bangladesh’s nation-building (Chowdhury, 2016). During British colonial rule, the CHT Regulation Act of 1900 restricted the entry of outsiders, including Bengalis, into the area, thereby protecting the land rights of the ethnic minority peoples (Barnes, 2022; Nicolas, 2020). However, the post-colonial period saw a reversal of this protection, as successive governments in Pakistan and later Bangladesh pursued policies that marginalized the ethnic minority population and facilitated the influx of Bengali people (Siddiqui, 2023; Barnes, 2022). The construction of the Kaptai Dam in 1963 displaced thousands of ethnic minority people without adequate compensation, exacerbating tensions (Barnes, 2022; Hossain et al., 2015). Some argued that the conflict in CHT is fundamentally a struggle over identity, land, and political representation. The dominant Bengali nationalist discourse has historically marginalized the ethnic minority peoples of CHT (Jasmin et al., 2019; Uddin, 2010). This has led to the suppression of their identities and the imposition of a homogeneous national identity (Yasmin, 2014; Chowdhury, 2018). The government’s settlement programs, such as the one initiated in 1979, have further exacerbated land disputes by creating competition over limited resources (Alamgir, 2017; Hossain et al., 2015). Denying their customary land rights has threatened their livelihoods and undermined their cultural and political autonomy (Uddin, 2019; Chowdhury, 2013). The state’s rejection of Jumma demands led to the formation of party and military wings that led the insurgency movement (Chakma, 2010; Barnes, 2022).

The 1997 Peace Accord between the GoB and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS or JSS in short) marked a significant turning point in the CHT conflict. The Accord granted limited autonomy to manage local affairs, including land, water, and forest resources (Rajput, 2024; Jamil & Panday, 2008; Hossain et al., 2015). Despite signing the Peace Accord, its implementation has faced numerous challenges. The Land Commission, established in 1999, has failed to resolve even a single land dispute due to a lack of political will and the non-recognition of customary land rights (Uddin, 2019; Hossain et al., 2015).

The Accord has also been criticized for its limited scope, primarily addressing the grievances of larger ethnic minority groups such as the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura while marginalizing smaller tribes. This has led to intra-group rivalries and conflicts, further complicating peacebuilding (Sadik, 2024). CHT has witnessed the emergence of armed groups, both during and after the conflict. These groups have often been involved in rivalries over resources, political influence, and territorial control, undermining peacebuilding efforts and exacerbating regional insecurity (Haider, 2023; Sadik, 2024). Armed groups have frequently been utilized as proxies by external forces, further complicating the conflict dynamics (Sadik, 2024; Chowdhury, 2006). Grassroot organizations have played a crucial role in advocating for the rights of ethnic minority groups in CHT; however, their efforts have often been constrained by limited resources and political repression (Jhuma & Biswas, 2021; Jamil & Panday, 2008). Inclusive development is critical to ensuring long-term peace and stability in CHT (Butler et al., 2023). Any sustainable peacebuilding effort in CHT requires a comprehensive approach that incorporates the perspectives of all stakeholders, including ethnic minorities, the Bengali people, as well as the government (Haider, 2023; Sadik, 2024).

The literatures reveal that the conflict in CHT is a complex issue with deep historical and socio-political roots. Addressing this conflict requires a comprehensive approach to achieving lasting peace and stability in the region. Most of the literature on CHT has focused on managing the conflict from a linear, issue-based perspective, such as land, ethnicity, and security. This gap underscores the need for more nuanced studies that consider the distinct ethnic and ideological groups within CHT and their impact on local politics and conflict dynamics. It is not only the simplified view of broad dichotomies between Bengali and tribal people. Thus, future studies should focus on the root causes, address the community's mistrust, and find solutions through conflict transformation to end hostility and instability. There is also a gap in research concerning the effectiveness of peace agreements in tackling the underlying issues of ethnic conflict and the mechanisms required to prevent the revival of insurgency in the CHT region.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

Research Paradigm and Design: This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences within specific socio-political and cultural contexts. The research adopts a mixed-methods, exploratory

design that integrates theoretical reflection with empirical inquiry. Rather than treating qualitative and quantitative tools as dichotomous, they are combined to illuminate both structure and agency within complex peacekeeping systems. It seeks to interpret lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives rather than to quantify causal relationships or test hypotheses. The design followed a twin-track structure:

- Epistemological/Theoretical Track - drew on open-source materials, policy documents, UN reports, and scholarly literature to establish a conceptual framework for understanding the intersection of CHT affairs, conflict transformation, and UN peacekeeping.
- Empirical Track - gathered original data through surveys and open-ended semi-structured interviews with officials serving in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and with Bangladeshi and international UN peacekeeping personnel.

Sampling and Data Collection. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with substantial knowledge, professional experience, or direct involvement in CHT affairs and UN peacekeeping operations. Two respondent clusters were surveyed. Cluster 1 consisted of 63 UN staff, while Cluster 2 comprised of 59 Bangladeshi officers with experience in both CHT and UN peacekeeping operations. The study population was stratified by occupational category (civilian, military, police, international staff) to maximize diversity of perspectives while maintaining internal comparability. Complementary qualitative data were obtained through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with selected respondents from both clusters (eight UN staff members and six Bangladeshi officers). The researcher's professional experience in CHT and four African UN missions further informed the interpretation of findings and enhanced contextual understanding.

Data Sources. Data analysis combined quantitative descriptive statistics from survey responses with qualitative content and thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Coding was conducted iteratively to identify recurring patterns and link them with theoretical constructs related to conflict transformation, peacekeeping effectiveness, and CHT affairs. Triangulation between survey data, interviews, and secondary literature strengthened internal validity and reduced interpretive bias. The researcher's own professional experience in both the CHT and four African UN missions informed a reflexive engagement with the data. Rather than claiming neutrality, this positionality is acknowledged as a resource that enhances

interpretive understanding while demanding constant critical awareness of bias and privilege. Findings from the survey and interview data analysis are embedded in the subsequent thematic sections of the paper.

Ethical Considerations. The study followed the ethical standards of social research and UN-related fieldwork. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, provided informed consent, and assured confidentiality. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Given the political sensitivity of CHT and participants' institutional affiliations, particular care was taken to avoid harm, reputational risk, or political exposure. Respondents retained the right to withdraw at any point.

Limitations. Security and political sensitivities restricted access to certain key stakeholders, particularly local inhabitants from both the Bengali and tribal communities, as well as political parties and armed groups in CHT. As interviews rely on self-reporting, some responses may reflect organizational positions or strategic silence. Moreover, each UN mission operates within unique political economies, limiting the generalizability of findings beyond the specific contexts of Bangladesh and UN peacekeeping. However, these limitations are analytically instructive rather than reductive—they reveal how access, representation, and voice are themselves shaped by structures of power that the study seeks to critique. These limitations were addressed through data triangulation, careful coding, and cross-validation with existing literature.

CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS - THE INSTABILITY AND COMPLEXITIES

“There are no conflicts which cannot be resolved unless the true promoters of them remain hidden.” - L. Ron Hubbard, American author and Scientologist

CHT Situation: Threats to Peace Loom Large in the Hills

Violent and Unstable Situation. With the signing of the CHT Peace Accord on December 2, 1997, although the scale of violence decreased, the hills remained bloodied by numerous sporadic fatal incidents. Former insurgents fragmented into various groups, still maintaining strong military factions. On August 18, 2019, one army soldier was shot dead when armed criminals opened fire on an

army patrol team in Poyaetumukh, 4km away from the Rajasthali Army Camp in Rangamati (The Daily Star, 2019). On March 18, 2019, unidentified gunmen in Rangamati shot dead seven people, including polling officials and security personnel, and 11 were injured in the Noi Mile area on the Baghaichari-Dighinala road (bdnews24.com, 2019). On May 4, 2018, a day after the killing of Shaktiman Chakma, the chairman of Naniarchar Upazila Parishad in Rangamati, another five people were shot dead (The Daily Star, 2018). Following these incidents, serious concerns arose regarding the use of sophisticated automatic and heavy weapons (YouTube, 2019); many questions remain unanswered about their source and funding (YouTube, 2018). Open sources indicate that arms proliferation is ongoing, with approximately 1,582 weapons in the possession of various armed groups. One report stated that over 500 people were killed in bloody conflicts over the last 20 years, alongside numerous abductions and assaults; 20 murders were reported during the span of just six months in 2018 (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). The emergence of the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) changed the dynamics of conflicts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In August 2019, suspected KNF militants attacked a security post in Bandarban, leading to clashes with the Bangladesh Army (The Daily Star, 2019). In April 2021, violence erupted between the Bengali and ethnic minority people in Rangamati over land disputes, resulting in fatalities and arson (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). In December 2021, the military intensified operations against the KNF in Bandarban, arresting several insurgents and seizing weapons. In March 2022, suspected KNF militants kidnapped a local businessman in Bandarban, demanding a ransom; security forces later rescued him (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). In June 2022, a Bengali settler was killed in an attack attributed to tribal insurgents, sparking tensions in Khagrachari. In September 2023, a police officer was killed in a militant ambush in Rangamati, which was claimed by a faction of the JSS (The Daily Star, 2018). In February 2024, the KNF abducted three NGO workers in Bandarban, releasing them after negotiations (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). In April 2024, the Bangladesh military conducted a major raid in remote CHT areas, arresting alleged KNF members and confiscating arms (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). In January 2025, reports emerged of clashes between the military and the KNF in remote Bandarban districts, with casualties on both sides (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). All these incidents over time suggest that conflict in CHT is in suspended animation, poised to ignite, as agreed by 83% of survey respondents.

The Politics of Violence. It involves ongoing conflict among at least four active CHT groups, which were once part of a single organization called the PCJSS/JSS. The United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), established in 1997, opposes the peace accord between the government and the JSS. Despite an informal treaty between these two groups, many leaders and activists have died due to their internal conflicts. Since the JSS and UPDF splintered, new avenues of conflict have emerged, leading to the formation of two additional groups: the JSS, led by MN Larma, and the UPDF Democratic.

Unabated Extortion - Implications for the Arms Stockpile. Around 70 crores BDT in illegal tolls are collected annually by three tribal groups in the Rangamati district alone (Army intelligence source, 2019). Toll collection has become a way of life for various factions in their respective areas of dominance. While toll collection may seem harmless, the sheer magnitude and large sums of money used to purchase arms and ammunition pose a significant threat to the security environment, as 85% of the survey respondents are apprehensive about it. Around eight thousand members of three regional groups are active in CHT (Daily Sun, 2017).

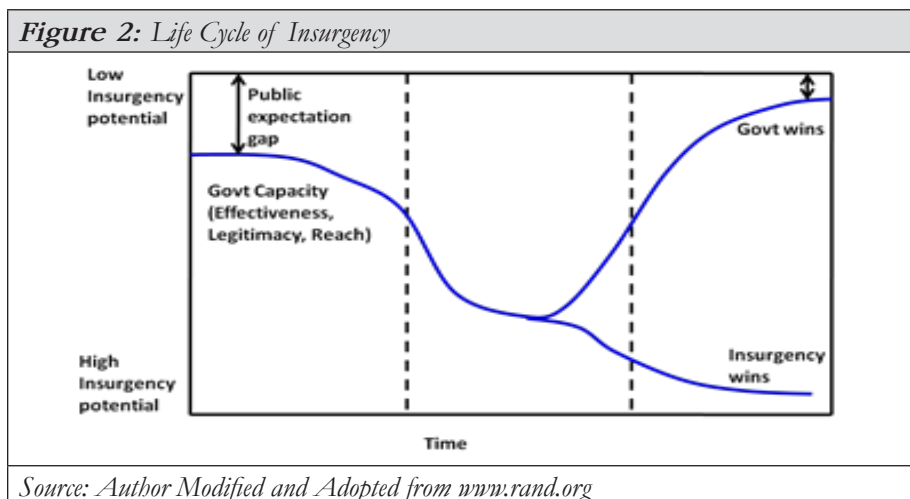
The Relevance of Security Forces Vis-À-Vis Camp Removal. A significant number of camps have been dismantled since the signing of the peace accord. Local reports indicate that in areas where camps were withdrawn, disturbances by miscreants have resurfaced due to the security forces' overstretched responsibilities. Therefore, the withdrawal of camps must be synchronized with the security situation on the ground, as agreed by most of the survey respondents/interviewees.

Interference or External Support in the CHT Conflict Raises Concerns. The insurgency-prone region of North-East India, CHT, and North Myanmar has a history of seeking assistance from neighboring countries. While the relationship between India and the previous regime suggested that anti-peace movements were unlikely to receive support from them, this possibility cannot be entirely ruled out, if there is a shift in government policy, or due to historical support for the Shanti Bahini (Subir Bhaumik, 1996, pp. 272-275). 93% of survey respondents agreed that there was no guarantee of regional non-interference. Meanwhile, insurgents in the Indian Northeast, facing unfavorable circumstances, might opt to sell their arms to armed miscreants in CHT. Additionally, Arakan insurgents, pursued by the Myanmar Army, may seek sanctuary in CHT. Consequently, CHT remains susceptible to external support or influence from regional armed groups and insurgents.

Impact of Misinformation and Disinformation. Misinformation and disinformation in CHT significantly affect the region, often worsening ethnic tensions, inciting violence, and making peace efforts more difficult. Various local and international actors spread these false narratives, which have serious real-world effects. Social media speeds up the spread of rumors, often with doctored images, weakening inter-community ties and increasing the risk of collective violence. The death toll in the violent clashes that erupted in the hill districts of Khagrachhari and Rangamati on 20 September has killed four, not 32, 67 or 100 people as claimed by many in social media (The Business Standard News, 2024).

Revival of Insurgency in CHT: Possibilities

Insurgency is Contained in Most Cases. World history shows that insurgency may revive⁶ if the core issues of their discontent are not addressed or eliminated. The Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) shows that between 1989 and 2005, 40 % of conflicts that ended in peace agreements returned to violence within five years. Agreements, including provisions for elections, for example, failed 38 % of the time, while those without failed 45 % of the time (Dayton and Kriesberg, 2009, p. 3). Peace agreements are not always the guarantors of peace in the future. The continuation of civil wars in many African countries has been an outcome of many ineffective peace treaties.



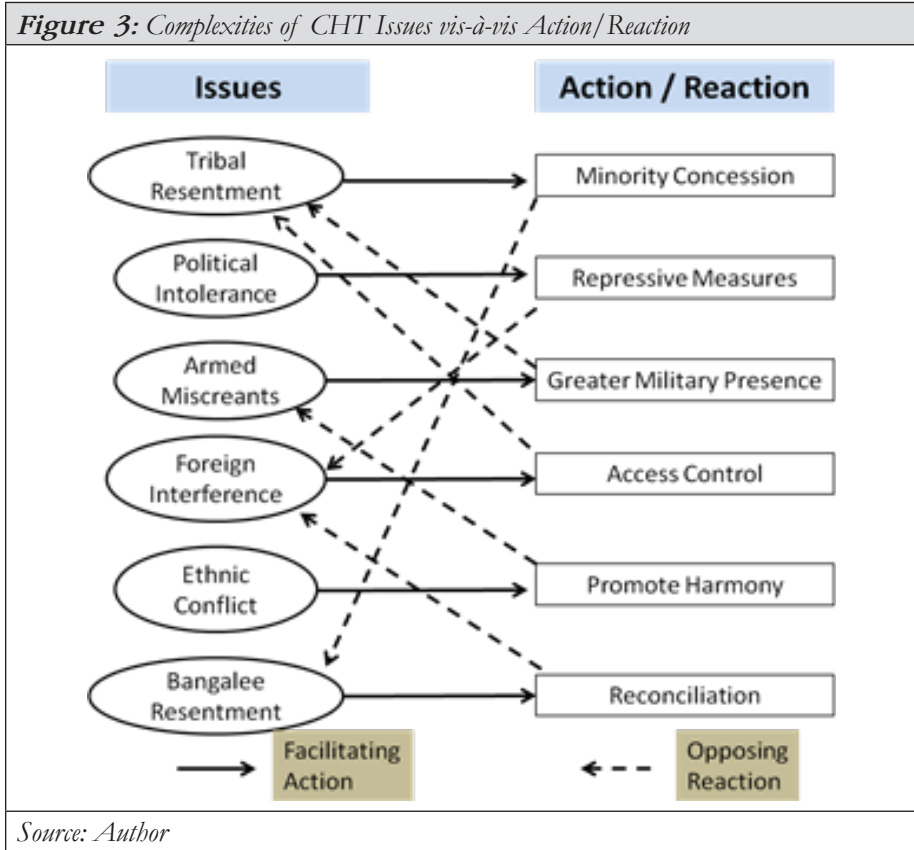
Given JSS's failure to implement the CHT accords, the UPDF has gradually

⁶Colombia ended its 52-year-long war against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group in November 2016. On August 29, 2019 FARC threatened a return to war. (The Economist, 2019)

become a recognizable regional party with complete control over local administration while maintaining its original demand for complete autonomy. Under such circumstances, with continued camp withdrawals, security forces are overstretched on the ground vis-à-vis a fully equipped UPDF, may be able to dictate terms to the GoB. CHT's government capacity (effectiveness, legitimacy, and reach) is further reduced in such a situation. If it fails to meet people's expectations, the possibility of the revival of insurgency may not be ruled out. Chakmas in India claim CHT as part of India (YouTube, 2019; The Times of India, 2019) - such news is disturbing for the GoB. Shantu Larma, President of JSS, commented, "We may have to revert to our old strategy after all these years," (bdnews24.com, 2014). CHT operates like a latent volcano regarding insurgency. In the post-insurgency era, its prevalence and potential for revival must be analyzed in terms of its symptoms, enduring demands, and expectations.

The Complexities of CHT Issues

JSS is the signatory to the CHT Peace Accord, but UPDF appeared as a preferred alternative to the hill people. Many tribal students are studying in different universities around the world who are rallying for the UPDF demand of Jumma Land. On the other hand, Bengali political parties (PCP and Shomo Audhikar Andolon) are becoming vocal about specific clauses of the Peace Accord that undermine their hopes and aspirations. CHT Land Commission, established in 1999, could not effectively work due to many hindrances and non-cooperation.



In the existing complex scenario, the claim for indigenous status⁷ added fuel to the problems in the CHT. The long-standing coexistence of both tribal and Bengali people has introduced some cultural changes within both communities. Additionally, there are instances of aggressive evangelization occurring in various parts of the CHT, accompanied by reports of exploitation. At times, the propaganda campaign impacts the communal harmony in the hills. CHT, being a safe route for drugs and arms trafficking, is also vulnerable to issues stemming from neighboring countries, including the Rohingya influx. Each issue in CHT has developed in complexity over time. For instance, increased activities by armed miscreants may lead to a greater military presence, which could cause resentment among the tribal population. Conversely, providing concessions to the tribal minority may provoke resentment among the Bengalis. Therefore, when

⁷'Indigenous and Tribal Population Convention 107' is an ILO convention, enacted in 1957 in which GoB ratified. But GoB did not ratify the ILO Convention 169, enacted in 1989, also UN declaration on the rights of indigenous people dated September 13, 2007.

addressing CHT issues, it is essential to consider the complexities involved and their possible implications.

Conflict Transformation in the CHT: Imperatives

A Clear and Coherent Strategy is Needed. It appears that the government has a slow and reactive approach towards CHT. The leadership of the pro-peace accord, particularly the elders of JSS, is brought into their comfort zone under the assumption that they will not resort to violence again. However, growing leadership from the marginalized groups is very likely. The most significant youths (such as UPDF, HWF, etc.) have not budged an inch from their demands. Allegations suggest that there are ongoing efforts to divide the tribal groups. Splitting the tribal parties may weaken them and complicate negotiation and mediation efforts. Without a clear and coherent strategy for CHT, the possibility of insurgency revival and ongoing violence remains.

Preventive Conflict Management Relies on a Quick Military Solution. The GoB depends on the military to contain the situation in CHT. Ironically, a rapid “military fix” for such situations rarely succeeds (Boehlke, *New Routes 2/2009*, p.16). This reliance on a military solution is a direct consequence of failing to address the root causes of the conflicts.

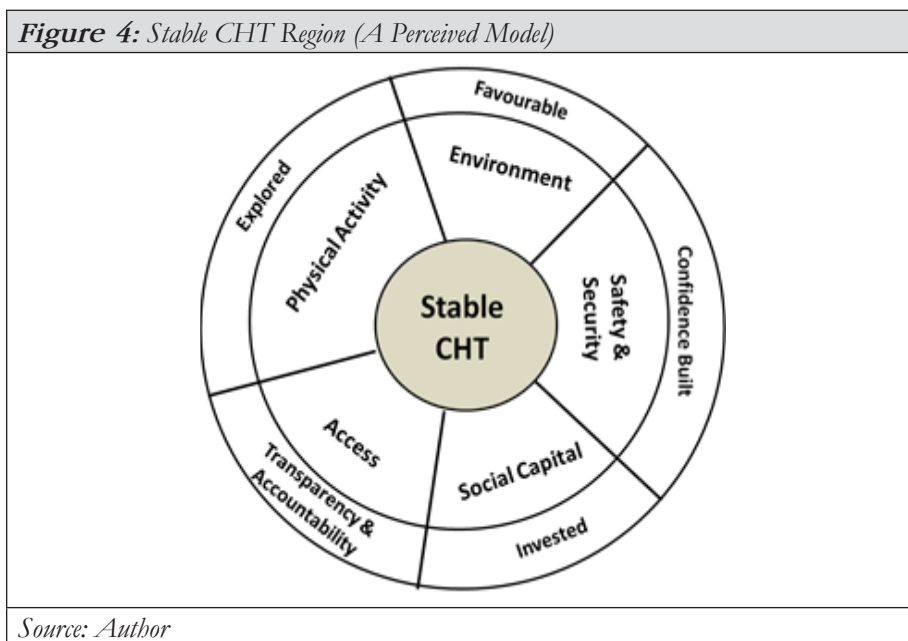
Uneven Peace and Peace Dividends. Post-conflict societies can be plagued by an “uneven peace;” “Peace benefits” that are distributed unevenly can add a layer to divisions between the “gots” and the “left-outs” in an already divided society (Dayton and Kriesberg 2009, p. 50-51). This is true for CHT, where the Chakma community enjoys the major share of peace benefits.

Prospects to Conflict Transformation. CHT has enormous potential and offers many opportunities. However, some vulnerabilities pose threats. These are briefly summarized below, requiring due consideration for CHT conflict transformation.

Strengths/Opportunities	Weaknesses/Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demographic balance ▪ Military familiarization ▪ Tribal leadership integrated in political process ▪ People exposed to better living ▪ Natural resources ▪ Tourism ▪ External investment ▪ Cultural diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Terrain difficulties ▪ Lack of trust ▪ Vulnerability to evangelization and exploitation ▪ Lack of education and poverty ▪ Widespread toll collection ▪ Easy access to weapon entry ▪ External support ▪ Internal undue influence ▪ Tribal diaspora propaganda ▪ Internal vested groups ▪ Naïve media

Stable CHT Region: A Perceived Model

Within the broader political goal of retaining the CHT region as an integral part of Bangladesh, the aim of conflict transformation could involve addressing the unmet demands of various conflicting parties, enabling them to refrain from



violence. This would foster stability, peace, and prosperity in the area. It would create a situation where the CHT feels like any other part of the country, with life proceeding as usual and free from security threats. Business and development initiatives could progress without concerns about security or stability. People would be able to participate in socio-cultural activities within a free environment. Maintaining a significant security force presence in the area wouldn't be necessary. A safe environment would open new opportunities for economic activities, allowing tourism to thrive without interference. Bengali and tribal people, imbued with a sense of communal harmony, would engage in economic and social activities together. The Bengali community and the government would prioritize preserving the culture, heritage, and traditions of the tribal community. Through ample social and cultural exchanges, both communities would engage in national and local politics driven by the ideals of nationalism, development, and the greater interests of the CHT region. Figure 4 illustrates a potential model for a stable CHT region.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS

“The United Nations was not created to take humanity to heaven, but to save it from hell.” - Dag Hammarskjöld, 2nd Secretary General, United Nations

UN Conflict Management⁸

The UN has identified four major areas of action in pursuit of peace: preventative diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. Over this period, two crucial shifts have occurred in the UN's response to conflicts: the redefinition of security from a state-centric approach to one focused on people and a shift toward prevention rather than reaction. While a significant portion of its conflict management involves peaceful mechanisms (Chapter VI), the UN also possesses the legal authority to employ coercion (Chapter VII). Occasionally, disputes are referred to a regional body (Chapter VIII) if it is more appropriate or to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) when legal issues are involved. Much of the Secretary-General's work revolves around what Dag Hammarskjöld called “quiet diplomacy” (Wolff and Yakinthou 2012, p. 119). UN diplomacy plays an important role, employing a range of techniques, such as shuttle diplomacy and quiet diplomacy, which involves confidential bilateral exchanges, multiparty

⁸Generally the term conflict management in case of UN broadly encompasses prevention, management, resolution.

discussions or roundtables, technical consulting, and facilitating access to other sources of advice and/or the financial and material resources necessary for policy implementation.

Peacekeeping: Evolution

Multidimensional Peacekeeping. Although the UN was founded on the precept of collective security, in the post-Cold War period, it was mainly engaged in intra-state conflicts. It evolved from a primarily military model to a complex multidimensional model. In today's conflicts, civilians have become both the targets and instruments of war. Hence, civilian dimensions are added to traditional peacekeeping mandates.

Dilemma of Soft or Robust Peacekeeping. The idea of robustness places peacekeepers in the grey area between peacekeeping and peace enforcement. Although the expectation remains for peacekeeping to be robust, with increasing emphasis on the Protection of Civilians (PoC), member states' commitment and timely deployment puts the robustness in question.

Towards Conflict Transformation. Today, the term peacekeeping covers various functions, not all of which include using military forces. Civilian personnel play a more central role in multidimensional and integrated peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, which often integrate political, humanitarian, development, and military activities to assist the host country's transition from conflict to sustainable peace. While the military component in UN peacekeeping primarily tackles the surface conflicts, the civilian sections like civil affairs, political affairs, human rights division, gender, child protection, justice and rule of law, security sector reform, electoral, environmental, etc, leverage beyond conflict management. Their major works are building relationships among parties and bringing fundamental social and political changes to correct inequalities and injustices through meetings, dialogues, workshops, seminars, interfaith engagements, and so on. Increased participation of UN Police and female staff in peacekeeping contributes to this end.

Lessons Learned/ Best Practices from Case Studies

Based on the study of the UN's conflict handling in general, case studies of four peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone, Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan where the author served, a few lessons or best practices are appended below:

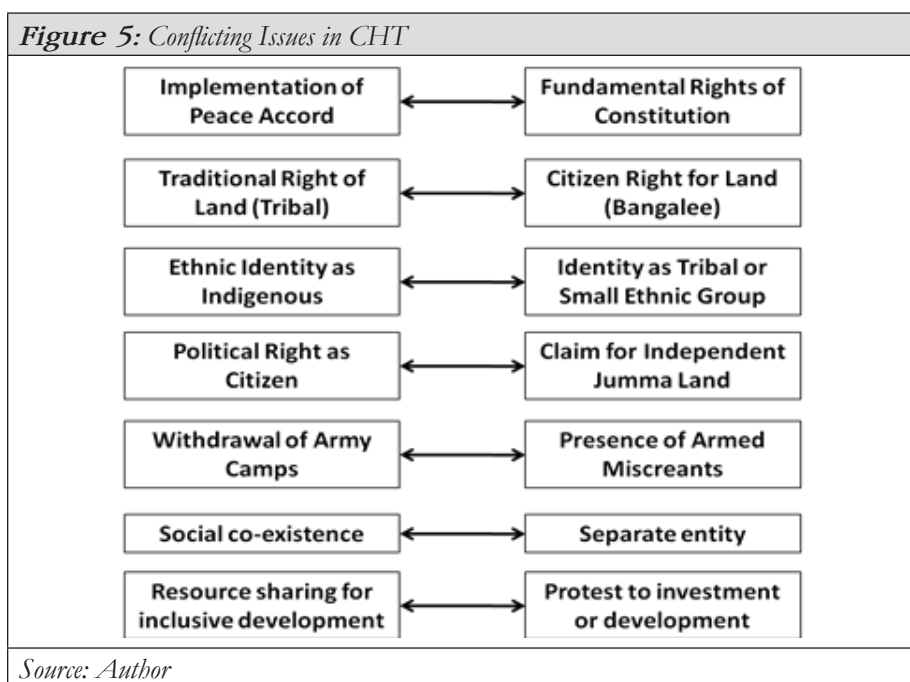
- Successful conflict transformation requires the comprehensive, unbiased diagnosis of the wider conflict formation.
- A dramatic change can occur when excluded groups are recognized as legitimate parties in a conflict, as in the case of the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia and South Sudan.
- Conflict transformation requires reacting to immediate threats to individuals and the structural prevention of armed conflicts by addressing their socio-economic root causes.
- Genuine conflict transformation can be done only by the actors who have no interest in a particular outcome of a conflict.
- Conflict transformation that prioritizes military threats and means, and ignores peaceful means is likely to fail, limiting the peace potential of civil societies in the conflict zone.
- A robust military presence is required to successfully implement the peace agreements, as experienced in Sierra Leone.
- When official negotiating channels are closed or dysfunctional, citizen groups can play an essential role in nurturing a climate of trust and even develop proposals to be delivered to their governments, like CAR and South Sudan.
- Compromise is less costly than punitive methods or military actions designed to force solutions. However, working with legitimate demands serves better than compromise.
- When the conflicting parties are exhausted and come to the negotiating table, violence receives the credit for bringing them there (Webel and Galtung 2009, p. 137). Changing this assumption is a long and difficult process, as often experienced in South Sudan.
- Women and girls are to be included in the planning and implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process.
- Media should integrate knowledge from Peace and Conflict Studies.

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS - A MODEL AND APPROACH

“Peace is not the absence of conflict; it is the ability to handle the conflict by peaceful means” -Ronald Reagan, 40th US President

CHT Situation: Post-Conflict Integration

The insurgents incite the local community against the state, drawing the attention of the global community to their suffering and subjugation. On the other hand, states often resort to force, as seen in Sri Lanka’s past, present-day Kashmir, and in Northeast India. However, once the insurgents surrender, as in CHT, they must be integrated into mainstream society during the post-conflict period, with efforts made to earn their trust and possibly provide them with more support than others. Following a peace accord, there should be a policy of engagement rather than disengagement from the government. In the event of disengagement, vested interests, whether internal or external, are likely to fill the vacuum and steer the peace process in another direction. The conflicting issues in CHT, as illustrated in Figure 5, require attention.

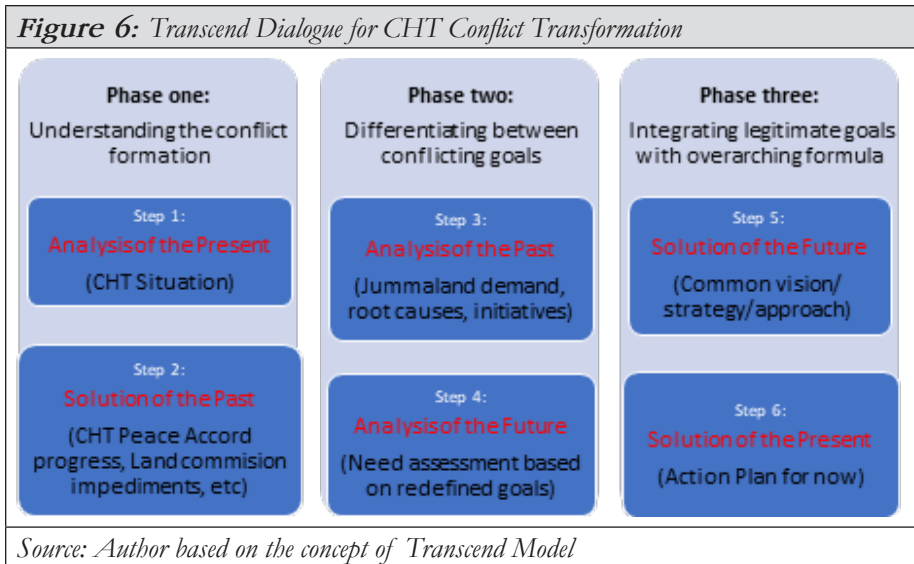


CHT Conflict Transformation Based on Transcend Model

Conflicts in CHT may be revisited in the prism of the Transcend model of ABC (Attitude, Behaviors and Contradictions). Here, the dialogues can be organized along three phases, each with two steps (Webel and Galtung 2009, pp. 135-141).⁹ Obviously, the CHT Peace Accord is to be taken as the building block for the transcendental dialogue.

- **Phase One: Understanding the Conflict Formation**

Step 1: Understanding all actors, their behavior and their relations in the context of the contradiction. It is an analysis of the present situation in CHT. The analysis takes place on the level of attitudes, behaviors and contradictions. GoB and JSS should start out by identifying their goals and those of the other conflict parties in the present context. CHT’s present situation is to be reviewed to arrive at a compromise of the goals involving said parties.



Step 2: Understanding the assumptions, attitudes and how they interact with contradictions and goals. It focuses on the solution of the past, looking to identify what happened and what failed to happen, leading to the present situation. The goal of Jumma Land arises from the assumption that the rights of tribal people will never be guaranteed. All such assumptions and resulting goals and strategies

⁹The naming of phases and steps adopted from Transcend model to juxtapose with CHT situation.

are examined in this step. Progress on CHT accords, impediments of land issues, etc., are to be analyzed in true spirit. The ineffectiveness of violence within the dialogue should be emphasized, and nonviolence should be explored as a viable strategy.

- **Phase Two: Differentiating Between ‘Just/legitimate’ and ‘Unjust/Illegitimate’ Goals**

Step 3: Exploring unconscious assumptions, attitudes, contradictions and goals. This is an analysis of the past, providing a more profound understanding of the conflict, what could have happened, and why things unfolded as they did. The root causes of insurgency in CHT, its impact on all, the sacrifices of security forces in counterinsurgency operations, and the development efforts - all deserve to be heard. This cannot be done overnight; the discussions must occur throughout society over an extended period. It examines the dynamics of structural and cultural obstacles and how they influenced the progression of the conflict, particularly in terms of attitudes, assumptions, and goals.

Step 4: Analysis of basic needs constellations and fixations. It is an analysis of the future, posing questions about basic human needs¹⁰, like what the situation will be if they are not satisfied in the long run (negative scenario) and what needs to be changed to ensure the basic needs (positive scenario). It is a need assessment based on redefined goals in step 1. Illegitimate goals, for example, the demand for Jumma Land, must be clearly communicated to the parties in conflict.

- **Phase Three: Integrating the Legitimate Goals with an Overarching Formula**

Step 5: Construction of new attitudes, new assumptions, and goals. It is the solution for the future where the conflicting parties develop a shared vision. It integrates the legitimate goals of all parties in conflict into an overarching framework through brainstorming and creative ideas. At this point, the conflicting parties are truly ready for the round table for honest negotiation because they are internally prepared to do so rather than being externally coerced.

Step 6: Create new behaviors and an action plan for the present. The process returns full circle to the present issues, focused on elaborative solutions of the action necessary to transform the conflict. The action plan brings forward the new vision to the conflicting parties. The most important here is the creation

¹⁰*Galtung distinguishes four categories of basic human needs: survival, well-being, identity, and freedom. Goals that need to be achieved to make the fulfilment of basic human needs possible deserve to be supported.*

of a new reality in which there is a palpable change in the relationship and a transcendence of the conflict.

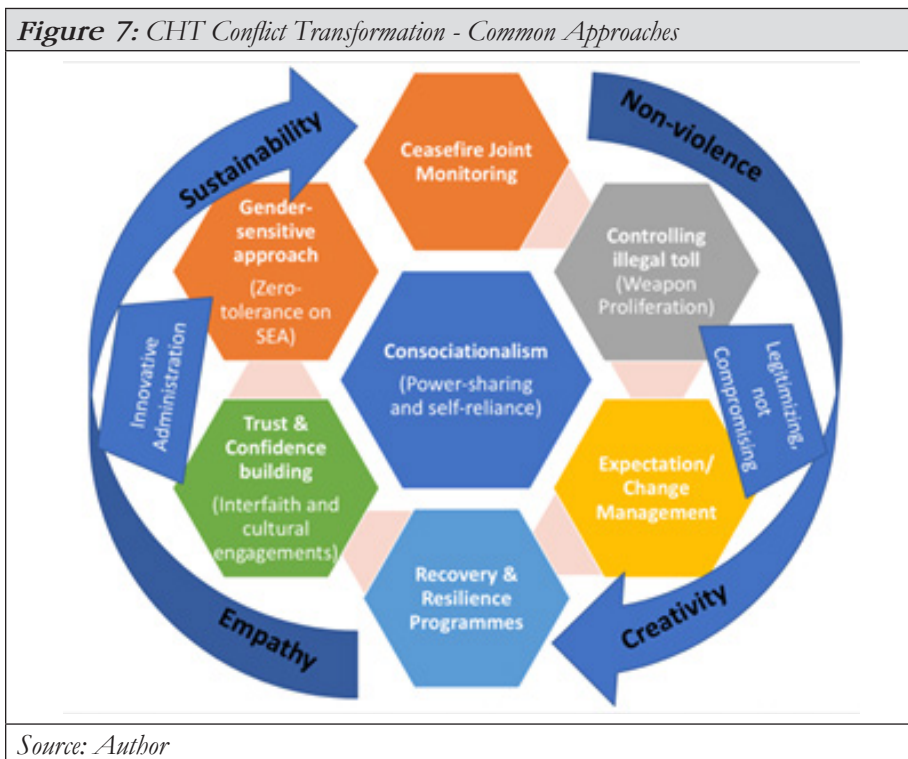
In most cases, the parties to the conflict should not be informed of the six steps.¹¹ Each step is an essential element of the transformation process. The complexities of the situation and realities may not allow moving directly from step one to step six; the process instead progresses through phases, and may go back and forth as required. All six steps can occur within a day, yet they may not be achieved after a period of years.

Common Approaches: Not One-Size-Fits-All

Since every conflict has unique features, no theory or research can prescribe a precise set of strategies. Figure 3 illustrates the standard approaches that the UN adopts, incorporating key concepts from the Transcend approach.

The Consociationalism Approach. Consociationalism, based on power-sharing and self-reliance, is likely to yield better results for CHT. The Peace Accord has already provided for the delegation of authority through the CHT Regional Councils (RCs) and three Hill District Councils (HDCs). In the context of CHT, where multiple ethnic groups coexist with distinct languages, religions, and traditions, consociationalism offers a pragmatic framework for peaceful coexistence. It promotes governance arrangements that ensure self-reliance, local autonomy, and equal participation in decision-making. These institutions serve as mechanisms for shared governance, enabling ethnic communities to exercise greater control over local administration, development priorities, and cultural preservation. However, transparency and accountability must be ensured during the decentralization of authority.

¹¹*The conflict trainer/worker should consider it as mental map and keep track of the steps.*



- Legitimizing, not Compromising.** In crafting the peace treaty, the GoB compromised on various provisions of the constitution. For example, the accord's provisions granting autonomy to the RC was seen by certain political groups as inconsistent with the unitary nature of the Republic under Article 1 and the uniform administrative framework implied in Article 7(1), which vests all power in the people of Bangladesh exercised through their representatives. However, while these concessions were made in the interest of conflict resolution, the anti-accord groups continued to reject the settlement, arguing that it neither fully restored their traditional rights nor guaranteed adequate constitutional protection for indigenous peoples. Thus, rather than relying solely on compromise, the long-term success of the peace process requires the legitimization of objectives-that is, aligning all peace provisions with the fundamental principles of the constitution and with civil, political, and human rights norms. Unlike India or Myanmar, Bangladesh has no concerns regarding legitimacy, as CHT has been legally and historically a part of it alongside the Bengali population. Therefore, the peace process must proceed from legal and moral legitimacy, not from ad hoc concessions or political

expediency-compromises that contradict constitutional provisions-however expedient-risk weakening state authority and creating future grievances. Sustainable peace, by contrast, rests on constitutional compliance, ethical consistency, and respect for human needs and rights. In essence, peace in the CHT must be grounded not in temporary bargains but in legitimate, constitutionally consistent governance that harmonizes national unity with local autonomy, ensuring equality, justice, and participation for all citizens.

- **Ceasefire Joint Monitoring.** The CHT Peace Accord calls for a cessation of violence, but it lacks a follow-up mechanism. In line with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, any hostility or ceasefire violations should be monitored by a joint body that is participated in by all parties in the conflict. This joint body should also clarify the alleged misconduct. This body will provide a common platform of security that is acceptable to all and credible for CHT.
- **Controlling Illegal Toll Collection.** Illegal toll collection in CHT poses a serious threat to the region's stability, given that much of the money is spent on weapon purchases. In Sierra Leone, DDR worked well, while in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, peace is still elusive due to the large number of weapons in the population.
- **Expectation and Change Management.** Media, diaspora communities, NGOs, and the transnational private sector have expanded their capacity to impact intrastate conflicts because of globalization dynamics. CHT should not be designated as a restricted area, as this would give the international community or vested parties/groups scope for suspicion. It should be open to all, ensuring transparency and accountability.
- **Recovery and Resilience Programs.** Fragile peace agreements can easily relapse into violence if they are not supported by post-conflict social integration, economic development, committed leadership, and the demilitarization of politics (Dayton and Kriesberg 2009, p. 5). Development projects should maintain CHT's stability. The GoB, along with regional bodies (RC, HDCs), should explore ways to unlock the local potential of CHT.
- **Building Trust and Confidence.** Eradicating psychological barriers of suspicion and mistrust helps to give up entrenched positions embedded in the rigid interpretation of adversaries' behavior. Interfaith religious groups are found to be instrumental in conflict management in South Sudan. Similarly,

in CHT, such arrangements may serve for peace. Besides, a common cultural platform can unite the people in CHT under the same umbrella, overlooking their differences.

- **Towards a Gender-Sensitive Approach.** The role of women in managing conflict in Sierra Leone presents a perfect lesson, such as, managing conflicts and rebuilding societies are no longer the exclusive preserve of men. The women in CHT are required to be integrated into all discussions and conflict management. Besides, there should be zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse in CHT.
- **Innovative Administration.** The Transcend model calls for innovation and creativity. CHT is unlike other parts of Bangladesh. Any reform initiative in the CHT administration and bureaucratic functions requires new thoughts and ideas.
- **Dual Role of GoB.** Unlike UN peacekeeping, where the UN functions as a neutral third party, the GoB in the CHT context is both a stakeholder and a solution-maker. This dual role complicates the application of UN peacebuilding principles and presents significant operational challenges. The GoB directly engages with all parties involved in the CHT conflict, balancing governance, security, and reconciliation responsibilities. Although India could naturally act as a third party, its involvement poses a conflict of interest. Nevertheless, it must be kept informed, as was evident during the 1997 Peace Accord process. Mediation could therefore be entrusted to a trained peace facilitator, a respected national figure, or, where appropriate, the United Nations. Alternatively, the process may proceed without external mediation-albeit with higher risk-provided the GoB assumes proactive leadership and sustained engagement with local stakeholders. Given the complex, multi-dimensional nature of the CHT issue, a diverse and adaptive conflict response strategy is essential for durable peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommended to transform the CHT conflict for sustainable peace and stability in the region:

- Building upon the CHT Peace Accord, the GoB, in collaboration with all conflicting parties in CHT, should initiate the conflict transformation process

using the Transcend/Peace Approach to address the issue. This process may be initiated by the GoB and mediated by a skilled third-party facilitator. At the same time, the Peace and Conflict Studies faculties at various universities may act as resources. To start this process, efforts should be made to create a non-violent environment by ceasing violence from armed groups, surrendering any remaining weapons, allowing state officials to operate freely, and enabling humanitarian organizations to work without obstruction.

- There should be a strong power balance regarding the prevalence of armed groups, as the resurgence of insurgency continues to pose a significant threat to CHT. This is further emphasized by the fact that a security vacuum arises whenever camps are withdrawn, and tribal leadership has reiterated the threat of armed resistance numerous times. A Ceasefire Joint Monitoring team should be established with government security forces and armed group representatives to oversee and investigate ceasefire violations or violence in CHT.
- The government and all stakeholders should support local peace committees that include the participation of tribal and Bengali communities in arranging truces and resolving disputes. Women should be included in these committees to address gender issues. Peace-loving local individuals must be actively integrated into the process through interethnic and interfaith groups, civil society, elder groups, and others. The transformation process must reflect their voices, hopes, and aspirations.
- The government should develop and enhance strategic communications regarding CHT. It should focus not only on the peace agreement but also on the entire conflict transformation process. It needs to clarify to the skeptical public that only legitimate, established demands will be considered for mediation and that it fully supports non-violence. Media, including social media, should be integrated into the overall approach. Broadcast messages can be aired through community radios to highlight shared interests and exchanges between tribal and Bengali communities.
- Conflict management training should be provided for officers, junior officers, and non-commissioned officers to contribute to conflict transformation in CHT effectively. Transforming mindsets often challenge the military to engage more deeply with the conflict, understand culture and history, analyze human behavior, eliminate biases, and learn to practice empathy and communication. Senior government officials and military leadership should

be exposed to the intricacies of conflict transformation through seminars, symposiums, and workshops.

CONCLUSION

A paradigm shift has occurred in how we manage and resolve conflicts, particularly in the context of UN Peacekeeping. A peace-focused approach, rather than a security-centered one, is more effective for sustainable results. Although the conflict in CHT was negotiated through a peace accord, its management is failing, as shown by sporadic violence in the region. The spread of arms, driven by widespread extortion, threatens to reignite insurgency in the area. The current situation in CHT can't be sustained for much longer. The government's slow or reactive policies will probably backfire over time, creating conditions that vested groups can easily exploit. Building on the CHT Peace Accord, the Transcend peace approach can be effectively applied in the context of CHT. These conflicts need to be transformed through this process to ensure a peaceful and stable CHT.

REFERENCES

- Alamgir, F. (2017). Land politics in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: dynamics of property, identity and authority.
- Amena Mohsin 2002, The Politics of Nationalism - The case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, The University Press Limited, Dhaka.
- Amena Mohsin 2003, The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh On the Difficult Road to Peace, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London.
- Atiqur Rahman, Parbattya Chattagramer Tothaya Kosh Vol 1 to 9, Parbat Prokashoni, Sylhet.
- Barnes, S. (2022). From Eruption of the Conflict to Its Management. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1944-1_3
- bdnews24 (2014b) 'Santu Larma now warns of armed conflict in CHT region', bdnews24, 4 December. Available at: <https://bdnews24.com/politics/2014/12/04/santu-larma-now-warns-of-armed-conflict-in-cht-region> (Accessed: 19 August 2019).

bdnews24.com (2019a) 'Upazila election presiding officer is among four shot dead in Rangamati', bdnews24.com, 18 March. Available at: <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2019/03/18/upazila-election-presiding-officer-is-among-four-shot-dead-in-rangamati> (Accessed: 19 August 2019).

Butler, Michael J 2009, *International Conflict Management*, Routledge, New York.

Butler, Szili, & Tripura. (2023). Tourism development and post-conflict reconciliation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: A community capitals framework approach. *Community Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2022.2163266>

Chakma, B. (2010). The post-colonial state and minorities: ethnocide in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 48(3), 281-300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2010.489746>

Chowdhury, N. (2018). The Policies of Belonging in Bangladesh: The Chakma Refugees in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0197-1_5

Chowdhury, N. H. (2006). The resistance movement in the chittagong hill tracts: global and regional connections.

Chowdhury, R. (2013). Land dispute resolution in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: caught between liberalism and legal pluralism.

Chowdhury, T. M. (2016). *Indigenous Identity in South Asia: Making Claims in the Colonial Chittagong Hill Tracts*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315561967/indigenous-identity-south-asia-tamina-chowdhury>

Daily Sun (2017) "CHT turns into safe haven for extortionists", Daily Sun, January 07. Available at: <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/196571> (Accessed: 07 August 2019).

Dayton, Bruce W and Louis Kriesberg (eds) 2009, *Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding: Moving from Violence to Sustainable Peace*, edited by Routledge, UK.

Dhaka Tribune (2018a) 'What is happening in the CHT', Dhaka Tribune, 6 May. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2018/05/06/what-is-happening-in-the-cht> (Accessed: 19 August 2019).

Dhaka Tribune (2021b) 'Two killed in Rangamati ethnic clash', Dhaka Tribune, 18 April. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/04/18/two-killed-in-rangamati-ethnic-clash> (Accessed: 13 January 2025).

Dhaka Tribune (2022c) 'Businessman abducted in Bandarban rescued', Dhaka Tribune, 22 March. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2022/03/22/businessman-abducted-in-bandarban-rescued> (Accessed: 13 January 2025).

Dhaka Tribune (2024d) 'KNF frees 3 abducted NGO workers in Bandarban', Dhaka Tribune, 8 February. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2024/02/08/knf-frees-3-abducted-ngo-workers-in-bandarban>. (Accessed: 16 January 2025).

Dhaka Tribune (2024e) 'Security forces detain KNF suspects, recover arms in CHT crackdown', Dhaka Tribune, 11 April. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2024/04/11/security-forces-detain-knf-suspects-recover-arms-in-cht-crackdown>. (Accessed: 13 January 2025).

Dhaka Tribune (2024f) 'Two KNF members detained in military operation', Dhaka Tribune. Available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/372046/two-knf-members-detained-in-military-operation-in>. (Accessed: 17 January 2025).

Haider, Sardar Ali (2023). *Armed Group Rivalry and Its Implications for Post-Accord Peacebuilding and Inclusive Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. Research on Humanities and Social Sciences. <https://doi.org/10.7176/rhss/13-8-03>

Hossain, B. G. M. S., ndc, ndc, hdmc, hdmc, & psc, psc. (2015). *Chittagong hill tracts (cht) land issue: challenges and way ahead*.

<https://www.pcjss.org/cht-accord-of-1997/Bangladesh> Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Population & Housing Census 2022: District Report - [District series]*. Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh.

Jamil, I., & Panday, P. K. (2008). The Elusive Peace Accord in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and the Plight of the Indigenous People. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662040802461141>

Jesmin, aklima, Islam, E., Rahman, A., & Haque, A. (2019). Indigenous Rights Discourse in Bangladesh. <https://doi.org/10.31124/ADVANCE.8938511.V1>

Jhuma, C. F., & Biswas, S. K. (2021). Exploring the Roles of Grassroots Organizations as Potential Agency: The Case of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2021.5420>

Lederach, John Paul 2014, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, Good Books, New York.

New Routes, Volume 14, 2/2009, published by the Life and Peace Institute, Uppsala, Sweden.

Rajput, S. G. (2024). The 1997 Peace Agreement between the Government of Bangladesh and the United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003487821-12>

Sadik, M. I. (2024). Drawbacks of the 1997 Peace Accord and Re-emergence of Militancy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: a Multidimensional Approach to Resolve the Issue. *Social Science Research Network*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4817372>

Siddiqui, M. S. H. (2023). Post-Coloniality and Racial Subjugation in the South Asian Conflict-Affected Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Philosophy and Progress*. <https://doi.org/10.3329/pp.v7i1i1-2.66520>

Subir Bhaumik 1996, *Insurgent Crossfire North-East India*, Lancer Publisher, New Delhi.

The Business Standard News (2024), 'How '100 dead in CHT clashes' disinfo spread through social media: dismislab' *The Business Standard news*, September 30, Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/fact-check/how-indian-media-false-promoted-100-dead-cht-clashes-dismislab-954176> (Accessed: 29 September 2025).

The Daily Star (2018b) 'Gun attack kills 5 in Rangamati', *The Daily Star*, 3 June. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/gun-attack-kills-5-rangamati-1571785> (Accessed: 19 August 2019).

The Daily Star (2019a) 'Army man shot dead in Rangamati', The Daily Star, 18 August. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/army-man-shot-dead-rangamati-1786924> (Accessed: 19 August 2019).

The Daily Star (2024c) 'Policeman killed in Rangamati gunfight', The Daily Star. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime/news/policeman-killed-rangamati-gunfight-jss-faction-3415671> (Accessed: 15 January 2025).

The Economist (2019) 'Will Colombia go back to war?', The Economist, August 29. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/08/29/will-colombia-go-back-to-war> (Accessed: 19 August 2029)

Times of India (2019) 'Chakmas observe Black Day against 1947 mistake', Times of India. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/agartala/chakmas-observe-black-day-against-1947-mistake/articleshow/70722837.cms> (Accessed: 19 August 2019).

Uddin, M. M. (2019). Settlement of Indigenous Land Disputes by the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission of Bangladesh: Challenges and Possible Solutions. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-7052-6_11

Uddin, N. (2010). Politics of Cultural Difference: Identity and Marginality in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. South Asian Survey. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152311201700206>

Webel, Charles and Johan Galtung (eds) 2009, Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies, edited by Routledge, UK.

Webel, Charles P and Jorgen Johansen (eds) 2012, Peace and Conflict Studies: A Reader, Routledge, UK.

Wolff, Stefan and Christalla Yakinthou (eds) 2012, Conflict Management in Divided Societies - Theories and Practice, Routledge, New York.

Yasmin, L. (2014). The Tyranny of the Majority in Bangladesh: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Nationalism and Ethnic Politics. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2014.879769>

YouTube (2011a), Johan Galtung- Transcend- Methods and Solutions. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0KHBhrbfffQ> (Accessed: 17 July 2019).

YouTube (2019b), Bloodsheds and politics in the hills. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvJZ-vQjTsI> (Accessed: 16 August 2019).

YouTube (2019c), Who are providing arms to the terrorists?. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpx5FRcu4CQ> (Accessed: 16 August 2019).

Youtube (2019d), Indian Chakmas claim CHT part of India. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpukX79q6B8> (Accessed: 19 August 2019).

AUTHOR

Colonel SM Abdur Rouf, afwc, psc, G (Retired), served in the Bangladesh Army for over 24 years before voluntarily retiring to join UNMISS as an international civilian staff member in July 2016. His previous UN experience includes serving as UNMO in UNAMSIL, SO(M&V) in UNMIS, and DCOS(PET)/CMPO in MINUSCA. His background in the Bangladesh Army includes commanding a battalion in CHT, as well as roles as GSO-1/GSO-3 at infantry division headquarters and BM at both infantry and artillery brigade headquarters. He served with various field and medium artillery units and worked as an instructor at the School of Artillery. He graduated from DSCSC in Bangladesh and the Nanjing Army Command College in China. He is qualified in the Armed Forces War Course and served as Directing Staff for this course. He earned an MPhil in Strategy and Development Studies and a Master's in Defence Studies.

Email: rouf4135@gmail.com.



DESIGNING A MENTAL MOBILITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING DECISION-MAKING IN BANGLADESH ARMY OFFICERS

Lieutenant Colonel Md Arif Hossain, afwc, psc, G, Artillery

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 27th March 2025; Accepted: 16th September 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: Mental mobility is the ability to function positively in an environment of quick changes, uncertainty, and inadequacy of information. It is the capacity to make quick decisions in complex situations. It is essential for effective decision-making. Despite its importance, the Bangladesh Army lacks standardized parameters to measure mental mobility. This study addresses the gap by examining how officers can better develop cognitive agility, including quick information processing and adaptability. Existing training methods emphasize traditional learning approaches, which limit officers' ability to adapt to dynamic operational environments. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data from case studies, interviews, and FGDs and quantitative data from surveys, Officer Performance Reports (OPR) marks, and staff course results. The paper analyzed key performance indicators such as OPR marks, staff course results, and commanders' assessments to measure officers' mental mobility. The focus was on intellectual ability, creativity, and fastness in decision-making. Findings revealed that while officers perform well in intellectual ability, they struggle to process information quickly and make effective decisions under stress. A key challenge is the lack of formal mental mobility data within the military system, making it difficult to effectively assess and appoint officers to command roles. The study recommends introducing a set of mental mobility training in regular courses, enhanced mentorship programs, and systematic assessment mechanisms for measuring cognitive agility through revised OPR formats and course reports. Maintaining a mental mobility database at the MS branch is also essential for selecting officers based on their cognitive agility score for command appointments.

Keywords: *Mental Mobility, Decision-Making, Cognitive Agility, Training, Assessment.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

“Success is not about the absence of challenges, but the ability to navigate through them with mental agility and strategic decision-making.”

- General James N. Mattis

Mental mobility, defined as the ability to process information rapidly and adapt to dynamic environments, is an essential skill for military officers. It is a concept created by Dr. Lindsey Swanson Schriefer that focuses on developing mental strength and mental flexibility to face any obstacle and take on any challenge (Schriefer, 2011). It encompasses cognitive agility, quick decision-making, and the capacity to function effectively in uncertain situations, rapid changes, and incomplete information. Cognitive agility refers specifically to the mental flexibility required to switch between tasks or strategies under stress. In modern military operations, where asymmetrical threats and complex battlefield conditions are prevalent, mental mobility has become decisive for effective decision making and operational success. Despite its growing importance, the Bangladesh Army currently lacks a standardized system for assessing or enhancing this capability among its officers. While formal metrics for evaluating cognitive agility are absent, this study utilizes existing performance indicators such as Officer Performance Reports (OPRs), staff course results, and commanding officers’ assessments as proxy measures to approximate mental mobility.

The rapidly evolving nature of warfare (hybrid warfare and unconventional threats) demands leaders who can quickly assess situations and make sound decisions with limited information. A mentally mobile commander grasps fleeting opportunities and converts disadvantages into advantages (Grint, 2002), and thereby, he can make effective decisions. Military leaders must think critically, solve problems creatively, and respond effectively in uncertain environments. However, the Bangladesh Army faces challenges in cultivating these vital skills. Stereotyped training, resistance to change, and a play-it-safe attitude are fundamental obstacles to practising flexible thinking and innovation (Bangladesh Army, 2018). Existing training and assessment systems focus on intellectual ability and technical proficiency, but they fail to measure officers’ ability to make quick and informed decisions under pressure. This results in a gap in assessing cognitive agility, an important component of leadership in the complex realities of modern military operations. While several militaries globally have adopted structured frameworks to assess and develop cognitive agility, including the U.S. Army’s “Ready and Resilient” program (US Army, 2018) and NATO’s emphasis

on mental readiness (Thompson & McCreary, 2006), such frameworks are absent in the Bangladesh Army. Existing literature on military mental readiness highlights tools such as psychometric testing, decision-making simulations, and leadership agility metrics as effective mechanisms for gauging cognitive flexibility. Here, a clear research gap exists in the adaptation of these tools within the Bangladesh Army context, particularly in asymmetric warfare environments. This study aims to fill that void by contextualizing global best practices and proposing localized assessment mechanism tailored to Bangladesh Army officers.

The Bangladesh Army faces significant challenges due to a lack of standard mental mobility among its officers. Challenges like desired operational inefficiency, delayed decision-making, and inadequate workload management by its officers are pronounced. This study proposes a multi-pronged strategy to address these issues. The scope of this study extends to developing a comprehensive framework for mental mobility assessment and training in the Bangladesh Army.

While the terms are related, this study uses mental mobility as an umbrella term that includes aspects of cognitive agility, such as adaptability, speed of thought, and emotional resilience. This study hypothesizes that implementing a standardized mental mobility assessment system and targeted training in the Bangladesh Army will lead to significant improvements in officers' cognitive agility and decision-making performance. The research objective is to propose appropriate strategies to enhance officers' mental mobility within the Bangladesh Army for effective decision-making. This study seeks to answer the following key questions:

- How can mental mobility be systematically measured among Bangladesh Army officers?
- Which strategies and assessment tools can effectively enhance officers' mental mobility for better decision-making in complex environments?

METHODOLOGY

It was an exploratory research and followed a mixed-methods approach where qualitative and quantitative data were analysed. The qualitative component includes 9 case studies, 13 interviews, and 2 FGDs with senior military officers to gather insights into cognitive agility and decision-making under pressure. 9 case studies were selected from a range of high-stakes operational environments to identify consistent behavioural patterns indicative of mental mobility. However,

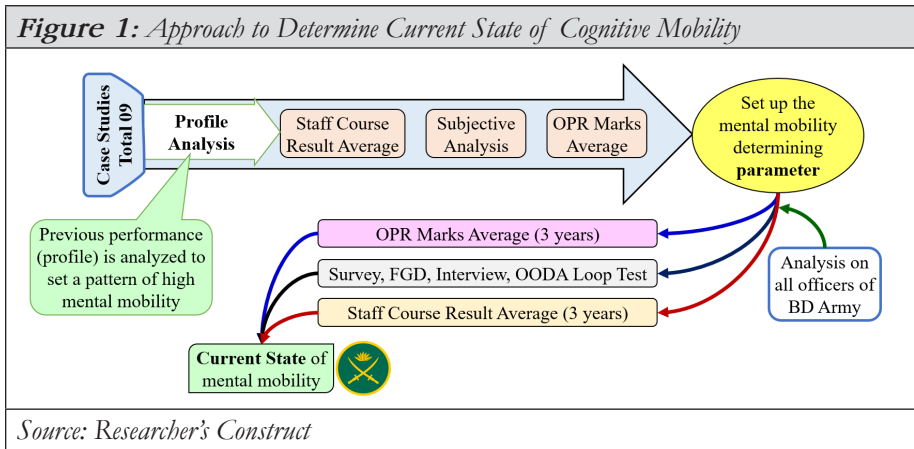
this sample size is recognized as a limitation, and future research with a larger pool of cases is necessary for broader generalizability. The quantitative component consists of survey data collected from officers across various ranks, focusing on key attributes of mental mobility. The researcher collected data from OPRs, staff course results, and CO assessments to analyze - how these performance indicators correlate with mental mobility. The insights from qualitative case studies were triangulated with quantitative performance metrics such as OPR scores and staff course results to identify recurring traits. This integration helped cross-validate the qualitative patterns with broader trends among the officer population. Although formal, standardized parameters for measuring mental mobility are currently absent in the Bangladesh Army, this study utilizes existing proxies, such as OPR marks, staff course results, and CO assessments, as indicative tools to approximate cognitive agility. These indicators are not definitive assessments but preliminary benchmarks for constructing a future standardized framework for measuring mental mobility. All data collection procedures adhered to ethical research standards. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; no identifying information was recorded or disclosed in the paper.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Research on mental mobility in military leadership has gained attention in recent years due to its direct link with decision-making and operational success. Schriefer (2011) emphasized the importance of mental flexibility for adapting to rapid change. Kahneman (2011) further supports the idea that decision-making speed and bias mitigation are tied to cognitive agility. Western militaries have operationalized these concepts through tools such as mental agility drills, cognitive load simulations, and scenario-based leadership tests (Thompson & McCreary, 2006; US Army, 2018). However, most of this literature is rooted in Western contexts. There is limited research on how these models can be effectively applied in the South Asian military landscape, especially within the structure and culture of the Bangladesh Army. This study addresses that void by drawing from local qualitative insights and combining them with international best practices to propose an indigenous model of cognitive mobility assessment and development.

CURRENT STATE OF MENTAL MOBILITY OF THE OFFICERS OF THE BANGLADESH ARMY

Determining Concept



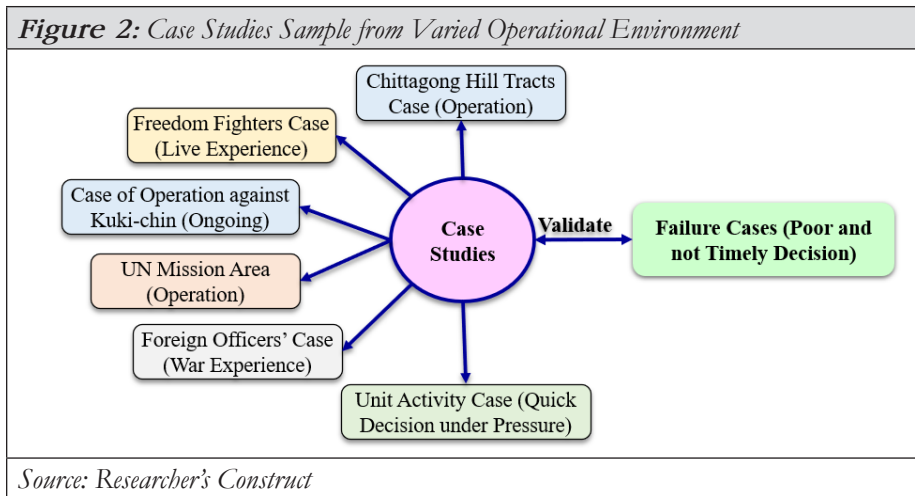
To foster cognitive skills, it is essential to first establish clear parameters that define the mental agility of the Bangladesh (BD) Army officers. Once these parameters are determined, the current state of mental mobility among officers can be systematically assessed and analyzed. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this process for evaluating the existing level of mental mobility in the BD Army.

Mental models and cognitive processes, such as mental mobility, are central to dynamic decision-making; decision-makers use mental models to assess and act in complex environments (Li and Maani, 2011). Therefore, mental mobility and decision-making are intrinsically connected and related. Officers at every level, from senior leaders to junior officers, need cognitive mobility to adapt tactics, manage resources, and ensure effective decision-making under pressure.

The setting of Measuring Parameters

In this study, a clear distinction is made between the parameters and the indicators of mental mobility. Parameters refer to the fundamental cognitive and emotional capacities, such as cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and situational awareness, which constitute the core of an officer's mental agility (Gioia et al., 2013). Indicators, by contrast, are the observable behaviours and measurable outputs-such as decision-making speed, adaptability during dynamic scenarios, and

performance evaluations in CPX or FTX exercises—that reflect these underlying parameters in practice. By systematically linking indicators to parameters, the assessment and enhancement of mental mobility can be approached in a structured and objective manner. Building on this foundation, seven case studies of officers who performed exceptionally well in crises were conducted. These officers demonstrated high mental mobility, particularly in decision-making under stress. The researcher analyzed their previous performance (OPR and staff course results) to identify a pattern of officers with high mental mobility. Research suggests that officers with similar traits are likely to perform better in crisis situations. The study also included two case studies of officers performing poorly in similar situations. This comparison with poor-performance cases was also included to validate and refine the proposed mental mobility parameters by highlighting contrasting traits that undermine cognitive agility. The case studies were considered from varied situations, as shown in Figure 2.



The analysis of successful case studies revealed that officers (Rank of Captain, Major and Lieutenant Colonel are considered) with a minimum of 92.5¹ OPR marks, “High Demanding” in staff course results and Fast² information processing ability typically indicated high mental mobility. In contrast, officers in the failure case studies showed slower reaction times, averaging 87 OPR marks, and their staff course performance was graded “Demanding.” These findings

¹The threshold of 92.5 OPR was determined based on a comparative review of top-performing officers across 9,435 records. Officers with OPR scores ≥ 92.5 consistently aligned with superior performance in crisis response, as noted in both CO narratives.

²The “fast” decision-making categorization was derived from open-ended scenario items within the survey instrument, where officers’ ability to provide standard responses within set time limit by Army SOP.

confirmed that well-profiled officers display stronger mental agility, while those with lower cognitive flexibility struggle in high-pressure situations.

Determining Mental Mobility of BD Officers

An analysis of 9,435 officers’ OPR marks revealed significant disparities in cognitive mobility across ranks. Lieutenant Colonels showed the highest cognitive agility, with over 61% scoring above 92.5 in OPR marks. However, majors and captains demonstrated lower mental mobility, with over 35% of majors and more than 14% of captains scoring above 92.5 (Military Secretary’s Branch, 2024). This trend suggests junior officers struggle with cognitive agility and should focus on developing and improving their mental mobility. As expected, senior officers scored higher in cognitive agility due to their extended experience, which emphasizes the need to build such capacity earlier in career paths. The findings indicate that mental mobility tends to improve with rank and experience, which is expected. However, establishing baseline parameters-such as decision-making speed, adaptability, and cognitive flexibility-allows comparison across ranks, ensuring junior officers meet a minimum standard early in their careers. This supports targeted interventions for officers needing improvement.

The staff course results indicate moderate cognitive agility among the BD Army officers, with over 65% achieving “High Demanding” and ‘Plus’ grading (Defence Services Command and Staff College, 2024). However, an analysis was conducted on 23 officers who scored “High Demanding” in their staff course. Their OPR marks were compared before and after the course, revealing negligible differences between the two scores (Figure 3). It shows that the staff course does not sufficiently address the gaps in mental mobility required for effective on-ground performance.

Figure 3: Case Studies Sample from Varied Operational Environments

Personality Traits	Before Staff Course	After Staff Course
(4) Intellectual Ability	92.25%	92.63%
(9) Judgement	88.13%	91.63%
(3) Creativity	89.88%	88.25%
(7) Firmness in Decision Making	87.75%	89.00%

Source: Military Secretary’s Branch, Dhaka Cantonment. Dated 16 July 2024

The study found that CO’s assessment of officers’ decision-making capability is poor. Both subjective and objective analyses confirm a lack of standard mental mobility among the BD Army officers (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Findings on the Current State of Mental Mobility

Serial	Criteria	Findings-Current State of Mental Mobility of the BD Army Officers	
		Standard (No Improvement Required)	Needs Improvement
1.	OPR Mark Analysis	No	Yes
2.	Staff Course Result Analysis	Yes	No
3.	Opinion of Commanders and CO (Survey and Subjective Analysis)	No	Yes
4.	State of information processing ability of officers	No	Yes

Source: Researcher's Construct

Correlation Analysis

To validate the assumption that higher mental mobility corresponds with stronger performance in both operational tasks and academic evaluations, a basic statistical analysis was conducted among 29 officers. The correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationships among OPR scores, decision-making speed, and staff course performance. A very strong positive correlation ($r = 0.96$) was observed between OPR scores and peer-assessed decision-making speed, indicating a meaningful association between field performance and cognitive agility. However, weaker correlations were noted between OPR scores and staff course results ($r = 0.10$) and between decision-making speed and staff course scores ($r = 0.01$), suggesting that formal course grading may not fully reflect practical decision-making capabilities.

These correlations reinforce the hypothesis that mental mobility is not just a conceptual attribute but also reflected in real-world performance indicators. While these correlations are not definitive, they provide initial empirical support for including mental mobility scores in OPR and command appointment processes.

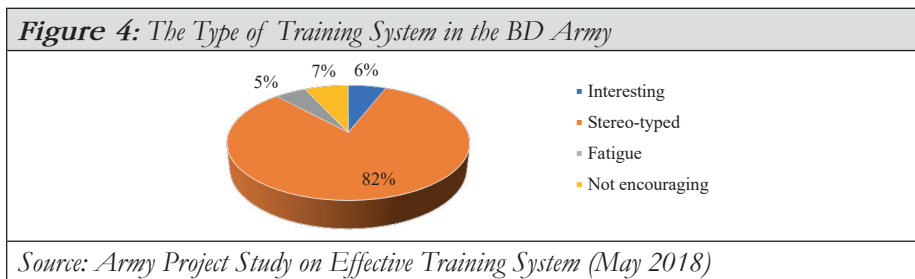
The relationship between officers' past performance and their mental mobility traits was established by comparing high performers' assessment scores with

their performance in real-time operational scenarios. Descriptive comparisons provided consistent patterns, reinforcing the proposed indicators. Future research could incorporate statistical tools to enhance the robustness of these findings. Since the study findings indicate a need for improving officers' mental mobility, it is essential to identify the factors affecting the low mental mobility of the BD Army officers.

FACTORS AFFECTING MENTAL MOBILITY AND CHALLENGES FACED

Factors Affecting Mental Mobility

Set-Piece Training. It is one of the significant factors that adversely affect mental mobility. On many occasions, the BD Army follows stereotypical training curricula (Bangladesh Army, 2018). 17 Infantry Division conducted an Army Project Study in May 2018, and most of the survey respondents echoed the exact theme (Figure 4). Figure 4 shows the rigidity of current training models, which correlates with limited tactical adaptability as highlighted in case narratives and CO feedback.



We train hard to make the fight easy. Therefore, training curricula must be dynamic and innovative to face new challenges. Instant battle judgment can be developed by training leaders regularly to handle unexpected situations that do not go according to plan. The Israeli Army has evolved a command method known as 'Option Control' (Netanyahu, 1986). Commanders are asked to prepare plans, and when ready to present, they are told that the situation has changed. It necessitates immediate modification of the existing plan or formulation of a fresh plan. In the BD Army, we do not practice a similar technique.

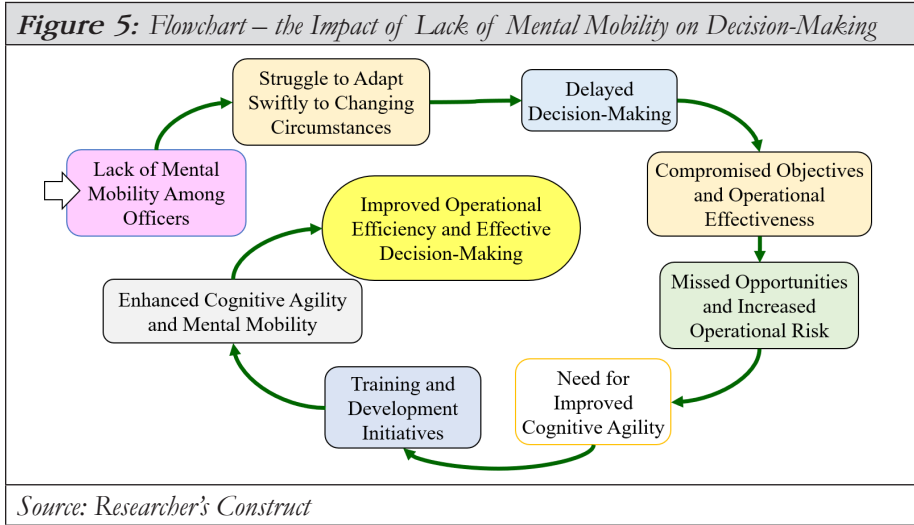
Organizational Culture. The BD Army's hierarchical structure, which emphasizes obedience over creativity, stifles cognitive flexibility and independent decision-making. This culture discourages initiative and innovation, hindering officers' ability to adapt quickly to complex situations (Burns, 2023). It has been heavily influenced by the colonial legacy, which emphasized obedience over independent thinking. This has stifled innovation in decision-making processes.

Mentorship. Mentorship is a critical yet underdeveloped aspect of the BD Army's leadership training. Mentorship programs help officers navigate complex situations, develop critical thinking skills, and adapt to evolving operational challenges (Charlotte C. Werden, 2013). The absence of a structured mentoring program has limited the development of cognitive agility among officers.

Absence of a Mental Mobility Assessment System. The BD Army does not have a formal system to assess and record officers' mental mobility. Neither OPRs nor course reports include separate columns on cognitive abilities. This gap means that mental mobility is not a factor in selecting officers for command appointments (Farid, 2024). In contrast, countries like the U.S., India, and Pakistan have integrated psychological assessments and decision-making metrics into their command appointment selection processes.

Challenges Faced by the Bangladesh Army

Operational Inefficiency and Delayed Decision-Making. A lack of mental mobility among officers poses a critical challenge, as it often results in operational inefficiency and delayed decision-making, particularly in high-stakes environments. According to RAND Corporation (2020), delays in decision-making can severely compromise mission objectives. 88% of the respondents in a survey indicated that the BD Army suffers operational delays due to over-supervision and slow decision-making. Figure 5 illustrates a cycle that shows the impact of a lack of mental mobility on operational efficiency and decision-making in the BD Army.



Inadequate Workload Management. The Army Project Study 2022 identified that officers work 14–15 hours a day, which is excessive compared to the standard 8-hour workday. This excessive workload indicates that officers face challenges in workload management. Due to inadequate mental mobility, the BD Army officers struggle to prioritize tasks effectively and manage workload efficiently, further contributing to long working hours and reduced operational efficiency (Haque, 2024).

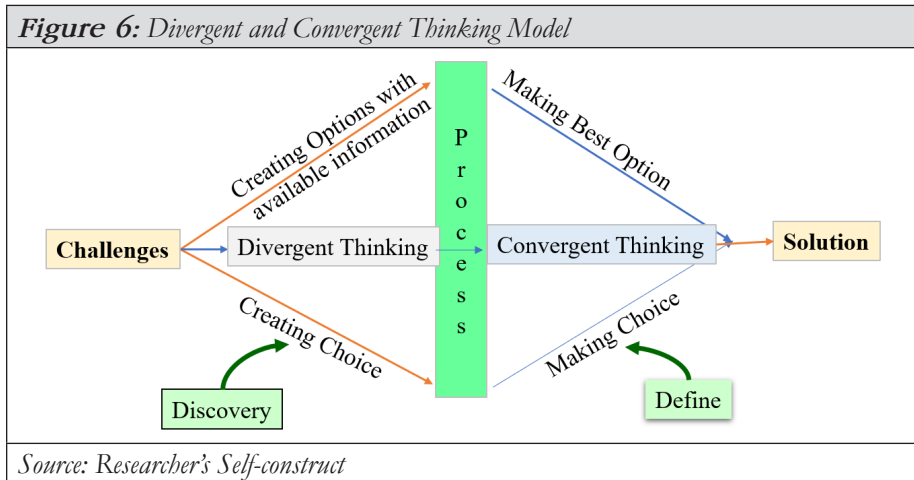
Lack of Mental Mobility Data. The absence of a formal assessment system to record mental mobility impedes the proper appointment of officers to command roles. Without cognitive agility data, the MS branch is unable to make informed decisions about which officers are best suited for command positions (Farid, 2024).

These challenges compromise mission execution and reduce the Army’s ability to respond swiftly and effectively. The following chapter examines the challenges and proposes strategic interventions to address the identified gaps.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING MENTAL MOBILITY IN THE BANGLADESH ARMY

Strategies – Best Practices

Divergent, Convergent, and Breakout Thinking. Cognitive agility can be developed through three key thinking processes: divergent thinking, which promotes creativity by generating multiple ideas; convergent thinking, which narrows down options to identify the best course of action; and breakout thinking, which pushes officers beyond conventional limitations (Jahir, 2024). These processes help officers navigate uncertain scenarios by encouraging flexibility and adaptability. The Bangladesh Army already applies this approach through the Decision-Making Process (DMP). However, as DMP is often lengthy, using this thinking model under a structured framework can make decisions faster and more flexible. Figure 6 demonstrates a divergent and convergent thinking model that can be integrated into training programs to promote cognitive agility.



Opportunity Seeking. Opportunity seeking³, instead of opportunity spotting, encourages officers to identify potential solutions before challenges fully materialize proactively. This approach assists quick decision-making and creativity in real-time scenarios. Opportunity-seeking is a viable strategy for developing mental mobility (Chowdhury, 2024). Officers who adopt this proactive mindset

³Opportunity seeking involves proactively identifying and pursuing potential opportunities before they become obvious to others, fostering innovation and forward-thinking. In contrast, opportunity spotting is the act of recognizing opportunities that have already become apparent.

are more likely to perceive obstacles as opportunities for growth and innovation, as illustrated by Ryan Holiday in his book *The Obstacle in the Way* (Holiday, 2014).

Mentorship Programs and Peer Support. Establish mentorship programs where experienced officers can guide and support junior officers in developing their decision-making skills (Chowdhury, 2024). Mentorship provides valuable insights, advice, and practical knowledge to aid effective decision-making. Peer support creates an environment of knowledge-sharing. It enables officers to exchange ideas and perspectives. This exchange leads to mutual learning and growth in cognitive skills. Together, mentorship and peer support enhance officers' mental mobility by promoting continuous learning in the face of uncertainty.

Strategies – Targeted Training

Situation Reaction Test (SRT). SRT is a training exercise used by militaries worldwide to evaluate an officer's ability to respond to stressful scenarios. A situation containing two to three problems is given to a group of seven to eight persons (Handout, 1999). After a set time, their views are discussed. No leader is nominated; an individual can participate freely, and any one of them can even give out the group plan. The calibre of leaders is graded by analyzing each individual's contribution in terms of ideas. Though SRT-like activities exist informally, institutionalizing them with standardized scoring and regular use would improve consistency.

Time Constraint Test (TCT). Time-constrained tactical exercises are another method of developing cognitive agility. By imposing strict time limits, officers are trained to make decisions quickly under pressure. According to research, training on reaction time tests is critical for military leaders who must make rapid decisions in high-stress environments (Rabbitt, 1991). Incorporating TCT into staff and other mandatory courses will help officers develop mental agility in time-sensitive situations.

Realistic Scenario-Based Training. Converting Command Post Exercises (CPX) into Command Post Field Exercises (CPFX) adds a layer of realism, allowing officers to experience the challenges of near-real-time decision-making (Shakil, 2024). This realistic training helps officers practice adapting to complex and high-stress situations.

Strategies – Assessment Concept

Assessment of Cognitive Mobility in the Course Report. A standardized column titled “Cognitive Mobility Performance” should be introduced in course reports for all mandatory courses. This column would assess officers’ critical thinking and decision-making skills during the courses, providing a quantifiable measure of cognitive agility. The existing course report format should be revised, as given in Table 2, to include a section for cognitive mobility performance.

<i>Table 2: Revised Course Report Grading Format (For Course 1)</i>			
Marks Obtained		Course Position	Cognitive Mobility Performance (Marks %)
Knowledge	Instructional Ability		
<i>Source: Researcher’s Self-construct</i>			

Assessment Concept of OPR. Cognitive mobility should be assessed annually in officers’ OPRs, based on their performance in key training exercises and day-to-day activities. A new “Cognitive Mobility Performance” section should be added to the OPR to record officers’ decision-making abilities in various scenarios. In the existing OPR format, an additional sub-paragraph, 19 (e), should be added to the OPR to record cognitive mobility performance (Table 3). In the event column, only short names will be used to assess the officer’s performance, i.e., CPX, FTX, CEE, WT, etc. For each event, the officer will be graded out of 100 marks. These grades will reflect their cognitive mobility performance in various scenarios. Finally, the scores from all events will be averaged and entered in the last column to provide an overall cognitive mobility score out of 100, of the year.

<i>Table 3: Revised OPR Format (Para 19 e)</i>				
Subject	Event-1	Event-2	Event-3	Total Average Out of 100 Marks
Name of the Event				
Marks Obtained				
<i>Source: Researcher’s Self-construct</i>				

Maintenance of Mental Mobility Database at MS Branch. The AHQ MS Branch should maintain a database of cognitive mobility scores derived from course reports and OPRs. These scores would evaluate officers’ cognitive

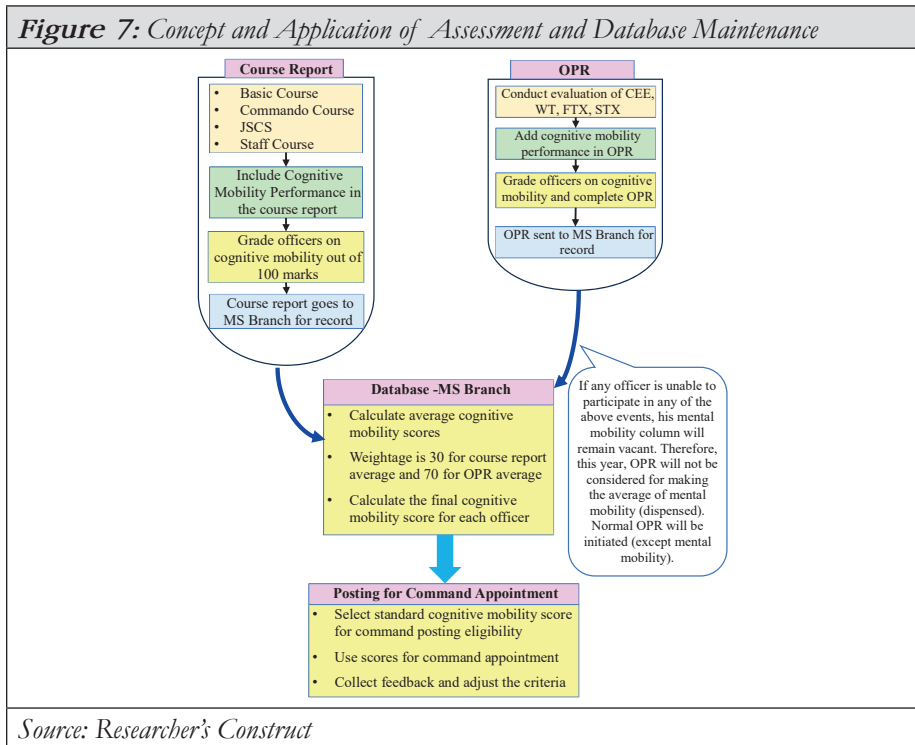
abilities. When considering officers for command appointments, the MS Branch should use the cumulative cognitive mobility score to ensure that officers with the highest mental agility are placed in leadership roles. An example of how the MS Branch might calculate cognitive mobility scores is provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Example of Calculating Cognitive Mobility Scores at MS Branch

Subject	Marks (Only Mental Mobility Part)				Weightage		Final Score
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Average	Allotted	Earned	
OPR	82	87	75	81.33	70.00	56.93	76.53
Course Report	Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	65.33	30.00	19.60	
Report	67	71	58				

Source: Researcher's Self-construct

Overall Assessment Flowchart. The concept of mental mobility scoring and its application are given in Figure 7. A separate column for mental mobility performance should be in the course report and OPR.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To validate and refine the proposed interventions, a pilot program should be designed and implemented. This pilot program could include selected units or officer batches to test the feasibility and effectiveness of the following recommendations:

- Field Formations may incorporate case studies, the Situation Reaction Test (SRT), and mentorship programs into their Formations during yearly training events. CAP, Time Constraint Tests (TCT), and Cross Training may be included in all mandatory courses according to the level of officers' courses. AHQ (MT Directorate) and HQ ARTDOC may study the programs, develop a modus operandi and introduce them in 2026.
- AHQ, MS Branch, may revise the OPR format to enhance cognitive mobility and effective decision-making among the BD Army officers. As soon as possible, a Board of Officers may be formed in the MS Branch to include a new column in the OPR for evaluating cognitive mobility.
- The AHQ (MT Directorate), in coordination with HQ ARTDOC, may include a separate column in the course reports of all mandatory courses for cognitive mobility performance. The process may start in the 1st cycle of training year 2025.
- The MS Branch may maintain a mental mobility database matrix for all officers from the year 2026 onwards. This matrix will compile data from course reports and OPRs, calculating each officer's overall cognitive mobility score. The score may be derived by assigning a weightage of 30% from course reports and 70% from OPR assessments. A Board of Officers may be formed in AHQ, MS Branch to formulate the detailed procedures.

CONCLUSION

Mental mobility is a vital component of effective decision-making in military operations, especially in environments characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and rapid changes. The Bangladesh Army, while excelling in many areas, faces challenges in developing this critical attribute among its officers. The current state of mental mobility reveals gaps in cognitive agility, particularly in areas such as creative problem-solving and decision-making under pressure. These

gaps can lead to operational inefficiencies, delayed decision-making, and missed opportunities in dynamic military contexts.

This study identified core factors like rigid training models and hierarchical culture that inhibit cognitive agility. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that implements best practices, such as divergent and convergent thinking, mentorship programs, and realistic, scenario-based training. Furthermore, targeted training methods like SRT and TCT will help officers develop quick decision-making skills under pressure.

The introduction of a structured assessment framework, including revisions to course reports and OPR, is essential. By maintaining a mental mobility database at the MS Branch, the Bangladesh Army can ensure that officers selected for command roles possess the necessary cognitive agility to lead effectively. Finally, enhancing mental mobility among Bangladesh Army officers is vital for improving decision-making capabilities. The strategies proposed in this study provide a roadmap for systematically developing cognitive agility, thereby preparing officers to navigate the complexities of modern military operations.

There were several challenges in conducting an abstract study like mental mobility. One significant difficulty was the complexity of measuring mental mobility, an abstract concept involving stress management, decision-making speed, and adaptability-elements that are inherently subjective and difficult to quantify. Another challenge was balancing subjective and objective data. While interviews and performance records provided valuable insights, subjective assessments could introduce bias, and objective data, like staff college results, did not always reflect an officer's true cognitive agility under operational stress. Lastly, the operational environment in real sense added another layer of complexity. The real-world military scenarios often differ significantly from controlled training environments, making it difficult to predict how officers would perform in actual combat or high-pressure situations. Though the challenges require a careful and methodical approach, this study will lay the foundation for future improvements in measuring and enhancing mental mobility.

REFERENCES

Bangladesh Army (2018) An effective formation training system for BD Army: Army project study by 17 Infantry Division. Unpublished internal report, Bangladesh Army.

Burns, W., 2023. Face the Nation with Margaret brennan [Interview] (26 February 2023).

CBS News (26 February 2023), Face the Nation with Margaret Brennan [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HN4bgqKq2MU> accessed on 05 April 2023.

Charlotte C. Werden, W. W. F., 2013. The role of mobility as a protective factor of cognitive functioning in ageing adults. *The Gerontologist*, 53(3), p. 421–433.

Chowdhury, Lieutenant General Ahmed Tabrej Shams (20 May 2024). GOCARTDOC. Enhancing Mental Mobility for Effective Decision Making: Challenges and Strategies. (Lt Col Arif, Interviewer).

Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC), 2024. Staff Course Performance Summary. Unpublished internal report, Mirpur, Dhaka.

Di Domenico, M. D. E. a. N. D., 2014. Mental Mobility in the Digital Age. p-28 ed.s.l.:New Technology, Work and Employment.

Driskell, J. E. S. E. & J. J., 1999. Does stress lead to a loss of team perspective? *Group Dynamics*, 3(4), p. 291–302.

Dweck, C. S., 2006. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. s.l.:Ballantine Books.

Farid, Major General Abu Mohammad Sarwar (15 June 2024). Deputy MS, AHQ, MS Branch. Enhancing Mental Mobility for Effective Decision Making: Challenges and Strategies. (Lt Col Arif, Interviewer).

Gioia, D.A., Corley, K.G. & Hamilton, A.L., 2013. Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), pp.15–31.

Grint, K., 2002. *Leadership: Classical, Contemporary, and Critical Approaches*. s.l.:Oxford University Press.

Handout, 1999. Developing Mental Mobility in Army. Moddho Prodesh: Army War College, India.

Haque, Lieutenant Colonel Md Zahirul (25 May 2024). Senior Psychologist ISSB. Enhancing Mental Mobility for Effective Decision Making: Challenges and Strategies. (Lt Col Arif, Interviewer).

Hillman, C. H. E. K. I. & K. A. F., 2008. Be smart, exercise your heart: Exercise effects on brain and cognition.. 9(1), 58-65. ed. s.l.:Nature Reviews Neuroscience.

Holiday, R., 2014. The Obstacle is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph. p-15 ed. s.l.:Portfolio.

Hossain, L. C. M. A., 2023. Developing Mental Mobility in Bangladesh Army. ARTDOC Journal, 3(1), p. 87.

Kahneman, D., 2011. Thinking, Fast and Slow. : Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Khan, L. C. S., 2015. Evaluation System for Effective Training: BD Army Perspective, Mirpur, Dhaka: AFWC 2015.

Klein, G., 1999. Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions. s.l.:The MIT Press.

Kolditz, T. A., 2010. In Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It. s.l.:Jossey-Bass.

Lawrence, T., 1926. Seven Pillar of Wisdom: A Triumph. p-248 ed. s.l.:Garden City Publishing.

Li, M. and Maani, K., 2011. Dynamic decision making: Learning and mental models. International Journal of Knowledge-Based Development, 2(1), pp.6–21. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJKBD.2011.038921>

Military Secretary's Branch, 2024. Analysis of OPR Marks for Cognitive Agility Assessment. Unpublished internal report, Bangladesh Army Headquarters, Dhaka.

Management of Workload in Army (2018) Army Project Study by Headquarter Army Training and Doctrine Command.

Moltke, H. V., 1880. Letters on Strategy. Translated by Harry Bell.. 3rd ed. s.l.:Reprinted by Naval and Military Press Ltd, Germany.

NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre. (2019). Complexity in Modern Military Operations website accessed on 15 June, 2024.

Netanyahu, B., 1986. Terrorism How the West Can Win. Farrar: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Israel.

Pink, D. H., 2009. Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us. s.l.:Riverhead Hardcover.

Rabbitt, P., 1991. Mental Mobility as Measured by Dynamics of Reaction Time. 12(8), p-845 to 856 ed. s.l.:Personality and Individual Difference, .

Schriefer, L., 2011. Center for Psychological Performance. [Online] Available at: <https://psychperformance.com/blog/a-beginners-guide-to-understanding-dyscalculia-bd7wk> [Accessed 27 February 2024].

Thompson, M. M. a. M. D. R., 2006. Enhancing Mental Readiness in Military Personnel. Toronto, DEFENCE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT TORONTO (CANADA), pp. 743-751.

US Army, R. D., 2018. Army Ready and Resilient. [Online] Available at: <https://www.armyresilience.army.mil/ard/R2/Practice-Mental-Agility.html> [Accessed 28 February 2024].

AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel Md Arif Hossain, afwc, psc, G, Artillery, was commissioned with the 50th BMA Long Course. He attended various courses at home and abroad. The officer graduated from Defence Services Command and Staff College, and National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Besides, he graduated from the School of Artillery and obtained a Master of Science and Applied Gunnery from the Bangladesh University of Professionals. He completed the Senior Command Course at Army War College, MHOW, India, in 2021. He also completed International Defence Management Course 24-1 and graduated from Defence Research Management Institute, California, USA. He served as Brigade Major of 72 Infantry Brigade. He also served in Army Training and Doctrine Command as General Staff Officer Grade-1 in 2022-23. The officer served twice as an instructor in the Artillery Centre and School. He commanded 19 Medium Regiment Artillery. As a peacekeeper, he served in Liberia as a contingent member and as a Military Observer in the Central African Republic. The officer has two publications in his credit.

Email: arit6832@yahoo.com



HOW UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BANGLADESH PERCEIVE NATIONAL SECURITY THREATS FROM SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Md. Mahbub Rahman

Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Arts and Sciences
Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology, Saidpur

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 31st August 2025; Accepted: 18th November 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: Due to the fast development of social media, misinformation has become a major issue for national security. This is of concern, especially in Bangladesh, which has high intensity internet penetration and high youth population. Adhering to the theory of securitization, this is a quantitative research inquiry of the perception among university students regarding national security threat posed by social media misinformation. The data were collected through a descriptive survey of 300 students. The study participants were recruited in the public universities as well as in the private universities in five major cities of the country. Stratified sampling methodology was employed to ensure that the sample was representative of the larger student population. The findings are striking: 92% of the students reported having a Facebook account and spending an average of more than three hours per day on social media, while 72% of them refer to it as their main news source. Misinformation of political nature was the most common (41%) and religious false content comes next (35%). It was found that there was a shortage on verification: 25% of them always search information; 50% of them do only simple Google searches. However, 79% respondents believe that misinformation is a real national security threat, usually suggesting a foreign involvement. The results indicate a lack of a relationship between high threat perception and low personal accountability which present the problem as an existential threat with securitization.

Keywords: *Online Misinformation; National Security; Threat Perception; Securitization Theory.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, the expansion towards a digital society is a powerful and complicated process. The scope and purpose of social media have vastly expanded beyond just conversation. These platforms now have an active role in shaping how young citizens form their friendships, their own beliefs and the way in which they see the world around them. It is a deeply contradictory situation; the very tools that provide a voice for activists and education for the students are at the same time the primary source of false information. It makes the environment too polarized and harms the discourse of the people which is a real and very increasing threat to the security of the country.

The statistical landscape is breathtaking without a doubt. Current data show that there are more than 130 million internet users in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, 2024) and on average, a person spends approximately three hours a day engaging on social media (Data Reportal, Digital Report Bangladesh 2024). This is an immersion to the depths which is more than just usage. This is not merely usage; however, it is immersion. And this kind of immersion has become such a national vulnerability that even security agencies such as the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) have decided to define malicious disinformation as an actual and present threat - a non-traditional threat that can engineer social unrest and possibly break trust in society's main institutions (CTTC, 2024).

University students expose how a society really comprehends new perils. Young people always fall victims to the impacts of national problems more than others. Social media is a part of every aspect of their everyday existence. Because they are still learning how to voice their political ideas on the web, their natural tendencies to trust make them easy targets for false information. Yet it is this openness to influence which makes them so valuable to study. What they believe is an essential construction of the rest of the mood and attitudes of the whole country.

Research has now revealed many psychological reasons why people believe false information. The havoc it wreaks in society is also well understood. However, there is still much room for improvement, especially in a context as complex and charged as Bangladesh. We do not have an in-depth exploration into the point where a society starts considering how to treat misinformation as a national security threat. This move is explained through the concept of securitization. It is the process in which a problem will not be resolved if left a political issue but an

existential danger that seems to demand an emergency response. The framework of this study is constructed directly on this theory.

In this work, we have surveyed 300 students of different universities of Bangladesh. What is the point of understanding how they think about online information? The real problem is not so much what they see, but how they understand it. Many now read what they find on the internet as a threat to their country's safety.

Therefore, this research has important practical use. It assists in providing a true image of what these new dangers are to policymakers and educators. This knowledge is essential. It is not about reducing the freedom but is just the way of making the society strong so that it can fight internal threats that come their way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Misinformation Ecosystem and Platform Architecture

Over the past ten years, social media has transformed how we communicate and give news. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bangladesh, where internet use is expanding at a phenomenal pace. However, in this context of the present research, the basic views of platforms like Facebook as neutral and uncomplicated instruments are being squandered back. An increasing literature is demonstrating how far they are not passive pipes. Instead, they are founded on active-selection and control algorithms of the information users view. This ability to be influential is designed directly into their architecture, a concept that researcher Tarleton Gillespie (2010, p. 350) refers to as 'platformness',

The primary task of these algorithms is to keep users engaged. Because of this, they continuously and systematically prefer content that elicits strong emotion or deepens social divisions. As multiple studies have shown (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018, p. 1146; Chen, Chang, Rao, Lerman, Cowan and Ferrara, 2022, p. 615; Zehmakan and Maurya, 2023, p. 5), within this technical design, more often than not, making the information viral is more important than ensuring its factual accuracy. This creates an environment in which misinformation (false content not aimed at harming people in the process [Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20]), not knowledge, can spread more and faster.

The problem is particularly acute in a country such as Bangladesh, where high social media usage helps combine with substantial prisoner digital literacies (Roy,

Ahmed and Islam, 2023, p.125). In these conditions, the echo chambers that private groups and encrypted apps allow the propagation of fake stories that are not fought. This has had real consequences with viral misinformation with Facebook contributing to real violence (Haque, Ahmad and Uddin, 2020, p. 25).

From Misinformation to Hybrid Threat

A critical evolution is being made in our understanding that information (misinformation) is increasingly being shed of its image as a mere social ill, and is being re-classified as a strategic asset in modern hybrid conflict. According to hybrid warfare theory, governments, as well as other forces, can achieve their objectives by combining day-to-day activities with war, and by employing non-military means of disturbing their enemies (Pemment, Nothhaft, Severson, Kjellgren and Agardh-Twetman, 2018, p. 45). Here, people use information as a weapon. Their goal is to create conflict within a country, reduce trust in democratic systems, and damage the bonds that hold society together. Since each post on the social media is not filtered like traditional media, various actors (both local and foreign) can propagate false information with ease, potentially endangering national security (Shukla and Tripathi, 2024, p. 80). It has been found that misinformation has been utilized in election cheating and propaganda in international conflicts (Jayakumar, Gopal, Kaushik, Verma and Singh, 2020, p. 345). Misinformation can destroy popular trust in institutions and cause unrest in politically divided nations such as Bangladesh, where it is a major contemporary risk to security (Gadjanova, Lynch and Werner, 2022, p. 1328).

Psychological Drivers and the Verification Deficit

Misinformation is quite common, which can be explained by psychological processes. People possess a tendency toward sharing information that supports the beliefs that have already been formed, a phenomenon known as confirmation bias, regardless of the truthfulness of the information (Nadareishvili, Schulz and Hartung, 2023, p. 12). Online platforms guarantee anonymity, which is another factor that motivates people to share fake content without being afraid of responsibility (Guo, Rohde and Wu, 2019, p. 5). More importantly, these cognitive vulnerabilities are worsened by excessive use of social media; indeed, a recently conducted study involving university students in Bangladesh found that 65% of the 450 students surveyed spent 4-5 hours or longer daily on such platforms, mostly in a non-academic manner, creating a high-risk environment for exposure

(Rahman and Ashikullah, 2024, p. e187). AI, such as deepfakes and automated bots, has significantly reduced the level of effort required to create highly realistic fake content, thus exacerbating the problem of identifying reliable information, especially in times of crisis (Masood, Awan and Bogdanov, 2022, p. 530; Pathak, Zhou and Kumar, 2021, p. 532).

While increasing digital literacy figures high on the agenda of most of the proposed solutions to the problem, a complicating factor has arisen from recent data. Research indicates a clear disparity between what people understand they should be doing online and what they are doing online. This difference at once is both persistent and surprising. The culture of active consumption is more often than not, substituted with a passive approach to consumption, where convenience replaces critical interaction (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2021, p. 385). The problem is exacerbated when people rely too much on tools with limited capacities, such as Google Search. Rather than a neutral fact-checking, these tools tend to reinforce the existing biases of users and drive them further into their own filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011, p. 15). This obvious disparity between what people know and what people do is a major vulnerability in our defense against false information.

The Securitization Theory Lens

This paper uses the theory of securitization theory developed by Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998) to determine how the false information is being treated as a national security issue. The main concept is quite straightforward: a problem is not bad in itself. However, rather, it is made an existential threat when it is done successfully by influential groups, i.e. by governmental bodies, media, or the general population. This study examines this process in Bangladesh. It examines how the misinformation is widespread and that the misinformation is a weapon of foreign actors has become a belief. This common ideology is strong. It is a significant social power force that directly influences the policies that the government is allowed to implement as well as the response that the country takes.

The Gap in the Literature

Existing studies on misinformation in Bangladesh provide some valuable sociological and technical information (Roy, Ahmed & Islam, 2023) though they are missing empirical research that utilizes securitization theory to quantify the construction of misinformation as a national security threat. Previous efforts have

been concerned with the spread and consequences of misinformation, without addressing an important step namely - how false claims become accepted as existential dangers. This study fills that gap by presenting quantitative information on securitization from an important demographic.

<i>Table 1: Research Gaps and Contributions</i>		
Aspect	What Previous Studies Did	What This Study Adds
Theory	Often lacked a security-specific framework.	Uses securitization theory to frame the analysis.
Focus	Looked at spread and general impact.	Measures public perception of the national security threat.
Policy Link	Rarely connected findings to security policy.	Explicitly links student perceptions to policy implications.
<i>Source: Author</i>		

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

This study is guided by the following questions:

- What is the pattern of social media usage and the level of misinformation exposure among the university students of Bangladesh?
- How do students verify what they are finding online and what does this have to do with their digital literacy?
- To what extent do students think that there are foreign actors behind misinformation campaigns?
- To what extent do students consider misinformation to be an existential national security threat?

Hypothesis: The researcher hypothesizes that the more people are exposed to political and religious misinformation on social media the more they perceive misinformation as a major threat to national security.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study was quantitative as well as cross sectional. Primary data were gathered using a survey and secondary data were gathered from reputable national and international sources. This approach enabled the measurement of the exposure to misinformation and an analysis of potential security implications of the misinformation.

Population and Sampling

This survey was directed to bring the students of some universities of Bangladesh between the age of 18 and 28. The given group was selected based on previous literature (Rahman, 2023; Islam and Sultana, 2022) as it has been pointed out by the researchers that the group was high users of social media and was more likely to be exposed to political and religious misinformation.

Sample Size Justification: The value of 300 was calculated to be adequate as a sample. Based on a conservative estimate of 50 percent of key variables (maximizing the necessary sample size) and 95 percent confidence level and a margin of error of $\pm 5.7\%$, a sample size of 300 will yield significant patterns in population.

Sampling Technique: Stratified random sampling technique was adopted in this research. This research was conducted in the universities of the five largest cities of Bangladesh, namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Sylhet, and Khulna. The respondents were chosen from both public and private universities.

Strata: The students were grouped into three important variables to make the sample representative namely, whether they were studying at a public or a private school, their sex and their major (science and arts and engineering and social science or business).

Data Collection

The survey was conducted between March and May 2025. It was distributed through a variety of methods, especially social media groups and university email lists, which proved to be the most effective.

The survey consisted of closed-ended questions. Many of these employed Likert scales, which are effective tools for measuring respondents' attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about specific topics.

Secondary Data

Secondary sources supplemented the survey data: Internet and social media user statistics from the BTRC (2024), The "Digital 2024: Bangladesh" report by Data Reportal, published reports from the Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit, Scholarly articles examining misinformation patterns in South Asia.

Data Collection Instrument

The questionnaire was divided into the following sections:

- **Demographic Information.** Age, gender, type of university, department.
- **Social Media Usage.** Platforms Used, Hours per day, Main Platform for news.
- **Misinformation Exposure.** Types of misinformation seen in the past six months (i.e., political deepfakes, religious rumors).
- **Trust and Perception.** Trust of platforms, harm perceived of different types of misinformation, and agreement about misinformation as a national security concern and a tool of foreign interference (all 5-point scales).
- **Verification Behavior.** Typical selection of method for verification (Google search, fact checking sites, peer discussion and no verification at all).
- **Digital Literacy Assessment.** A 10 question tool that evaluated skills such as recognizing clickbait and sources. Scores were determined as a percentage (0-100).

To guarantee the quality of the survey, we evaluated the reliability and validity of the survey. A pilot test that used 30 students revealed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82). Expert reviews defined the questions as clear and measured the intended concepts

Data Analysis

In order to analyze quantitative data, the researcher used descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and correlation analysis between variables (e.g., digital literacy and misinformation susceptibility). To produce graphs and charts, Matplotlib has been used.

Ethical Issues

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was acquired from all the respondents at the beginning of survey. The consent form described the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality and the right of withdrawal. No personal identifying information was gathered. Data was anonymized and housed in a secure data storage area on the computer which is password-protected. The research was conducted keeping in view the ethical guidelines of Bangladesh Sociological Association.

FINDINGS

Participant Profile

<i>Table 2: Participant Demographics (n=300)</i>		
Characteristic	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	54%
	Female	46%
University Type	Public	58%
	Private	42%
Field of Study	Sciences	32%
	Business	24%
	Social Sciences	22%
	Arts & Humanities	22%

Source: Survey Conducted by the Author

The response rate of the survey was 78%. Some challenges included follow up and encouragement to participate and this did not have significant impact on data collection.

Usage Pattern of Social Media

Table 3: Average Daily Social Media Usage Hours/Day (n=300)			
Platform	Users (%)	Avg. Hours/Day	Primary News Source (%)
Facebook	92%	3.1	72%
YouTube	81%	2.4	15%
Instagram	63%	1.9	9%
TikTok	54%	1.7	5%
WhatsApp	22%	1.1	8%
<i>Source: Survey Conducted by the Author</i>			

As demonstrated in the table, Facebook is the leading source of misinformation as it has the highest usage (92%), the most time spent (3.1 hours/day on average), and the highest reliance (72%) as a primary news source. YouTube (81%, 2.4 hrs, 15% news use) and Instagram (63%, 1.9 hrs, 9% news use) can also be sources of misinformation, but their effect size is lower than on Facebook. TikTok (54%, 1.7 hrs, 5% news use) has a lesser influential role in news consumption. WhatsApp (22%, 1.1 hrs, 8% news use) reaches fewer people in general, but misinformation can travel far in its private groups, which are more difficult to track.

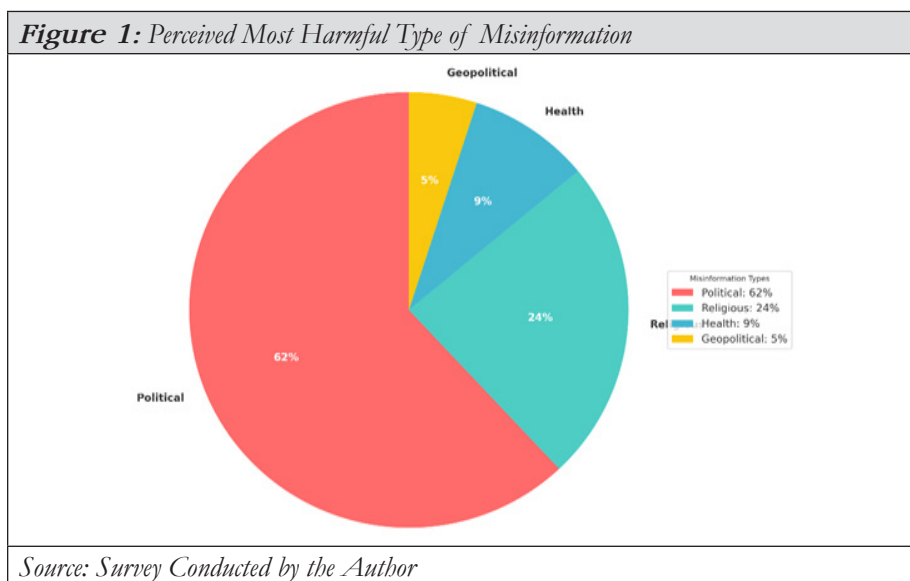
Types of Misinformation Encountered

Table 4: Misinformation Typology		
Category	Prevalence	Security Risk
Political	41%	Institutional Distrust
Religious	35%	Communal Violence
Health	15%	Public Health Crisis
Geopolitical	5%	Diplomatic Tension
<i>Source: Survey Conducted by the Author</i>		

This chart indicates that Political misinformation (41%) is the one that undermines trust and religious misinformation (35%) is a source of violence. The realms of health misinformation (15%), which has a negative impact on the safety of the population, and geopolitical fakes (5%), which create certain problems in

the diplomatic sphere, are also dangerous. Combined, political and religious misinformation (76%) are the greatest security risks.

Perceived Most Harmful Type of Misinformation

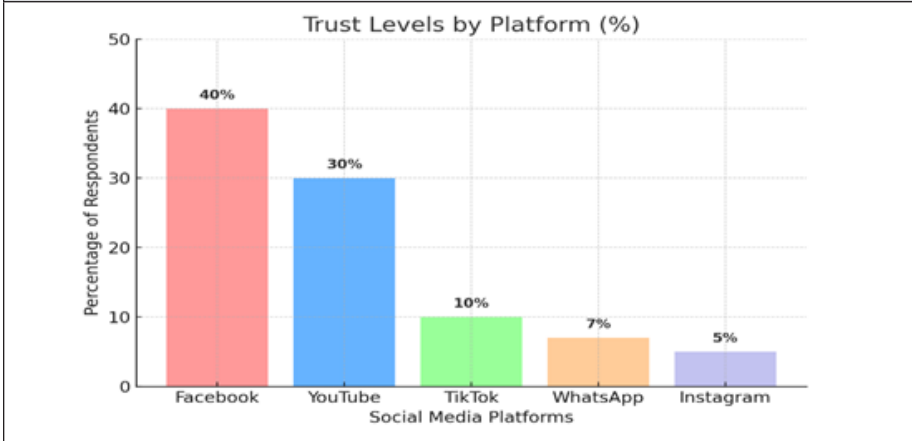


The respondents perceived political misinformation (62%) as the most harmful, citing its high potential for destabilizing society and governance. In the second place with respect to its role in creating conflict in the society and inter-communal tensions came religious misinformation (24%). It was found that the health misinformation (9%) was not so harmful in social terms, but there was also a significant risk to the health of the population. The least harmful was considered to be geopolitical misinformation (5%). The results bring out the point that political talk was viewed as the most significant cause of detrimental misinformation in Bangladesh.

Trust Levels by Platforms for News

The respondents were questioned about the platform they trusted most to find a credible news. The findings reveal that even with Facebook domination in its use, the level of trust is divided with YouTube and traditional media sources being viewed as more credible.

Figure 2: Trust Levels by Platforms

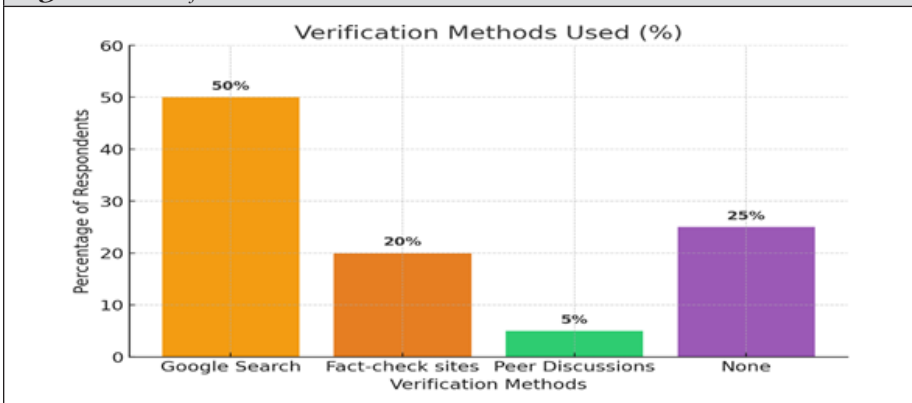


Source: Survey Conducted by the Author

In the bar chart, the percentages of trust on a platform were provided, with the highest proportion going to Facebook which is 40% and YouTube 30%. It is significantly less in TikTok which is 10% and then in WhatsApp 7% and Instagram 5%. It presupposes that the oldest social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube are the ones that are more trusted, and the least old ones, including TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram, are the ones that are least trusted by the interviewees.

Verification Methods Used

Figure 3: Verification Methods Used



Source: Survey Conducted by the Author

The bar chart aids in the understanding that the most popular or utilized of the verification strategies was the Google Search as it was adopted by 50% of respondents. The fact-checking websites (20%), and Peer Discussions (5%), were the secondary methods used. An estimate of 25% of the respondents said that they had done no verification.

The Link Between Digital Literacy and Verification Practices

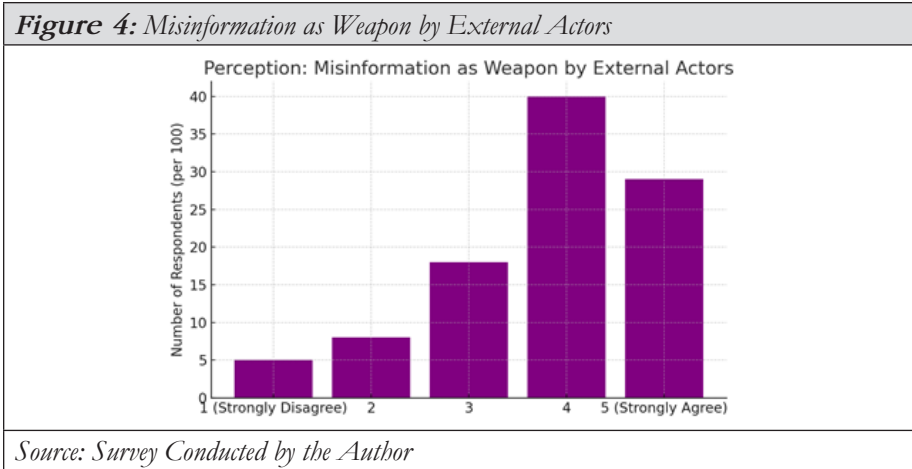
Assessing the digital literacy of all 300 subjects, we had a validated instrument that could measure the digital literacy scores, and the values were 0 to 100 as composite scores. The mean of the digital literacy of the sample was moderate ($M = 58.0$, $SD = 12.4$). We have established that there is a positive correlation that is evident; those who are more literate performed more proactive information verification.

But this relationship was by no means absolute. Interestingly, among the high-literacy cohort (score greater than 70, approximately the 83rd percentile, $n=51$) the tendency to distribute false information was significantly smaller (48.1 percent, $n=25$). This is a key point of difference because the vast majority of all the sample (64.0, $n=192$) responded that they never or barely ever verified information prior to sharing it.

This is a paradox because though skill and behavior correlate, there still exists a large gap of verification. A test of literacy will not necessarily translate into alert practice in the real life. In the end, this may indicate that the solution to this menace of misinformation may be found beyond skills training, and this is the development of stable checking habits that will seal this harmful divide between what is known and acted upon.

Misinformation as Weapon by External Actors

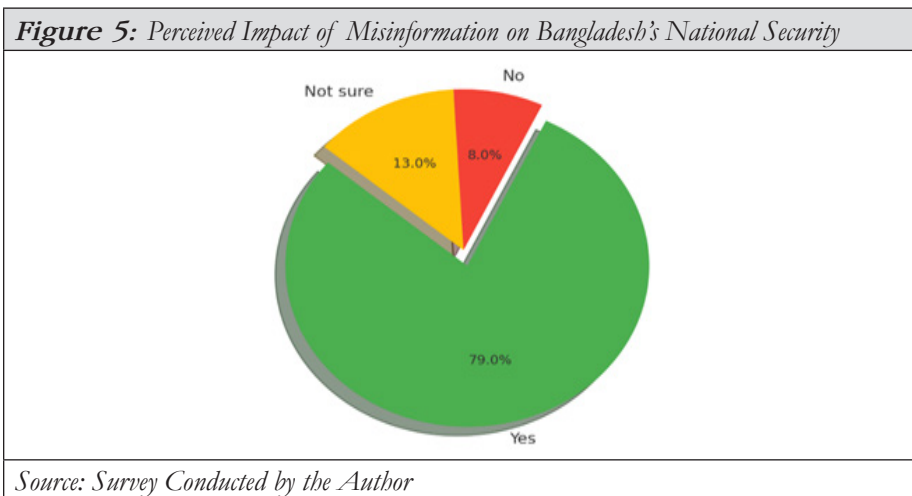
Figure 4: *Misinformation as Weapon by External Actors*



In response to the question of whether media lies are a weapon of foreign parties to portray society as unstable, the majority of the respondents were defiant or highly defiant. Measurement in this consensus took a standard Likert scale where the 4 or 5 scores were equivalent to an extreme high level of agreement with the statement.

Perceived Impact of Misinformation on Bangladesh’s National Security

Figure 5: *Perceived Impact of Misinformation on Bangladesh’s National Security*



These statistics introduce an impressive unanimity indicative of the majority of the surveyed individuals; 79% are of the opinion that misinformation threatens national security. The 8% disagree and 13% not sure. These percentages are indicative of a well beholding perception that will inform not only what the populace thinks but also further contribution to the academic research.

DISCUSSION

This paper has recorded trends in false information consumption by the students of a Bangladeshi university and evaluated how these trends affect the national security. The inferences that have been made are summarized and put into perspective in relation to the existing discussions concerning misinformation as a hybrid threat and their most important implications to researchers and policymakers.

The Dominance of Facebook: A Tool of Spreading Misinformation

The statistics explain it needlessly that Facebook is the social network to dominate and is the most used area to obtain information and, therefore, be affected by misinformation. It has the widespread coverage (92% of the people answered), has a high user engagement (3.1 hours daily on average), and was the primary source of information about the news among more than 72% of the students. This hegemony corresponds to the notion of ‘platformness’ (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348), where a platform infrastructure and algorithmic curation have a significant influence on the information environment by prioritizing riveting and emotionally evocative posts over the truth (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018, p. 1146). One of the principal findings that comes out of such dominance is the platform-information dissonance state. Facebook is used by the highest percentage of users, but only 40% of its users trust it as a source of news, the highest rating of any platform listed and low by any measure. Research indicates that for many users, practical benefits outweigh concerns about trust. This includes the utility of a platform, established habits, and the value of its user network. Scholars noted that this is a common pattern in other new digital democracies (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2021, p. 112). A major weakness in today’s information environment also exists. People can use those sources that they consider unreliable to obtain essential news. This practice is a serious flaw in the ways information is collected by the society.

Typology and Trajectory: Misinformation to Security Domains Mapping

The statistics show a worrying and very evident trend: the nature of these fake news that individuals observe is a direct threat to certain aspects of national security. Most of the misinformation the respondents came across falls into two categories - political misinformation (41%) and religious misinformation (35%). This is frightening as these types of misinformation assault the core of a nation, i.e. sense of trust in the country and social unity. The real-life experience contributes greatly to the theory of hybrid warfare (Pamment, Nothhaft, Agardh-Twetman and Fjallhed, 2018, p. 6) according to which information as a weapon is the means to segregate individuals, tear up communities, and undermine the legitimacy of a government without shooting a shot. Although not widespread, fake health and geopolitical news are also perilous. They can create the health panic of the population and harm the international relations. This demonstrates that the general threat is complex and multi-faceted as well as serious.

The Critical Verification Deficit

There was a marked disjunction between beliefs and behavior: when it came to news, the participants said that they relied on YouTube, but used Facebook more. The issue is aggravated by poor fact-checking.

Half of the respondents consult Google Search to verify facts, but the source hardly offers unbiased answers since algorithms present the information based on the beliefs people have. This forms a kind of bubble of filtering (Pariser, 2011, p. 15), a kind of echo chamber that promotes personal beliefs and restricts the exposure to credible sources. A huge percentage of 25 never checks out information.

Passive consumption can be traced to this conflict, which is being aware of bad information but not critically assessing it. This is perceived in the literature of the research as a major weakness (Breakstone, McGrew, Smith, Ortega and Wineburg, 2021, p. 86), four Ultimately, being online does not necessarily teach users to critically evaluate information.

Digital Literacy: A Necessary but Insufficient Factor

The researcher showed a positive correlation by finding that increased levels of digital literacy measured by assessments were linked to an increased self-reported

likelihood of using fact-checking strategies. These results offer strong support to one of the major assumptions which underlie this study. It also reinforces the claim that policies and teaching programs should be developed that seek to develop these necessary digital skills.

Nevertheless, such findings must be interpreted very carefully. The mean level of digital literacy among the respondents was 58%, and it indicates a high level of discrepancy in required online skills. There was a more alarming trend among the top achievers (those who scored above 70%). Among them, only under fifty percent (48.1% by definition) said they regularly check the veracity of information they encounter. This means that individuals can have the concepts in theory, but cannot apply them in practice.

Thus, digital literacy cannot be taught in isolation only. Learning is not necessarily followed by action. To achieve actual change, a conscious effort should be made by education to convert skills into habits. Such an insight points to a weakness in the policy of merely increasing the number of students in the classrooms and the amount of technology in their hands. A deeper change is needed. We need to change all our methods of education. Schools should not merely make information available but should also include practical lessons in the curriculum on essential skills, such as how to check the credibility of a source, how to cross-referencing information on the internet, how to recognize algorithmic bias, etc. across all levels (UNESCO, 2021, p. 54).

Securitization of Misinformation in the Public Consciousness

The high level of consensus between participants that misinformation uses the weapons of outer powers is a sociologically important finding. The fact that a specific issue is being sold as an absolute menace and thus a need to take special action more extreme than regular politics is an indication that the securitization process has now permeated the general consciousness (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998, p. 25).

This popular perception is, essentially, two-sided, with significant and opposite implications. On the one hand, it may provide the necessary public support of powerful anti-government counter-measures and advance the collective vigilance. On the other hand, it creates a tendency toward a simplistic form of external attribution bias, the tendency to hold foreign sources of malicious misinformation to a large extent. Such a trend has a danger of diversion in the critical elements

of analysis and policy priority in the direction of homegrown disinformation actions, thereby posing a critical vulnerability in the defensive capacity of the country. More than that, it can strengthen internal party divisions by falsely presenting lawful domestic opposition and critique of policy as an effect of foreign intervention and subverting efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy and Regulatory Reform

Create a National Counter-Disinformation Task Force: It is the recommendation to implement an inter-ministerial body that includes the Ministry of Information and Broadcast, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the ICT Division, as well as the national security agencies. Its initial mandate ought to be to:

- Develop a system through which viral misinformation campaigns that jeopardize the order or national security of the population are coordinately detected, analyzed and debunked.
- Reform the Digital Security Act by incorporating specific and practical definitions of coordinated inauthentic behavior and malicious disinformation and confirm that the freedoms of expression should be spelled out to prevent abuse.

Technological Countermeasures and Platform Accountability

- **Create Viral MIS Detection Systems that are Indigenous.** Form alliances between government cyber teams, academic research centers (ex: BUET, KUET), and the technology industry to create and install machine learning systems that can detect viral misinformation in Bengali and dialects of the regional vernacular almost instantly.
- **Mandate Platform Transparency and Collaboration.** Require social media platforms (e.g., Meta, Google) operating in Bangladesh to:
- **Integrate Context-Aware Fact-Checking.** Implement prominent warning labels and provide users with access to verified corrections from accredited local fact-checking organizations.

- **Ensure Proportional Content Moderation.** Dedicate sufficient resources, including moderators fluent in local languages and cultural contexts, to effectively address harmful content.

Educational Curriculum and Capacity Building

- **Incorporate Critical Digital Literacy into the National Curriculum.** National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) ought to require the inclusion of practical digital literacy courses at the secondary and the tertiary levels. Special, advanced skills are the best defense against misinformation and therefore, the training is required. Individuals should be taught on how to be critical to the reliability of a source. They are forced to train to look at the claims by opening up other tabs that will give an account of what other sources report. Every person is expected to understand how to search using reverse image to verify pictures. Lastly, one must know how algorithms have the power to subtly nudge biased information at people.
- **Introduce Influencer Training.** Conduct special train-the-trainer seminars with key pillars of the community such as student leaders in universities, journalists, local authorities and religious leaders, and train them to be sources of reliable information within their circles.

Public Awareness and Community Engagement

- **Implement a National Public Education Program.** Use public media (BTV, Bangladesh Betar) and collaborate with private media and online micro-influencers to conduct continuous campaigns idealizing verification practices and enlighten people on what misinformation should look like.
- **Empower Community-Based Digital First Responders.** Organize and re-organize local community organizations and youth groups to present themselves as grassroots fact-checking processes by giving them effective avenues into reporting harmful rumors to the official fact-checking services

Security Sector Integration

- **The Security Policies Will Have to Alter.** They should now incorporate the operation of overseeing fake news on social media. This innovative move necessitates the construction of early-warning systems. Such systems should

be capable of searching particular harmful stories that are made to destabilize public confidence or destroy societal cohesiveness.

LIMITATIONS

This research is subjected to a number of drawbacks. First, its structure gives a picture of the moment and it is not able to establish cause and effect. Second, this research is confined to the study of urban students in universities. Therefore, the results might not reflect all Bangladeshi youths. Third, the data is self-reported, and it might be subject to social desirability bias. Lastly, digital literacy tool, though helpful, is an oversimplified measure of a very complicated skill set.

CONCLUSION

This study interprets information gathered from university students in Bangladesh to conceptualize how fake news circulated on social media jeopardizes national security. The most influential platform where one can disseminate false information is Facebook. Results of our surveys indicate that 92 percent of students spend an average of 3.1 hours per day on Facebook. Moreover, the majority of these students (72 percent) primarily receive their news through this platform. Political misinformation (41 percent) and religious misinformation (35 percent) are also prevalent. This creates a harmful information environment which is propagated in large numbers by false content. False narratives will soon be real life security threats in such a context. These are akin to hybrid warfare. They hit some of the most vulnerable pillars of a state: the popular belief in institutions and the cohesion of people.

The data helped to find a considerable realization: in many cases, people know how to fact-check something on the internet, but they simply do not do it. A significant proportion of the interviewees (25%) claimed that they never reference the information, and half of them depended on Google search, which is notorious to reinforce the existing prejudices. This indicates that contemporary digital literacy initiatives are unable to instill required routine verification practices. It is also a complicated issue due to the fact that even technological savvy people tend to neglect or circumvent actual fact-checking. Instead of thinking, they normally choose the easiest course of action.

The most important finding in this study is the fact that students currently represent misinformation as a national security issue. It is perceived as a threat by a big majority (79%) particularly when it is associated with foreign intrusion. Although this agreement can be used to bolster defenses and civil awareness, it encourages a shift into blaming foreigners. Human beings seem to believe that this problem is not ordinary to be handled by politics. Such mentality is a vivid application of securitization, which can be defined to be a concept by Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998). This is a dangerous bias of making external attributions. It could make the authorities disregard national sources of disinformation. Worse still, it can lead them to assume legitimate internal criticism of external attacks that are sponsored by foreigners. This mistake becomes a serious weakness.

REFERENCES

- Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). (2024). Internet subscriber report: December 2023. <https://www.btrc.gov.bd>
- Breakstone, J., McGrew, S., Smith, M., Ortega, T., & Wineburg, S. (2021). Lateral reading: College students learn to critically evaluate internet sources in an online course. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 2(1), 1-17.
- Buzan, B., Waever, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Chen, E., Chang, H., Rao, A., Lerman, K., Cowan, G., & Ferrara, E. (2022). COVID-19 misinformation and the 2020 U.S. presidential election. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 3(1), 1-24.
- Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC). (2024). Annual threat assessment report. Dhaka.
- DataReportal. (2024). Digital 2024: Bangladesh. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-bangladesh>
- Gadjanova, E., Lynch, G., & Werner, K. (2022). Social media, cyber-brigades, and political polarization in the United States and India. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(23), e2117178119.
- Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms'. *New Media & Society*, 12(3), 347-364.

Guo, L., Rohde, J. A., & Wu, H. D. (2019). Who is responsible for Twitter's echo chamber problem? Evidence from 2016 U.S. election networks. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(2), 234–251.

Haque, M. M., Ahmad, K., & Uddin, S. (2020). Rumors and misinformation on Facebook and Instagram: A case study of Bangladesh. In **Proceedings of the 2020 IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining** (pp. 22-26). IEEE.

Jayakumar, N., Gopal, A., Kaushik, A., Verma, M. K., & Singh, P. (2020). Disinformation and democratic decay: A comparative study of India and the United States. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 5(4), 340–358.

Masood, M., Awan, M. U., & Bogdanov, D. (2022). Deepfakes and misinformation: A multidimensional crisis. *Journal of Cybersecurity*, 8(1), tyac010.

Nadareishvili, I., Schulz, P., & Hartung, U. (2023). Confirmation bias in the era of curated information: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research*, 50(5), 567–591.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.

Pamment, J., Nothhaft, H., Severson, A., Kjellgren, B., & Agardh-Twetman, H. (2018). *Countering information influence activities: The state of the art*. Lund University.

Rahman, M. (2023). Social media and political polarization: A study on Bangladeshi youth. *South Asian Journal of Political Studies*, 11(3), 112–130.

Rahman, M. M., & Ashikullah, M. (2024). Influence of social media on academic performance of university students. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 11(6), e185–e188.

Roy, S., Ahmed, S., & Islam, M. N. (2023). Misinformation during the COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh: A survey on urban citizens. *Journal of Information Science*, 49(1), 121–135.

Shukla, A., & Tripathi, V. (2024). Hybrid threats in the digital age: A framework for analysis. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45(1), 75–95.

Tandoc, E. C., Lim, D., & Ling, R. (2021). Diffusion of disinformation: How social media users respond to fake news and why. *Journalism*, 21(3), 381–398.

UNESCO. (2021). Media and information literate citizens: Think critically, click wisely. Paris: UNESCO.

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151.

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe.

AUTHOR

Md. Mahbub Rahman is an accomplished academic and researcher, currently serving as an Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Arts and Sciences at the Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology (BAUST). He brings a wealth of practical research experience to his academic role. He has worked as a Qualitative Researcher at Mitra Associates, a prominent development research consulting firm in Bangladesh. His career also includes a significant role as a Research Supervisor at the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), where he managed and guided research initiatives in the education sector. His early professional experience includes a position as a Research Assistant at Caritas Bangladesh, a leading national development and humanitarian NGO. He is an alumnus of the University of Rajshahi, a leading institution in Bangladesh, where he earned both his Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) and Master of Social Science (MSS) degrees in Sociology.

Email: mabbub@baust.edu.bd



MODERN OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY THROUGH DECEPTION AND DETERRENCE: A STRATEGIC APPRAISAL FOR THE BANGLADESH ARMY

Major Akib Ahsan Teas, psc

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 10th April 2025; Accepted: 08th November 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract. The research evaluates how modern decoy systems would work as a defence strategy for the Bangladesh Army to improve its deterrence capabilities against advanced enemies. The research investigates how Bangladesh lacks both decoy stockpiles and operational guidelines for its military forces even though other nations use decoy systems to defend against advanced surveillance and precision-strike technology. The research combines literature reviews with conflict case studies of Ukraine, Armenia-Azerbaijan Wars and expert military professional interviews to evaluate both practicality and operational value. The research shows that present-day inflatable and heat-emitting decoys create substantial protection for military forces through their ability to confuse enemy surveillance systems and redirect precision-guided missiles while hiding actual military assets. The systems create psychological effects on enemies while providing affordable force multiplication benefits during operations in challenging terrain such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and southeastern frontier zones. The research also displays that deploying advanced decoy systems with electronic countermeasures and adaptive camouflage technology provide Bangladesh with an affordable method to boost its defensive capabilities during hybrid warfare conflicts. The research indicated that multiple barriers exist which prevent the military from adopting decoy systems at scale. The main constraint to decoy system adoption stems from insufficient funding which hinders continuous procurement, research and development activities, the military's lack of trained experts in deception operations and decoy technology and finally, insufficient facilities for testing and training. The operational need for decoys has not led to faster institutional change because of these organizational barriers. The implementation of decoy systems as a national defence strategy depends on strategic partnerships, capacity development and doctrinal updates to overcome current structural constraints. The implementation of decoy systems as a fundamental defence element would boost Bangladesh military's operational efficiencies and defensive capabilities.

Keywords: *Military Deception; Inflatable Decoys; Technological Advancement; Strategic Deployment, Operational Efficiency.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Deception has long been a defining element in military strategy, serving as a critical tool to mislead and disorient adversaries. From antiquity to the modern era, military thinkers have emphasized its role in achieving tactical and operational superiority. It is rather than relying solely on brute force, commanders have used deception to generate uncertainty and disrupt enemy decision-making. What began as simple battlefield ruses has evolved into advanced operations using sophisticated decoy technologies to misdirect surveillance and intelligence systems. Historical examples, particularly from the world wars, show the deliberate use of deception to shape enemy perceptions. Allied and Axis forces used inflatable tanks, dummy aircraft, and simulated troop deployments to mislead opponents, with Operation Fortitude standing out for its role in obscuring the true D-Day landing site. These tactics laid the foundation for today's deception strategies, which now integrate visual, thermal, electromagnetic, and cyber-based elements in conflicts such as Syria and Ukraine to manipulate enemy targeting and evade precision strikes.

The growing military dependence on sensors, drones and electronic surveillance systems has made decoys more valuable for military operations. Modern systems generate artificial radar signals, heat emissions and electromagnetic radiation to confuse sophisticated targeting systems. The system provides dual protection to forces while enabling multi-domain operations (MDO) through electronic warfare and perception management. The Bangladesh Army needs to understand how these systems can be integrated into its operations because they represent essential tools for enhancing operational readiness against current regional security challenges.

The research investigates practical and budget-friendly military strategies that use modern deception-based decoy systems for the Bangladesh Army. The research explores whether this system provides enhanced force protection, risk reduction and improved deterrence capabilities through affordable means. The research also endeavours to investigate operational efficiency effects through its primary question while examining additional factors which include technological implementation, doctrinal changes and military tactics comparison. The research uses qualitative data collection methods combined with historical examples from WWII, recent modern conflicts, technical documentation and available online educational resources. The paper starts with a historical section before moving to present-day applications and then presents Bangladesh-specific integration methods to prove decoys boost operational performance in modern security environments

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research paper includes multiple articles which study decoy technology deployment in modern warfare followed by their historical and present-day applications. The research contains unexplored areas which need investigation because they relate to Bangladesh Army operations and strategic deployment of decoys.

The fundamental principle of deceptive warfare through decoy tactics has existed since Charles Cruickshank (1980) documented Deception in World War II which analyzed Allied deception operations through Operation Fortitude by creating fake military units and fake equipment and fake communications to deceive German High Command. The research confirms decoys play a crucial role in achieving strategic success; yet it focuses on conventional military operations from past times. The research fails to demonstrate how these principles function in modern multi-domain military operations and it neglects to explain their application to Bangladesh military doctrine which faces electronic warfare and drone threats.

The United States Department of Defence (2000) examines decoy deployment during the Kosovo war through Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After Action Report which shows how NATO forces used fake targets to confuse Serbian air defence systems. The research demonstrates better institutional adoption of decoys yet it fails to evaluate their affordability and their ability to scale up for forces of all sizes. The research offers limited evidence about doctrinal changes which form a central point of investigation for studying force structure integration.

Colonel P.M.S. Kohli (2024) explains in his paper Inflatable Decoys: Enhancing Battlefield Survival and Deception how inflatable decoys help military units survive on the battlefield. The author explains that decoys create strategic value because they successfully deceive enemy targeting systems. The research fails to address geographical constraints which affect the Bangladesh Army because it operates in riverine and jungle environments. The research lacks any evaluation of cost-effectiveness which creates a knowledge gap for the second research question about budget-constrained solutions.

The paper by Flight Lieutenant Chris Whelan (2023) examines how unmanned systems with decoys function in intense military battles during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. The research by Whelan shows how Azerbaijan used UCAVs

alongside decoys to break through Armenian defences during the conflict. The research fails to evaluate how decoy systems become vulnerable to counter-deception technologies which represents a critical weakness for Bangladesh Army operations against technologically superior opponents. The research fails to evaluate decoy system vulnerability to counter-deception technology which makes the study less relevant to the main research question about operational success in asymmetric warfare.

Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans (2021) present a detailed analysis of Armenia's SAM Decoys in their paper *Strike Me Please* which demonstrates how decoys redirect enemy fire toward fake targets. The research confirms that electronic warfare decoys create significant strategic value for military operations. However, the research fails to demonstrate how these systems become part of military organizations and their long-term operational plans.

The strategic deployment of decoys in Ukraine remains a topic of discussion according to Nicola Bonsegna (2024) in his paper about *Decoy Strategies in the Ukrainian conflict*. The author examines how decoys helped Ukraine protect its resources by misleading Russian military attacks. The research successfully demonstrates deception tactics in battle but it does not explore how repeated deception affects both enemy and friendly force morale and situational understanding. The research findings about leadership problems in the Bangladesh Army and command challenges during extended low-intensity operations remain unaddressed.

Lastly, Master Sergeant Jorge L. Rivero (2024) provides a comprehensive explanation about decoys' ability to shape battlefield dynamics and control operational speed in his paper *Decoy Warfare: Lessons and Implications of the War in Ukraine*. The paper by Rivero contains extensive analysis yet fails to demonstrate how training reforms and doctrinal changes enable forces to adopt decoy tactics which represents a critical limitation for this study's hypothesis about doctrinal preparedness as the key factor for successful decoy training integration.

Scope for Research. In response to the topic of concern from various literature reviews, this paper aims particularly to discuss how incorporating advanced decoy systems will enhance the operational effectiveness of the Bangladesh Army in terms of survivability, deception capabilities, and cost-effective deterrence.

HYPOTHESIS

The implementation of contemporary inflatable and electronic decoy systems within Bangladesh Army operations will boost operational performance through enhanced force protection, deception methods ,and improved deterrence capabilities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design adopts a mixed method analysis. The research scope is appropriate because the integration of decoys within Bangladesh Army remains poorly studied but requires basic assessment of existing conditions and potential barriers. The research will create new insights to design better investigation questions and hypotheses which will guide future research.

Limitations and Assumptions. Following limitations and assumptions are considered while conducting the research:

- The data required for the research are mostly collected from online platforms and reviewed literatures.
- The data for this study have primarily been collected from reviewed academic literature and reputable online defence platforms. While field-level surveys were limited due to time and resource constraints, the research integrates expert interviews and open-source intelligence for a comprehensive assessment.
- This research focuses specifically on their potential application for enhancing operational efficiency, since the integration of advanced decoys remains largely unexplored in the Bangladesh Army. This narrowed scope allows for a deeper exploration of the practical and strategic aspects of decoy deployment within existing military structures.
- Although modern decoys have seen significant advancement post-2000, the research draws upon both historical and recent conflict case studies- including World War II, Operation Desert Storm, and the Ukraine-Russia war- to illustrate the evolutionary trajectory and ongoing relevance of decoy strategies. This historical context enhances the analytical foundation necessary for projecting future applicability.

- While the advancement of drone technology and decoy systems are conceptually interlinked, this paper limits its scope to analyzing the progression and strategic potential of decoys alone. The interaction with modern drone surveillance and targeting is discussed only to the extent necessary to contextualize decoy effectiveness and design imperatives in contemporary warfare
- Due to time and resource constraints as well as limited subject matter experts, it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive ground survey. Therefore, the research is mostly based on limited online content analysis.
- It is presumed that the samples used in the research represent the ground commanders who have given opinions based on their experiences. The respondents provided rational responses to the survey questions.

Research Questions

Primary Question. How can the integration of modern decoy systems enhance the Bangladesh Army's operational efficiency by improving survivability, deception capability, and cost-effective deterrence within its distinct geographical and resource constraints?

Secondary Questions. The secondary questions are as follows:

- What has been the historical role of decoys in military strategy globally, and how have these practices influenced modern military tactics?
- What are the strategic roles played by decoys in modern era conflicts?
- How do these technologies meet the specific operational needs of the Modern Army?
- How can successful decoy integration strengthen Bangladesh's strategic deterrence, border security, and operational readiness against technologically superior threats?

Study Design. The research used multiple data collection techniques which combined qualitative and quantitative methods with extensive document review. The survey assessed 101 military personnel at different ranks to evaluate their knowledge about decoy systems and their effectiveness and concerns regarding system deployment. The research used Milan Vego's Operational Design

Framework and the Cost-Imposition Strategy Framework to validate the research hypothesis through rigorous analysis. The research evaluated decoy system feasibility through multiple online journals and literature reviews to determine their historical and present-day performance. The Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence verified statistical results by analyzing how operational experience affects decoy effectiveness perceptions among officers. The test applied the formula $\chi^2 = \sum((O - E)^2 / E)$ to verify that observed frequencies differed from expected frequencies at a statistically significant level. Senior military leaders participated in personal interviews to explore the operational limitations and potential applications of contemporary decoy systems within Bangladesh's military context. The research team conducted purposeful analysis to create logical arguments based on Bangladesh-specific evidence which supported the study's main hypothesis.

Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of Respondents

Rank Category	% of Respondents	Arm/Service	Avg. Years of Service
Major-Lt Col	76%	Infantry/ Artillery	14
Col-Brig	22%	Artillery/Engineers	20
Maj Gen+	2%	All Arms	29

Source: Author's Self Construct (sample size: 101 officers)

Methodological Framework. This research investigates the possibility of adding decoy systems to inventory to boost operational efficiency within Bangladesh Army. The systematic process of validating research objectives will be displayed through an organized methodology as shown in the table below:

Table 2: Framework Connecting Objectives with Methodology

Research Objectives	Corresponding Research Questions	Methodology
To explore the historical evolution and strategic importance of decoys in military operations globally.	How have decoys evolved in their role and technology in military history globally?	Literature review of historical military strategies.

Table 2: Framework Connecting Objectives with Methodology		
Research Objectives	Corresponding Research Questions	Methodology
To analyze the effectiveness of different types of decoys in modern warfare, focusing on the technological aspects.	What technological advancements have been incorporated into modern decoys, and how effective are they in deceiving enemy surveillance and weaponry?	Comparative analysis of different decoy technologies through case studies of recent conflicts where decoys were reported to be used. Collaboration with defence technology experts for technical insights and Milan Vego's framework.
To identify the conceptual understanding and assess the scope of integration of advanced decoys within the Bangladesh Army's inventory.	What is the current status, understanding and likely areas to integrate the advanced decoy deployment in the Bangladesh Army?	Qualitative (including Chi-square Test) and Quantitative analysis through server and interviews with senior military officers, followed by conceptual framework to identify conceptual understanding and integration issues.
<i>Source: Author's Self Construct</i>		

Outline of the Paper. In addition to the introductory chapter, the paper will be unfolded into following chapters:

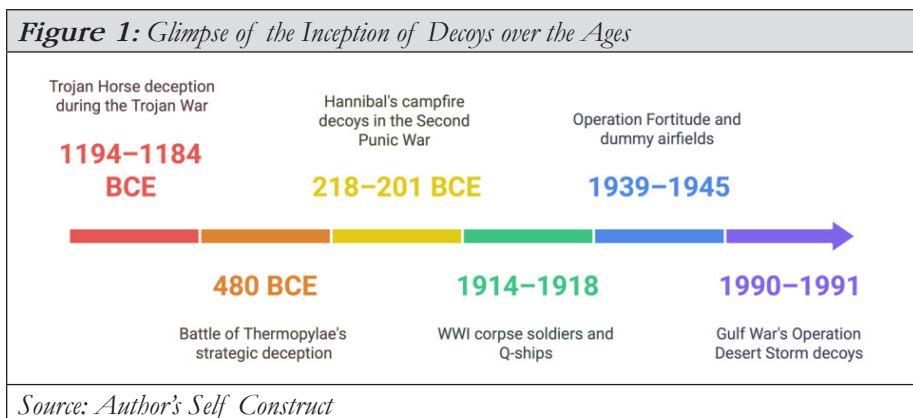
- The focus will be on historical roots of decoys in warfare through the ages and provide analysis on the use of decoys in various conflicts ranging from WWI to modern conflicts.
- A critical analysis will be carried out to trace the effective use of decoys in modern conflicts and its technological transform from simple dummy units to sophisticated electronic and thermal imaging decoys.
- An in-depth study on how the Bangladesh Army could integrate the modern decoy system to enhance the operational capabilities through deception, deterrence and force projection.

Future Scope for Research. Future study can focus on following area:

- Future research should emphasize the design, prototyping, and testing of indigenous decoys tailored to Bangladesh’s terrain, weather, and operational environment.
- There is a requirement for additional research in the incorporation of decoy operations into the Bangladesh Army’s tactical doctrine, training exercises, and operational planning paradigms. This would render the decoy concept an integral part of force protection and deterrence strategy.

Ethical Disclosure. In the current study, participation was a voluntary effort, and all the 101 officers in this survey responded voluntarily after finding out about what academic value lies behind it. All responses were anonymous, and no personal identifiers could be traced back to officers or units/commands. No classified or operationally sensitive information was requested or provided at any point. The approval of institutional ethical clearance was obtained by the Research and Ethics Committee of the National Defence College (NDC), ensuring that both professional and academic ethical standards were adhered to. In addition to the survey data, the researcher consulted data available in public journals, news articles and editorials for academic purposes, ensuring that all secondary data were taken from non-classified sources.

INCEPTION OF DECOYS THROUGH THE AGES



Effectiveness of Employing Decoys in Ancient Era

The ancient military forces used basic decoy tactics which formed part of their deception plans to alter enemy perceptions. The fundamental concept of using deceptive representations to deceive enemies existed since ancient times even though modern inflatable systems represent a contemporary advancement. During Hellenistic and Roman military operations, soldiers deployed fake fortifications along with dummy troops and concealed military equipment to create illusions about their numbers and redirect enemy forces. The Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) gained fame for its tactical deception but other periods used disguised equipment and fake encampments to create illusions about force size. The early decoy methods which included mannequins at watchpoints, and deceptive visual arrangements established the fundamental principles for organized physical decoy operations in contemporary warfare.

The Trojan Horse deception took place from 1194–1184 BC. During a ten-year Troy siege, the Greeks under Odysseus created a plan to sneak into the city by building a massive wooden horse to give as a supposed peace treaty offering to the Trojan people. Through their false sense of victory, the Trojans accepted the gigantic horse statue as a victory prize which concealed Greek warriors who emerged to attack during the night. That night, once the Trojans were asleep, the Greek soldiers emerged from the horse, opened the gates to the Greek army, and destroyed the city of Troy, ending the war (Blanks, 1994). The deception shown in these tactics demonstrated that deception combined with perceived advantages could redirect enemy attention allowing smaller forces to gain strategic decision-making power.

Decoys in World War I

The strategy of deception took a giant step forward in WWI with dummy installations, camouflage and inflatable decoys. Fake artillery, mannequins, and false trenches were used by both the Allies and Central powers to deceive enemy reconnaissance. The British Army placed dummy corpses in no man's land to attract sniper fire and gauge enemy positions (Grant, 2017). Additionally, mock battalions were created to mislead enemy intelligence, often moving in patterns that mimicked actual troop movements to create the illusion of larger armies.

The British Royal Navy created Q-ships which were merchant ships that concealed their weapons systems inside their deck structures. German U-boats would

surface to attack before Q-ships exposed their hidden artillery for counterattacks (Halpern, 1994). Enemy forces lost resources through these deceptive tactics which also neutralized their technological advantages. The first extensive use of deceptive naval warfare occurred during this period and later conflicts adopted similar tactics by using disguised warships and electronic masking technology to deceive enemy targeting systems.

Employment of Decoys in World War II

World War II demonstrated that deception, when institutionalized and multi-dimensional, can decisively influence the outcome of large-scale military campaigns by distorting enemy perception and delaying their response. Operation Fortitude (1944), the centerpiece of Allied deception, employed a fictitious First U.S. Army Group (FUSAG) under General Patton, using inflatable tanks, fake landing crafts, and scripted radio traffic to convince German forces that the D-Day landings would occur at Pas-de-Calais rather than Normandy. This strategic misdirection, supported by Operation Bodyguard, led to delayed German troop movements and contributed significantly to the success of the actual Normandy invasion, preserving thousands of Allied lives (Holt, 2004).

Figure 2: Ghost Army Decoy Tanks Used in Operation Fortitude



Source: War History Online-The Ghost Army of WWII

Simultaneously, the Soviet Union institutionalized deception under its doctrine of maskirovka. During the Battle of Moscow (1941–42), Soviet forces deployed hundreds of dummy tanks and aircraft, simulated artillery barrages, and artificial sound effects to confuse German intelligence about their real force posture

(Cruikshank, 1980). In the air domain, the British Royal Air Force (RAF) developed “K” sites-dummy airfields with decoy aircraft and simulated fuel explosions-to mislead the Luftwaffe. These sites diverted German bombing raids from actual airbases and oil depots, preserving critical infrastructure (Cruikshank, 1980).

These examples show that deception, when coordinated across domains (land, air, electromagnetic), can shift operational momentum even against capable adversaries. For the Bangladesh Army, integrating similar multi-domain deception into doctrinal planning-particularly during mobilization, force projection, or coastal defence-could achieve strategic surprise at low cost. In areas like Feni, CHT or the Padma basin, simulated force buildup using dummy artillery, false helipads, or radio decoys could deter adversary action or delay enemy responses during crisis escalation. The WWII model suggests that deception is not merely a tactical ploy, but an institutional capability with enduring strategic value.

Decoys in Post-World War II Conflicts

During the Kosovo War (1999), Serbian forces effectively employed decoys to mislead NATO airstrikes. The analysis of NATO bombing results revealed that many of the targets they claimed to have destroyed were actually wooden or inflatable decoys (After Action Report, 2000). Serbian commanders used radar-reflecting materials and thermal generators to mimic the signatures of real military vehicles, forcing NATO to waste high-value precision-guided munitions on false targets. Operation Desert Storm (1991) saw coalition forces deploy inflatable tanks together with fake artillery and dummy helicopters to create deception for Iraqi intelligence. The simulated southwestern attack deceived Iraqi commanders while the real coalition forces advanced from the southeast (Gordon & Trainor, 1995). U.S. forces used deceptive radio traffic combined with false convoy movements and infrared heat sources to create fake attack illusions in areas that were not the actual strike zones.

<p>Figure 3: Decoy Aircrafts used by Serbian Force to Deceive NATO Force</p>	<p>Figure 4: Challenger Decoys Used to Deceive Iraqi Force</p>
	
<p>Source: Reddit.com</p>	<p>Source: Reddit.com</p>

Summary. Post–World War II conflicts from Kosovo to the Gulf War, showed how decoys can neutralize technological gaps and force costly enemy errors. Whether through Serbia’s radar-reflective mock-ups or U.S. inflatable armor and false convoys, these tactics disrupted enemy targeting and preserved real assets. For Bangladesh, facing potential adversaries with advanced ISR but limited resources of its own, such cost-effective deception could play a vital role in border defence. Building on these lessons, the following sections examine how decoys continue to evolve and operate effectively in modern conflicts.

Use of Decoys in Modern Conflicts

General. The recent military conflicts showed that decoys in general and inflatable decoys in particular were crucial tools which helped militaries to deceive advanced adversaries’ surveillance and targeting systems. The decoy tactic proved successful in Armenia-Azerbaijan, Syria and Russia-Ukraine Conflicts as well as Israel-Palestine although the latter conflict relies less on decoys. The subsequent sub paragraphs show minimum references and techniques used for decoy applications in these military conflicts.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict. The 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh brought out the power of deception to level superior threats, even for inferior forces. When Armenia was being pounded by Azerbaijani drones, 9K33 decoy SAM systems were placed near their actual counterparts, enemy drones attacking phony targets. It saved precious air defence like the S-300 and caused the enemy to expend expensive ammo. It was not only tactical-but also this was strategic deception that tried to induce miscalculation. For the Bangladesh Army, the message is stark: in environments of scarce resources, decoys are not

an extravagance—they are an operational approach to protecting key systems, degrading enemy ISR, and expanding operational reach. In regions like the CHT or southeastern borders, where threat surveillance is mounting, inexpensive decoys can serve simultaneously as both defence and deterrent without overburdening manpower or logistics.

Figure 5: Armenia's SAM Decoys



Source: *Orynx.com*

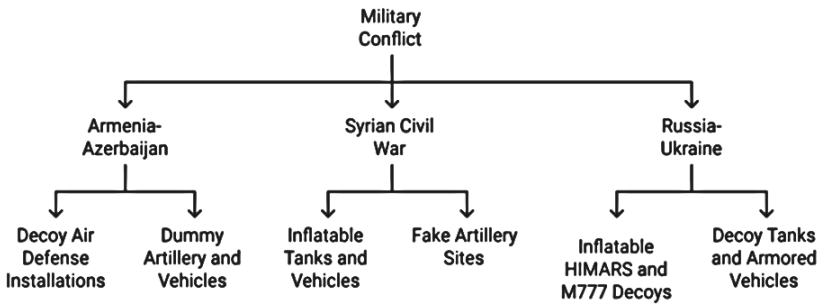
Russia-Ukraine Conflicts. The Russia–Ukraine conflict demonstrates how decoy operations have become central to modern battlefield survival and information warfare. Ukraine, facing a technologically superior enemy, deployed inflatable replicas of high-value western assets such as HIMARS and M777 howitzers. These decoys mimicked both the thermal and visual signatures of real systems, effectively confusing Russian drones and artillery targeting. The result was not symbolic—it was operational: Russian forces wasted munitions on false targets, mistakenly claiming the destruction of 44 HIMARS systems when only 16 had actually been delivered by mid-2022 (Bonsegna, 2024). Similarly, decoy T-72 tanks were used to simulate armored build-ups, diverting Russian firepower and misleading ISR efforts. These measures enabled Ukraine to preserve real assets while sustaining offensive operations. For Bangladesh, this underscores a critical lesson: in a surveillance-heavy battlespace, success often depends not just on firepower, but on managing what the enemy believes. Strategic use of decoys can protect limited high-value platforms, absorb enemy ISR attention, and create false targeting dilemmas—especially relevant in terrain like CHT or Feni, where operational deception could compensate for gaps in fire support or air defence.

Figure 6: *Inflatable HIMARS Decoy Used in the War in Ukraine*



Source: Inflatech.com

Figure 7: *Glimpse on the Use of Decoys in Modern Conflicts*



Source: Author's Self Construct

Summary of Historical Perspectives. Historical records show that deception through decoytactics has been a constant factor in determining military conflict results. Decoys have proven essential throughout history as military tools which direct enemy movements while safeguarding vital resources and improving combat unit survival rates. The development of inflatable decoys during recent decades has elevated deception into a modern technological system which offers strategic flexibility. The development of decoy technology has established essential knowledge about their advanced strategic functions in contemporary warfare.

OPERATIONAL FEATURES OF ADVANCED DECOYS IN MODERN CONFLICTS

General. Modern warfare has experienced a transformative shift using inflatable military decoys. These lightweight, deployable systems are designed to replicate the appearance and thermal signatures of real military equipment. Their strategic value lies in their ability to create convincing illusions that protect high-value assets and force adversaries to waste precision munitions. This chapter will examine the key features that make inflatable decoys effective—such as cost-efficiency, mobility, and adaptability—and demonstrate how these characteristics contribute to their growing role in modern military operations.

Cost-Effective Protection. Inflatable military decoys offer a budget-friendly means of safeguarding expensive defence assets such as tanks, artillery, and radar installations, which are prime targets for precision strikes. Their low cost—often under USD 1,000, as in the case of Ukrainian company Inflatech, which produces plywood-and-drainpipe decoys replicating Russian and Ukrainian systems (Rivero, 2024)—makes them a cost-imposition tool against technologically superior adversaries. These decoys emit realistic heat and radar signatures, drawing enemy fire away from actual platforms. During the 1999 Kosovo War, Serbian forces used wooden and inflatable mock-ups equipped with heat sources and radar reflectors, causing NATO to expend costly munitions on false targets while preserving real assets (NATO After-Action Report, 2000). For Bangladesh, deploying similar low-cost decoys in areas like the CHT or South Eastern border, along coast-line and many other strategic areas could compel adversaries to waste high-value ammunition, preserving critical systems during prolonged operations.

Figure 8: *A Decoy Tank Mimicking the Real Asset*



Source: China Inflatables.com

Mobility and Deployment. The tactical mobility of inflatable decoys stems from their lightweight, portable design and flexible materials, allowing compact storage, easy transport in standard military vehicles, and rapid deployment by small teams without heavy equipment. The deployment of inflatable tanks and radars and rocket launchers requires only ten minutes of work from a single person. Moreover, some modern variants integrate remote-control and basic robotic features for autonomous movement (Kohli, 2024). In Operation Desert Storm (1991), such mobility enabled coalition forces to simulate large-scale armor and helicopter concentrations, diverting Iraqi forces from the real attack axis (Gordon & Trainor, 1995). For the Bangladesh Army, rapidly deployable decoys could be repositioned across riverine belts or hilly terrain to create shifting target patterns and disrupt enemy ISR during critical operations. The deployment of inflatable tanks and radars and rocket launchers requires only ten minutes of work from a single person. The following table demonstrates the unique benefits of inflatable decoys through a comparison with conventional equipment and hard-structured alternatives by evaluating their mobility and setup time and operational flexibility and cost:

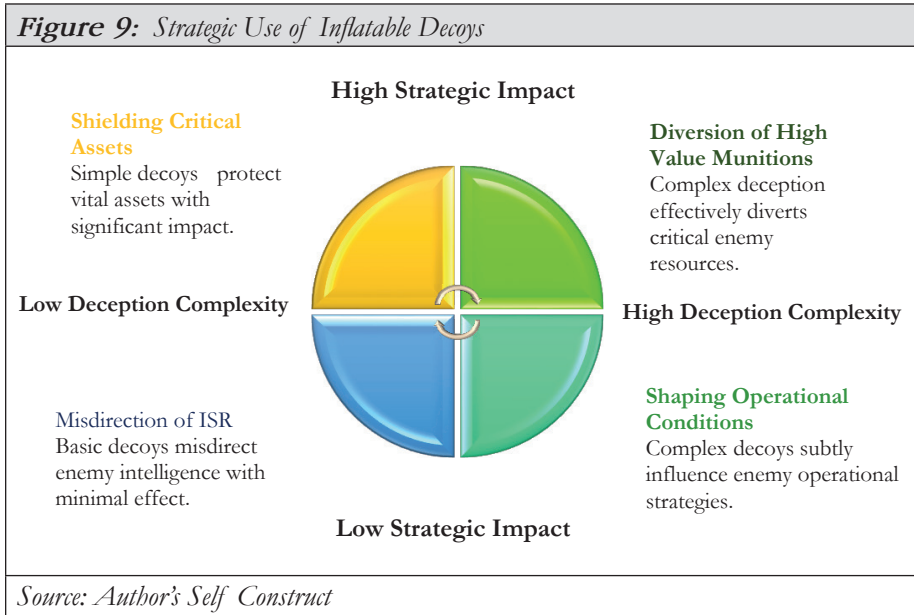
Table 3: Comparison between Decoys and Real Assets

Parameter	Original	Inflatable Decoys	Hard Structure Decoys
Optical Visibility	Yes	Yes	Yes
IR and RADAR Visibility	Yes	Yes	Limited Possibilities
Rapid Mobility and Transportation	Low	high	Medium
Cost	High	Low	Low
Environmental Impact	High	Low	Low

Source: Inflatech-Military Decoys Industries

Versatile Deception. The effectiveness of inflatable military decoys lies in their ability to replicate the visual, thermal, and radar signatures of real equipment, thereby deceiving modern multi-sensor surveillance systems that combine optical imaging, radar, infrared, and radio frequency detection. According to Milan Vego’s operational deception framework, such measures support key objectives like misdirecting enemy intelligence, protecting critical assets, and creating operational opportunities by shaping adversary perceptions before and during combat. In the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Russian forces used inflatable tank decoys to convince

Ukrainian intelligence that an area was lightly defended, prompting premature strikes on false targets before repositioned real tanks executed a counterattack (Hodunova, 2024).



Operational Flexibility. The operational flexibility of military forces increases through inflatable decoys because these tools enable commanders to modify enemy perception while controlling the battlespace and maintaining operational freedom. The quick deployment features and modular structure of these decoys enable their immediate use across different operational environments which span from intense conventional battles to counter-insurgency and peace support missions. Commanders gain increased flexibility to modify their force positions and create deceptive reinforcement or withdrawal simulations and protect valuable assets through decoys instead of deploying actual military assets. The decoys function effectively to support deception in offensive operations while creating force-multiplying illusions during defensive deployments and supplementing limited troop presence in sensitive areas. The training environments benefit from these decoys because they offer affordable and authentic ways to simulate battlefield threats. During the Syrian conflict, inflatable fighter jet replicas served as decoys to deceive enemy reconnaissance while protecting operational infrastructure from precision strikes (Cruikshank, 1980). The deployment of inflatable decoys in tactical operations

demonstrates their ability to support deception strategies which provide commanders with flexible options while minimizing resource exposure and maintaining strategic unpredictability.

Figure 10: Strategic Aspects of Effective Employment of Decoys



Diverting Enemy Surveillance Assets. The strategic importance of deception in modern warfare continues to grow and advanced decoys serve as essential tools to mislead enemy surveillance and reconnaissance operations. The deployment of decoys forces opponents to waste their intelligence resources on target verification which extends their surveillance capabilities and delays their decision-making processes. Decoys that mimic real military assets across visual thermal and electronic domains enable friendly forces to execute maneuvers while hiding their actual intentions. The development of drone-based reconnaissance and targeting systems has created significant challenges for traditional decoy methods.

Figure 11: Drone view of Real and Fake Equipment



Source: Business Insider (Russia Decoy Tanks being misused)

Adaptability to Terrain and Threat Environment. Modern inflatable decoys are increasingly designed to blend seamlessly with specific terrain and counter diverse threat profiles. Adaptability such as 'anamorphic camouflage allows decoys to alter color, texture, and reflectivity to match their surroundings, while integrated heat and radar emitters replicate the visual and thermal signatures of real military equipment. Some designs now incorporate sensors that detect environmental changes or nearby surveillance, enabling manual or automated adjustment of emitted signatures to improve deception. A notable example occurred during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Armenian forces used heat- and radar-emitting surface-to-air missile (SAM) decoys to mislead Azerbaijani drones, preserving actual air defense systems (Mitzer & Oliemans, 2021). For Bangladesh, similar terrain-adapted and sensor-enabled decoys could enhance survivability of high-value assets in complex operational zones such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts or coastal Cox's Bazar, where natural concealment can be combined with signature manipulation to confuse enemy ISR systems.

Integration with Electronic Countermeasures. The combination of electronic countermeasures (ECM) with inflatable decoys creates a more powerful system to counter modern drone threats. The visual deception capability of inflatable decoys works in conjunction with built-in ECM components which actively disrupt drone communications and navigation and sensor operations. The decoys achieve dual functionality through signal

¹Anamorphic camouflage refers to techniques where the appearance of the object is altered in such a way that from the observer's vantage point the object's shape, size or outline is distorted so it blends into background or appears as something else.

jamming and spoofing which both redirects enemy attention and reduces drone strike accuracy and reliability. Research continues to develop lightweight jamming modules and signal-mimicking technologies for decoy platforms which create a dual defense system that deceives and disrupts. The integrated defense system provides optimal protection for valuable assets located in surveillance-prone areas that use loitering munitions.

Figure 12: *Electromagnetic Emitter Installed in A Modern Decoy*



Source: Inflattech Industry

Use of Decoys by Neighbouring Countries in Contemporary Warfare.

The research focuses on Bangladesh Army operations within its operational environment but studying neighboring states India and Pakistan through comparative analysis provides essential background information. The modern conflict environment benefits from deception and decoy strategies which India and Pakistan have learned to use for misleading enemy intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) systems as well as protecting their combat resources. The Indian Air Force deployed mobile inflatable fighter aircraft together with surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems and radars across its western and southern commands. The test decoys function as duplicates of actual combat resources to create enemy confusion about target locations and US ISR platform detection (Anantam IAS, 2025). The Indian military operated X-Guard² AI-controlled towed decoy system during Operation Sindoor in May 2025 to successfully deceive Pakistani radar and missile systems (The Economic Times, 2025). The

²The Israeli company Rafael developed X-Guard as a fibre-optic towed electronic-warfare decoy (FOTD) which uses a fibre cable to trail behind fighter aircraft while actively duplicating their radar and Doppler signals and transmitting jamming and deception signals. Multiple news sources indicate that India used the AI-powered X-Guard system on Rafale aircraft during Operation Sindoor (May 2025) to successfully confuse Pakistani radar systems and missile defenses.

Pakistani military appears to have restricted its deployment of decoy technologies when compared to Indian military operations. Reports suggest Pakistan employed decoy radars and fake drone tactics for psychological warfare but at a limited scale compared to India (Reuters, 2025). The different approaches between India and Pakistan demonstrate valuable lessons for Bangladesh to apply in its military operations. The combination of riverine terrain and border areas and limited resources in Bangladesh makes it challenging to deploy advanced decoy systems like those used by India. The Bangladesh military should use inexpensive inflatable and electronic decoys to enhance local deterrence capabilities and extend operational endurance according to its specific strategic requirements.

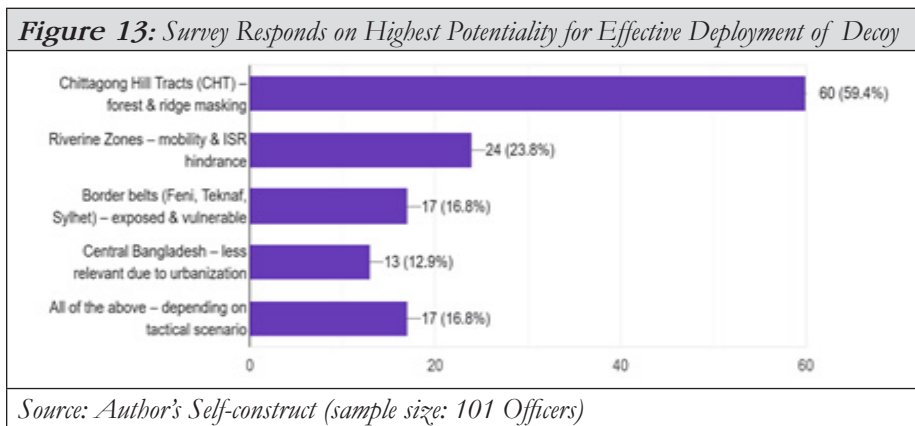
Summary. The operational effectiveness of inflatable military decoys is anchored in three critical domains: technological integration, electronic countermeasures, and material advancements. Modern decoys have evolved into multi-domain defense tools through recent advancements which include AI-supported deception algorithms and radar and thermal signature replication and lightweight jamming or spoofing modules. These advancements provide Bangladesh and other countries with limited resources and high strategic vulnerabilities an opportunity to boost their deterrence capabilities without requiring significant force structure or defense spending to be increased.

MODERN DECOY TECHNOLOGIES AND STRATEGIES: APPLICATION IN THE BANGLADESH ARMY

General. The security environment of Bangladesh requires new affordable methods to enhance deterrence capabilities and force projection because of changing regional security dynamics and technological threats. The Bangladesh armed forces can enhance their operational capacity through inflatable military decoys which work together with signature-recreation technologies, electronic countermeasures and mobility solutions at a fraction of the cost of traditional manpower and hardware expansion. The systems achieve their operational goals through three main capabilities which include fake forward deployments and enemy surveillance disruption and protection of vital assets in Feni and Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and southeastern border regions of Bangladesh. The survey results show that decoys provide high value to military operations because 58.4% of respondents considered them essential for protecting forces and creating

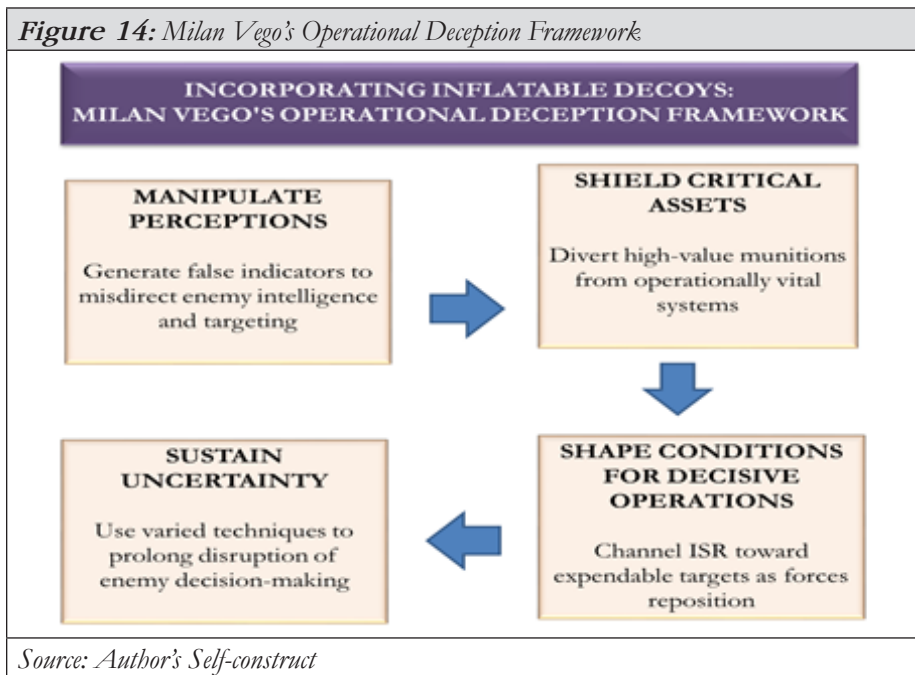
deception and deterrence effects. The Chi-square test of independence showed a statistically significant result of $\chi^2(3, N = 101) = 64.7$ ($p < 0.001$) which proved that officers' strong agreement about decoys did not happen randomly. The survey results demonstrate that decoys function as effective force enhancement tools which provide flexible defense capabilities to Bangladesh at affordable costs despite limited defense funding, lack of expertise and doctrinal integration.

Strategic Posture and Terrain-Adaptive Force Projection. Bangladesh requires continuous protection of its essential frontiers which include the CHT and the southeastern border with its neighbour. The regions experience ongoing threats because of challenging geography, past conflicts, and present-day regional instability, which includes the Rohingya crisis. The protection of territorial integrity requires a continuous yet adaptable military presence in this situation. Inflatable military decoys can function as an economical solution to create a defensive appearance in areas that require extensive resources for permanent military deployments. The Army can improve its apparent military power through decoy tanks and artillery, and missile system deployments, which will deter hostile actions without requiring excessive logistical or manpower resources. This view is also reflected in survey results indicating that more than 59% of officers recommend deploying such decoys specifically in the CHT and southeastern border areas.



Operational Deception and Asset Protection. Following Milan Vego's Operational deception frameworks enable the strategic use of inflatable decoys to create false enemy perceptions while protecting essential assets and creating conditions for successful military operations. The deceptive indicators produced by decoys create believable false signals which interfere with enemy intelligence operations and targeting systems. The strategic placement of decoys during the

ongoing Ukraine conflict has successfully redirected enemy precision attacks away from essential operational systems which protects military capabilities and reduces enemy operational effectiveness. The implementation of deception measures in operational planning by Bangladesh would redirect enemy ISR operations toward expendable targets in Bandarban, Rangamati, Feni and Teknaf while actual military forces execute repositioning and countermeasure preparation. The combination of decoy deployment with radio deception through radio signals and terrain concealment and delayed troop deployments creates decision cycle uncertainty for enemies while commanders gain better operational freedom. The results from the officer survey support the argument that decoys would effectively deceive enemy ISR systems. The survey results show that 56.4% of respondents strongly believed decoys would effectively deceive enemy ISR systems and 27.7% believed they would succeed in at least one deception area. The survey results show a significant non-uniform distribution and the Chi-square test of independence produces $\chi^2(3, N = 101) = 74.1$ with $p < 0.001$, indicating a significant deviation from the null hypothesis. The survey results demonstrate that decoy systems combined with electronic and tactical deception methods will effectively disrupt enemy ISR operations and protect military assets despite limited resources.



Psychological Warfare and Perception Management. Modern deterrence depends equally on how things appear to others as it does on actual military power. The visible presence of decoys-particularly those mimicking armored vehicles or electronic installations-can instill caution in potential adversaries. The illusions deployed in the CHT and along the south-eastern border as well as some other strategically important areas can delay enemy planning, redirect surveillance resources, or prevent enemy incursions. Military exercises and patrol rotations that include decoys as a regular practice create a believable impression of military preparedness. The perception management strategy helps achieve national defense goals without requiring permanent large-scale deployments.

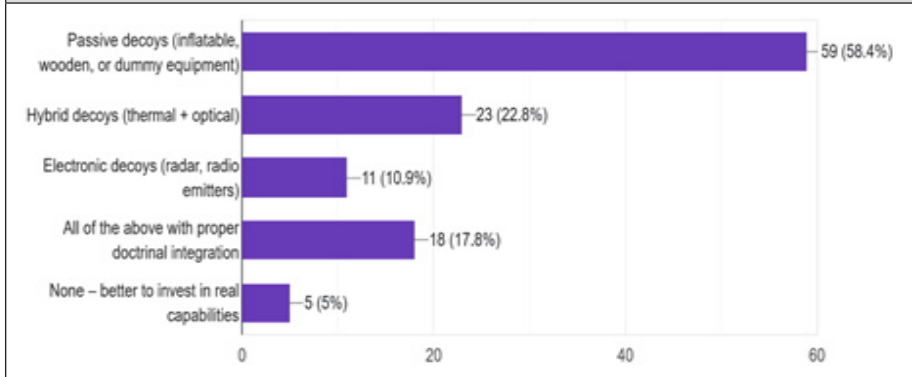
Layered Defense in Challenging Terrain. The southeastern border of Bangladesh remains difficult to traverse because it contains dense forests, hills, and riverine areas, which restrict standard movement and observation capabilities. The strategic paths between Teknaf, Buthidaung, Bandarban and Rakhine State remain highly susceptible to enemy infiltration. The defense system can be strengthened through the combination of inflatable decoys with surveillance drones and light infantry patrols in this area. The quick deployment capabilities and low logistical requirements of these systems make them suitable for areas with restricted access. Electronic decoys that duplicate radar signals will make it harder for enemies to gather signal intelligence, thus producing early warnings which can steer adversaries into predetermined engagement areas.

Effective Tools for Conducting Training. The Bangladesh Army uses decoys as an economical training solution which creates authentic combat environments through equipment substitution without affecting operational effectiveness. The army can create battlefield environments through inflatable tanks and aircraft and artillery which protect valuable assets from harm while ensuring trainee safety. The decoy systems reduce training operational costs because they have minimal weight and simple management requirements. The infantry uses decoys to create enemy and friendly force simulations during winter collective training which helps soldiers develop better tactics for handling complex battlefields. The decoy systems function as protected targets during summer training which enables units to execute strategies and test weapon systems without endangering actual platforms. The School of Infantry and Tactics (SI&T) and Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA) should integrate decoys as essential training equipment to teach officers and cadets about tactical operations and weapon performance. The current lack of operational deception experts together with insufficient advanced training facilities and research centers prevents the integration of

decoy technology into military doctrine. The current restrictions prevent the widespread adoption of decoy-based training methods in standard educational programs. The implementation of decoy-based training as a learning tool will become possible after institutional adoption because it provides affordable and secure training that prepares soldiers for contemporary warfare while improving operational readiness.

Cost-Imposition via Decoys in BD Army. Considering the small defense budget of Bangladesh approximately USD 4.6 billion in 2023 against USD 73 billion of India (SIPRI, 2024), it is impractical to reach the level of parity in the spheres of advanced strike and surveillance systems. The RAND (2020) cost-imposition strategies offer a feasible countermeasure, as they compel an adversary to burn costly munitions in the assets that are cheap. Inflatable decoys less than USD 1000 including those made by the Inflattech, have the capability of provoking the deployment of USD 70,000-115,000-worth munitions, used rapidly to destroy the precision-striking inventory of an adversary. In the case of the Bangladesh Army, application of this model would entail incorporation of decoy usage into operations plans such as setting them up close to strategic logistic points, staging areas and around air-defence sectors, in conjunction with electronic and visual deception actions. This would compel an adversary to divert ISR resources and precision munitions away from actual combat power, extending Bangladesh's operational endurance without proportionate expenditure. To substantiate this proposition empirically, a survey conducted among 101 Bangladesh Army officers revealed a strong preference for sustainable decoy deployment strategies. The majority (58.4%) identified passive decoys-such as inflatable, wooden, or dummy systems-as the most realistic and cost-effective option for Bangladesh's context, followed by hybrid and doctrinally integrated approaches. These findings reinforce the practical feasibility of the cost-imposition model in the Bangladesh Army's operational doctrine. Furthermore, to gain a more comprehensive understanding, a detailed variable-based survey was conducted across multiple operational, perceptual, and doctrinal criteria; the results of these variables are presented in the following table to illustrate inter-linked patterns of awareness, feasibility, and strategic perception among officers.

Figure 15: Survey Responds on Sustainability of Forms of Decoy Deployment from Bangladesh Army Perspective



Source: Author's Self-construct (sample size: 101 Officers)

Table 4: Officers' Perception on Decoy Utility

Survey Variable	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Decoys enhance survivability of critical assets	58.4%	24.5%	13.1%	4%
Decoys are suitable for operational use in CHT and border areas	59%	26%	11%	4%
Decoys can effectively mislead enemy ISR systems	56.4%	27.7%	12.9%	3%
Decoys can impose cost on technologically superior adversaries	56.4%	27.7%	12.9%	3%
Decoys can reduce the requirement for deploying real assets	55%	25%	13%	7%
Bangladesh Army should invest in inflatable & electronic decoys	57.4%	23.8%	13%	5%

Source: Author's Self-construct through Survey (sample size: 101 Officers)

CONCLUSION

This research began with a foundational principle of military strategy-that warfare, at its core, is built on deception. Through a comprehensive review of historical and modern practices, the study has explored how decoy systems have evolved from simple battlefield tricks into sophisticated strategic tools. Rooted in the theoretical insights of military thinkers like Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, the paper sought to evaluate whether such deception-based technologies could meaningfully enhance the operational efficiency of the Bangladesh Army. This question has guided the entire inquiry-from the literature to the analytical chapters-and it forms the basis of the conclusions drawn here.

The exploration of past and present conflicts revealed how decoys have been transformed into multi-functional assets that blur the lines between physical, electronic, and psychological warfare. From World War II's inflatable divisions to Ukraine's low-cost decoy drones, the pattern is clear: deception has grown in parallel with surveillance and targeting technologies. Yet, despite this evolution, critical gaps remain in the literature-particularly regarding how such systems can be tailored to resource-sensitive, terrain-diverse, and institutionally conservative forces like the Bangladesh Army. Identifying these gaps not only validated the relevance of this study but also underscored the need for customized approaches to modern decoy integration.

Bridging this gap requires reimagining the role of decoys-not as expendable tools for battlefield confusion, but as deliberate instruments of deterrence, resource conservation, and force multiplication. The Bangladesh Army, operating in a challenging security environment with constrained budgets and complex terrain like the Chittagong Hill Tracts and maritime southeast, stands to gain substantially from adopting advanced decoy systems. By manipulating enemy perception and inflating the appearance of force presence, these systems can reinforce deterrence, confuse adversaries, and protect high-value assets from first-strike vulnerabilities. This application also aligns with the broader strategic objective of enhancing survivability without proportionate escalation in military spending.

The use of decoys is, however, not restricted to war situations. Occupation of their role in training settings, simulations and war games provide a low-risk, high-yield way to develop operational preparedness. Decoys facilitate a culture of preparedness and realism by enabling troops to be exposed to the dynamics of complex battlefields, without compromising the well-being of actual equipment

and personnel. In addition, there would be the option of integrating electronic countermeasures with adaptive camouflage, as suggested in the present paper, and that would allow the use of decoys in the range of contemporary reconnaissance and firearms systems. Therefore, decoys are not only a tactical tool but also a strategic competence in line with the future needs of war.

The Bangladesh Army needs to create a long-term strategy which incorporates decoy systems throughout its doctrine development process and procurement planning and training institutions. The transition requires more than technological spending because it demands an institutional framework which treats deception as a core defense strategy component. The acquisition of technology must accompany training programs at war colleges and field experiments with integrated testing of doctrine manuals. The decoy systems will transform into operational planning elements for force projection through this approach.

Concisely, the research establishes that modified and integrated decoy systems can function as an effective force multiplier for the Bangladesh Army. The research journey began with a proven military principle which evolved into a strategic policy that treats technological deception as a defensive tool and operational efficiency enhancer. The ability to confuse and delay and mislead will become equally important as the ability to attack and protect because security challenges in the region and globally will become more technologically complex. The strategic future depends on mastering the ability to appear powerful rather than achieving actual strength.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Defence College faculty members and research mentors at Mirpur Dhaka provided me with their continuous academic support during my research. The research needed vital information from the Commandant and operational knowledge from the College Secretary and Director Research and Academics at National Defence College. The college library and digital research platforms provided vital assistance for both literature review research and data collection tasks. The research project operated without receiving financial support from external organizations. The support from my classmates and people who supported me maintained my dedication to complete this academic work.

REFERENCES

Adamsky, D. (2021). *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel*. Stanford University Press.

Anantam IAS. (2025, June 10). India's use of decoys in contemporary warfare. Retrieved from <https://iasananantam.com/current-affairs/indias-use-of-decoys-in-contemporary-warfare/>

Bendett, S. (2021). *Russian Military Autonomy in Ukraine: Deception, Electronic Warfare, and Unmanned Systems*. Center for Naval Analyses.

Blanks, D. R. (1994). *The Trojan War: A New History*. Oxford University Press.

Cartledge, P. (2006). *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World*. Knopf.

Chakraborty, A. (2022). Regional Defense Strategies and Military Innovations in South Asia: The Role of Bangladesh. *South Asian Defense Journal*, 37(4), 85-102.

Charles Cruickshank, "Deception in World War II" by Charles Cruickshank, Oxford University Press, 1980.

Colonel PMS Kohli, *Inflatable Decoys: Enhancing Battlefield Survival and deception*, Centre from Air power studies, 08 July 2024.

Flight Lieutenant Chris Whelan, *The 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War: Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles in Modern Warfare*, *Air and Space Power Review* Vol 25, 2023.

Giles, K. (2016). *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*. NATO Defense College.

Glantz, D. M. (2012). *The Battle of Moscow 1941-1942*. Casemate Publishers.

Gordon, M. R., & Trainor, B. E. (1995). *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf*. Little, Brown.

Grant, R. G. (2017). *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18*. Yale University Press.

Grau, L. W., & Bartles, C. K. (2018). *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization in the 21st Century*. Army University Press.

Griffith, S. B. (1963). *The Art of War by Sun Tzu*. Oxford University Press.

Holt, T. (2004). *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War*. Scribner.

Howard, M., & Paret, P. (1984). *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz. Princeton University Press.

Inflatech Tactical Military Decoys.

Islam, S., & Rahman, A. (2020). *Military Modernization in Bangladesh: Challenges and Strategic Imperatives*. Bangladesh Institute of Strategic Studies.

Kania, E. B. (2020). The PLA's Strategic Use of Military Deception and AI-Enabled Warfare. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43(5), 721-745.

Kateryn Hodunova, Russia Use Cheap decoy drones to overload Ukraine's air defence, *The Kyiv international*, 18 November 2024.

Kosovo/ Operation Allied Force (After Action Report), Report to Congress, 31 January, 2000.

Master Sergeant Jorge L. Rivero, *Decoy Warfare: Lessons and Implications from the war in Ukraine*, US Naval Institute, 01 April 2024, Vol 150/4.

Nicola Bonsegna, *The strategic Role of Decoys in the Conflict in Ukraine*, *The defence horizon journal*, oct 31, 2024.

Reuters. (2025, May 27). India-Pakistan's drone battles mark new arms race in Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/india-pakistans-drone-battles-mark-new-arms-race-asia-2025-05-27/>

Stinj Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, *Stike Me Please: Armenia's SAM Decoys*, *Oryx journal*, April 28, 2021.

The Economic Times. (2025, May 28). Best deception ever seen: US F-16 pilot reveals how a 30 kg device fooled Pakistan into thinking it downed a Rafale. Retrieved from <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/best-deception-ever-seen-us-f-16-pilot-reveals-how-a-30-kg-device-fooled-pakistan-into-thinking-it-downed-a-rafale/articleshow/122313728.cms>

Whaley, B. (2007). *Stratagem: Deception and Surprise in War*. Artech House.

AUTHOR

Major Akib Ahsan Teas, psc was born on 20 January, 1991 at Bagerhat. He passed Secondary School Certificate from Savar Cantonment Public School and Higher Secondary Certificate Examinations from St Joseph College. He was commissioned from Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA) with 65 BMA Long Course in the Corps of Infantry on 21 December 2011. He has a diverse experience of serving in unit, as staff, and as instructor. He served in 4 Bangladesh Infantry Regiment in different regimental appointments. As instructor, he served as Instructor Class 'B' of Tactics Wing in School of Infantry and Tactics. He is a graduate from Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC). He has participated in United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in MONUSCA (Central Africa) as a Contingent Member. Presently, he is serving as General Staff Officer -2 (Coord) at National Defence College (NDC). He is happily married to Afreen Sultana and blessed with one daughter – Azmina Ahsan. His hobbies include reading books and travelling.

Email: akibahsan8372@gmail.com



EDUCATION AS A STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT FOR SOVEREIGNTY: BANGLADESH IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Major Md Akther Hossan, psc, AEC

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 30th August 2025; Accepted: 30th October 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: This research paper examines education as a strategic instrument for sovereignty, arguing that a nation's power now extends beyond military might to its intellectual and human capital. The paper employs a mixed-methods design, combining a qualitative, comparative case-study analysis with a quantitative field survey of 220 key stakeholders in Bangladesh. The findings reveal that while education was historically central to Bangladesh's national identity, there is now a critical consensus that systemic weaknesses are creating strategic vulnerabilities. Survey data confirms that a severe curriculum-market mismatch (identified by 82% of respondents) and an acute 'brain drain' (rated as a severe threat by 88%) are undermining the nation's economic and technological sovereignty. International case studies from nations like South Korea and Singapore provide models for strategically leveraging education for national resilience and economic transformation. The paper concludes with data-driven policy implications for Bangladesh, advocating for curriculum reforms, strategic investment in STEM education, and formalised military-academic partnerships. This research asserts that for developing nations, strategically managing education is not a social service but an indispensable pillar of modern statecraft and national security.

Keywords: *Sovereignty, Education, Strategic Instrument, Curriculum Reforms, Soft Power.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The classical concept of sovereignty, often referred to as Westphalian sovereignty, has traditionally been defined by a state's supreme, exclusive authority over its territory, free from external interference (Krasner, 2001). This perspective

positions sovereignty as a right of non-intervention, with the primary external corollary being the right to wage war. Within this framework, a country's power and security were predominantly measured by its military strength and the inviolability of its borders. However, the dynamics of the 21st century have rendered this narrow definition of sovereignty increasingly insufficient. The proliferation of globalisation, transnational security threats, economic interdependence, and the rise of non-state actors have challenged the notion of absolute, territorial control (Glanville, 2013).

Sovereignty is not an eroding concept but is undergoing a philosophical redefinition (Korff, 1923; Krasner, 2001; Raschke, 2024). Its focus is shifting from a state's supreme authority over others to a collective authority of its populace, a form of 'popular sovereignty' where the supreme authority ultimately resides with the citizens (Raschke, 2024). This evolution necessitates an expansion of the concept beyond the traditional military and political domains to encompass social, economic, cultural, and human dimensions. A nation's sovereignty today is linked to its internal stability, economic resilience, cultural cohesion, and the well-being of its people. This paper posits that a nation's ability to govern itself and project its influence now rests on a multidimensional foundation, where education emerges as a critical, strategic instrument alongside traditional military and economic strategies.

In the context of this evolving understanding of sovereignty, education ceases to be merely a social service or a consumption good. It becomes a strategic investment and a direct tool of national power. While military might operates through coercion and economic power through inducement, education yields a unique form of influence: attraction and persuasion, which Joseph Nye termed 'soft power' (Smith, 2014). A well-educated populace is a nation's most valuable asset, as they create a virtuous cycle of innovation, productivity, and social cohesion that directly strengthens a country's sovereignty in its non-traditional dimensions. It is the foundation for a vibrant economy, a strong civil society, and a competitive presence on the global stage. This paper's central argument is that for developing nations like Bangladesh, education is not merely a social service but a critical pillar of statecraft that must be strategically integrated into national security and development strategies to defend and enhance sovereignty in a globalised world.

While much has been written on education reform and national security separately, this study fills a critical gap by empirically linking stakeholder perceptions of

educational shortfalls directly to strategic vulnerabilities in national sovereignty. It moves the discussion from the theoretical to the evidence-based by providing a data-driven assessment of the challenges and priorities within Bangladeshi context.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Broad Objective. The broad objective of this research is to establish a framework linking education to modern, multi-dimensional sovereignty, demonstrate this link through a combination of historical analysis and contemporary empirical data, and derive actionable policy implications for Bangladesh.

Specific Objectives. The specific objectives of this research are:

- To examine the theoretical linkage between education and non-traditional sovereignty.
- To analyse the perceptions of key stakeholders in Bangladesh regarding the education system's current role in strengthening national sovereignty.
- To derive strategic policy lessons from the empirical findings and comparative international models.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Primary Question. The central research question is: How can education function as a tool of sovereignty in Bangladesh, complementing military and economic strategies, with comparative insights from other nations?

Secondary Questions. In order to address the primary question, this paper explores three secondary questions:

- What is the theoretical linkage between education and non-traditional dimensions of sovereignty, such as human security and soft power?
- How do key stakeholders in Bangladesh perceive the current education system's role in strengthening national sovereignty?
- What strategic policy lessons can be derived from both the empirical data and the international models analysed?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

This study hypothesises that a strategic alignment of Bangladesh's education system with national security objectives—specifically by addressing stakeholder-identified vulnerabilities in curriculum relevance, talent retention, and investment priorities—will significantly enhance the nation's economic, technological, and cultural sovereignty.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature of the subject, a mixed-methods design combining qualitative analysis with a cross-sectional descriptive survey has been conducted under non-experimental research. Both primary and secondary source materials are used. The theoretical framework and comparative case studies are based on secondary sources, while the empirical validation of the paper's arguments within Bangladeshi context relies on primary data from a field survey.

Content Analysis. Available books, journals, periodicals, government policy documents, and research papers on related subjects from various sources have been extensively analysed. Relevant national and international reports on education, human capital, and national security have been consulted to establish the conceptual foundation of the study.

Field Survey. The opinion of 220 stakeholders, comprising academics, government officials, and military officers with expertise in national policy, security, and education, was collected. These practitioners were actively working on policy formulation, strategic studies, or higher education in Bangladesh. The sample was drawn following a Stratified Sampling technique under the Probability Sampling Method, with strata defined by the participants' professional sectors (academia, government, and military).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations were paramount in conducting this research. The field survey guaranteed voluntary participation and the complete anonymity of all respondents. An informed consent statement was provided to all participants, outlining the academic purpose of the study. All data was handled with strict confidentiality to protect the privacy of individuals and their respective organizations. The research has been conducted with objectivity and a commitment to academic integrity.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

While this study's mixed-methods design provides both theoretical depth and empirical grounding, the author acknowledges its limitations. Firstly, the quantitative data is based on a purposive, non-random sample of 250 stakeholders. Although this method was chosen to target relevant expertise, the findings are not statistically generalizable to the entire population of Bangladesh but rather represent the informed perspectives of a key group of professionals in the fields of education, government, and defense. Secondly, the survey instrument captures perceptions and attitudes rather than objective performance metrics. A more comprehensive study could correlate these perceptions with economic indicators or educational outcomes. Finally, while the research provides a strong snapshot of the current situation, the dynamic nature of both education and national security means that these stakeholder perceptions may evolve. Future research should employ longitudinal studies to track these trends over time and could benefit from in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the nuances behind the survey responses.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: EDUCATION AND SOVEREIGNTY

Education as a Pillar of Human Security. The 1994 UNDP Human Development Report marked a paradigm shift in the understanding of security as it moves its focus from territorial integrity to the well-being of people (UNDP, 1994). This new concept, known as human security, is centered on 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want' (UNDP, 1994). Education is not just a dimension of human security but is its fundamental enabler, directly addressing the 'freedom from want' aspect. Illiteracy and innumeracy are themselves forms of insecurity, as they limit an individual's potential and ability to navigate and compete in a modern world (Rana, 2021). The first and most immediate contribution of a successful education system is the direct reduction of this deep-rooted insecurity.

The Link Between Education and Human Security is Multi-Layered and Causal. Education empowers individuals by equipping them with the knowledge and skills to secure livelihoods and gain employment in a globalised economy, which is a crucial aspect of economic security (Sen, 2002). It raises political consciousness and enables citizens to voice their concerns and hold their governments accountable. The observation that famines do not occur in democracies, a point often attributed to Amartya Sen, is a powerful illustration of

the effectiveness of political voice, which is amplified by a literate and educated populace (Sen, 1980).

Education as a Source of Soft Power. Joseph Nye's theory of soft power defines it as the ability to attract and persuade others to want the outcomes one desires, rather than coercing or paying them to do so (Smith, 2014). A country's soft power is derived from its culture, values, and policies. Education serves as one of the most effective and enduring resources for projecting a nation's soft power (Smith, 2014). Academic institutions and educational exchange programs are central to this process. When foreign students come to a country, they are exposed to its culture, its political institutions, its democratic values, and its social norms (White, 2022). This exposure builds long-term goodwill and creates a network of future leaders who are favorably disposed toward the host country, a phenomenon described as public diplomacy (Lima Jr, 2007).

This Form of Influence is Distinct from Hard Power. It does not cost anything in a coercive sense; a country 'simply gets its way-softly' by shaping the preferences of others (Nye, 2005). For example, American graduate programs in STEM fields attract global talent, which helps the United States maintain its position as a leader in research and innovation (Mihalyi, 2025). This influx of talent is not just an economic benefit but a strategic one, as these individuals become informal ambassadors for the U.S. and often contribute to its long-term economic and intellectual growth. This is not merely a transactional relationship but an exchange that builds mutual understanding and support, ultimately strengthening the host country's global standing (Lima Jr, 2007).

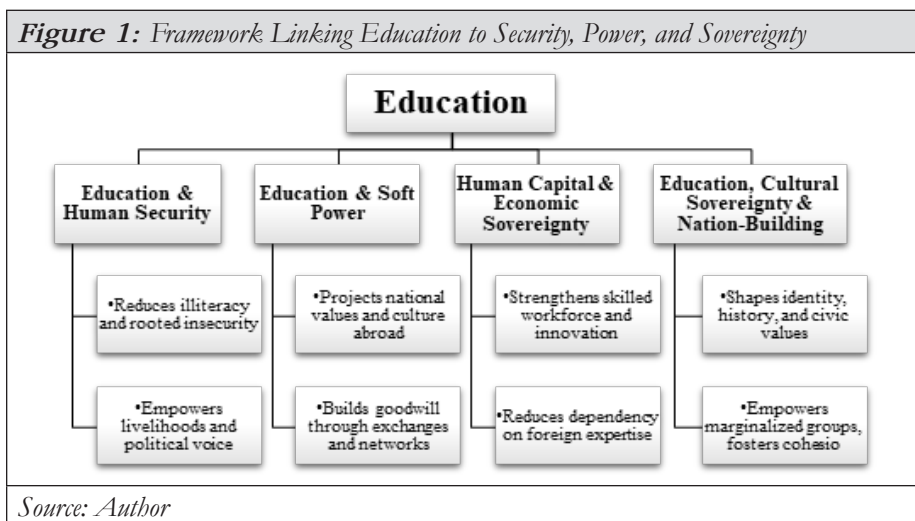
The Human Capital and Economic Sovereignty Nexus. The Human Capital Theory, most prominently advanced by Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, posits that investment in education is a crucial factor in a nation's economic growth and productivity (Becker, 1994). By increasing the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of its population, a country develops its human capital, which is as vital as physical capital for economic advancement. Education is reconceptualised from a purely cultural or social good to a tangible economic input with a positive return on investment (Breton, 2014).

Theoretical Framework Provides a Clear Link to Economic Sovereignty. In a globalised world, a nation's economic independence and competitiveness are directly tied to its ability to innovate and produce high-value goods and services. A highly skilled, well-educated workforce reduces a country's dependency on foreign expertise and labor because it allows it to control its economic destiny

and compete effectively in high-tech, knowledge-based industries (Habib, 2025). Without a robust base of human capital, a nation cannot effectively manage physical capital or achieve sustainable economic growth, leaving it vulnerable to external economic pressures and a diminished role in the global economy.

Education as Cultural Sovereignty and Nation-Building. Beyond its economic function, education is central to a nation’s cultural sovereignty and the process of nation-building. Education systems, through their curricula and teaching of history, language, and civic values, transmit a ‘master narrative’ or ‘myths of origin’ that are essential for forging a shared national identity and collective memory (Carretero et al., 2018). This process establishes geographical, ideological, and affective boundaries that distinguish a country from its ‘others’ and instill a sense of patriotism and belonging.

Challenges in this Process. The instrumentalisation of history for political purposes can be problematic (Carretero et al., 2018). However, education can be a powerful force for social cohesion particularly in diverse or newly-formed states when it is managed effectively. It can also serve as a tool for empowering marginalised groups. For Indigenous communities, educational sovereignty means the right to control their own systems and institutions to transmit cultural knowledge and asserts their right to self-determination. This perspective reframes cultural sovereignty as an emancipatory strategy that empowers people to speak and act from a position of agency, thereby solidifying the foundation of their collective self-government.



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: EDUCATION IN NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

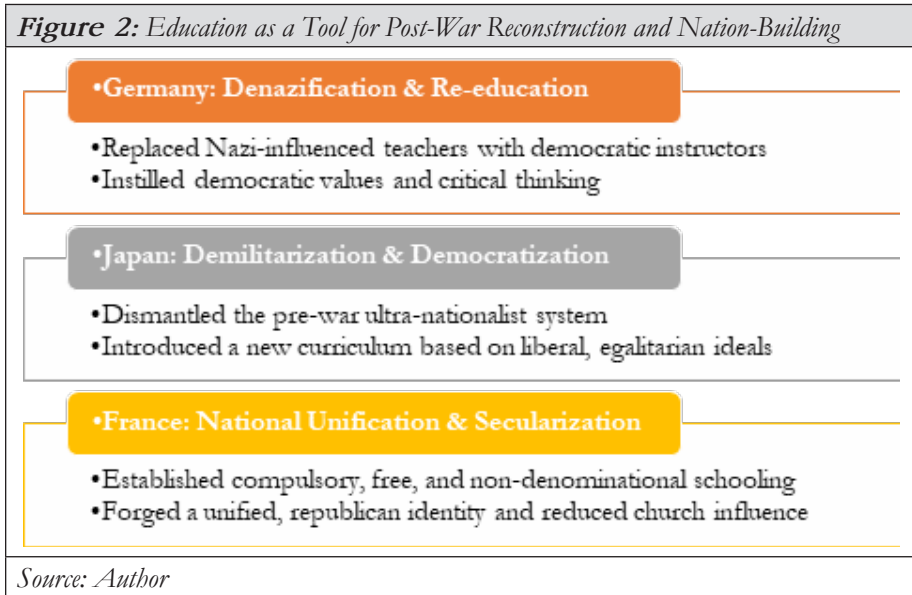
Post-War Nation-Building: Germany, Japan, and France

The aftermath of World War II saw education becoming a deliberate and direct instrument of national reconstruction and ideological transformation. In Germany, the Allies implemented the Neulehrer programme to ‘reeducate’ and ‘denazify’ the country’s youth (Plum, 2011). By replacing teachers influenced by Nazi ideology with new, democratically oriented instructors, the Allies sought to fundamentally reorient the German education system and instill democratic values, tolerance and human rights. This shift from a top-down, authoritarian model to one that prized critical thinking and local autonomy was a strategic component of rebuilding the state from its moral and ideological foundations.

Similarly in occupied Japan, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) implemented a comprehensive educational reform (Sasaki, 1957). The pre-war system, which had been used to promote ultra-nationalist and militaristic values, was dismantled. A new 6-3-3-4 school system and a revised curriculum were introduced with the explicit goal of conditioning students to accept democratic, liberal and egalitarian ideals. This was not merely a curricular change but a systematic effort to rebuild the nation’s identity and institutional structure, moving away from a hierarchical, militaristic society toward a democratic one.

The role of education in nation-building is not limited to post-war contexts. In 19th-century France, the Third Republic used educational policies to forge a unified republican identity. By making schoolings compulsory, free and non-denominational, the government aimed to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church and create a secular, patriotic populace (Rivera, 2023). This deliberate use of education to assert state authority over religious and cultural institutions demonstrates its power as a tool for national cohesion and strategic political objectives.

Figure 2: Education as a Tool for Post-War Reconstruction and Nation-Building



Education and Ideological Sovereignty during the Cold War

During the Cold War, education became a critical battleground for ideological sovereignty. The conflict was not just a military or economic standoff but a struggle between two competing worldviews: Western liberalism and Soviet communism. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union used their education systems to promote their respective ideological premises (Engerman, 2010). In the U.S., academic leaders debated how to best teach ‘democratic citizenship’ to counter the perceived threat of communism. Educational exchange programs, scholarships, and cultural institutions became instruments of state policy to promote their ideology and values abroad. This period showed education’s function as a tool to win ‘hearts and minds’ and project a nation’s values as a form of ideological defense and expansion.

Education as a ‘Social Defense’ in Finland

Finland’s historical resistance to Russian Russification efforts offers a powerful case study in the use of education for cultural sovereignty. In the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, Russia’s imperial government sought to limit Finland’s autonomy through policies that included mandating the teaching of the Russian language in Finnish schools (Thaden, 2014). In a remarkable display of nonviolent

resistance, the Finnish population, led by professors and clergy, refused to have their children learn Russian. This form of ‘social defense’ was not a violent uprising but a systematic and widespread act of defiance aimed at preserving culture and linguistic identity. By withdrawing from governmental educational institutions and using education as a platform to maintain their national heritage, the Finns successfully defended their cultural sovereignty against a militarily superior external power.

BANGLADESH CONTEXT: EDUCATION FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Historical Precedent: The 1952 Language Movement

The history of Bangladesh provides a foundational example of education’s role in forging national sovereignty. The Bengali Language Movement of 1952 was not merely a protest for linguistic rights; it was a struggle for cultural and, ultimately, political sovereignty (Lee, 2022). Following the partition of British India in 1947, the newly formed state of Pakistan sought to impose Urdu as the sole state language, a move seen by the Bengali-speaking majority in East Pakistan as an attempt to erase their cultural identity. The protests, led primarily by students from Dhaka University, were met with violence, leading to the martyrdom of several students (Lee, 2022). This event solidified Bengali as a central pillar of national identity and served as the catalyst for the broader sociopolitical struggle that culminated in the 1971 Liberation War. The movement’s global recognition as International Mother Language Day shows the universal significance of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage as fundamental elements of national self-determination.

Education as a Weapon in the 1971 Liberation War

The Pakistani military’s genocidal campaign during the 1971 Liberation War included the deliberate and systematic targeting of Bengali intellectuals (Nishat and Hossain, 2022). Professors, teachers, journalists, doctors, and writers were systematically rounded up and killed. This was not a random act of violence but a calculated policy to ‘cripple the Bengali nation’ by destroying its ‘essential foundations’-its intellectual class (Hossain et al., 2024). The perpetrators understood that to break the spirit of a nation and prevent its future development,

they had to eliminate its guiding lights and leaders. This tragic event underscores a critical strategic reality: a nation’s intellectual and educational elite are recognised by its adversaries as a core pillar of its strength and a direct component of its sovereignty (Biplob et al., 2024).



EDUCATION’S CURRENT STRATEGIC ROLE

Education Countering Radicalisation and Extremism. In the contemporary context, education has been recognised as a key instrument in countering radicalisation and violent extremism in Bangladesh (GCERF, 2020). The menace of radicalisation, especially among the educated youth, poses a significant non-traditional security threat to the nation’s internal stability. Educational programmes, workshops and peer-to-peer training aims to build the resilience of students from diverse backgrounds against extremist ideologies. By strengthening critical thinking skills, promoting social cohesion and engaging youth as ‘change agents’ for peace, education serves as a frontline defense against a threat that transcends traditional military concerns.

Madrasa Reforms and the National Curriculum. The government of Bangladesh has undertaken significant efforts to reform its madrasa education system as part of a broader strategy to counter radicalism and promote economic integration. The reformed Aliya madrasa system, which operates under government supervision and follows a unified national curriculum has successfully integrated secular subjects to provide students with a pathway to

mainstream employment and tertiary education (Bano, 2014). However, the unreformed Qawmi madrasa system remains largely outside of this framework and the broader goal of generating a ‘modern discourse’ on Islam has yet to be fully realised. This persistent duality in the education system presents a significant challenge to national cohesion and economic progress.

Education for Economic and Technological Sovereignty. Bangladesh’s economic sovereignty is deeply related to its education system, particularly through the remittance economy. A significant portion of the country’s foreign exchange earnings comes from the remittances of Bangladeshi migrants working abroad. However, most of these migrants are semi- or unskilled laborers, which results in a lower rate of remittance growth compared to the overall outflow of labor (Siddiqui, 2001). The country’s education system has a clear mismatch with the labor market’s needs, failing to produce a skilled workforce that could command higher salaries and generate more valuable foreign exchange.

Figure 4: The Strategic Functions of Education in Contemporary Bangladesh

•Countering Radicalisation and Extremism	•Builds student resilience against extremist ideologies
	•Promotes critical thinking and social cohesion
•Promoting National Cohesion	•Reforming Madrasa education to align with the national curriculum
	•Integrates secular subjects to create mainstream opportunities
•Securing Economic Sovereignty	•Addresses the mismatch between education and labor market needs
	•Aims to develop a skilled workforce to boost foreign remittances

Source: Author

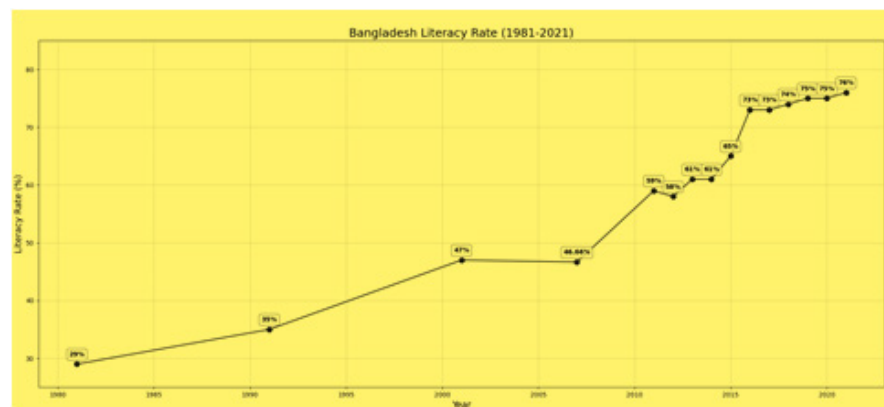
Key Challenges and Contradictions

Despite its historical and contemporary importance, Bangladesh’s education system faces significant challenges that create vulnerabilities to national sovereignty. The persistence of deep inequality is a major concern (Habib, 2025). A ‘two-tiered’ system of education creates vast disparities in opportunity between students in urban, well-equipped schools and those in rural, underserved villages. This disparity extends to the labor market. As a consequence, it creates long-term socio-economic

and political divisions that can threaten national unity (Habib, 2025). A major functional challenge is the persistent mismatch between the skills produced by the education system and the needs of the modern labor market. While global demand for IT-based skills is growing rapidly, Bangladesh's curriculum and teaching methods have remained stagnant for decades (Habib, 2025).

On the surface, the nation has made commendable progress in one key metric: foundational literacy. This quantitative expansion, a cornerstone of public policy for decades, reflects a successful drive to increase basic educational access across the population, as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 5: Bangladesh's National Literacy Rate Trends (1981-2021)



Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Macrotrends

However, the upward trend (as shown in Figure 5), though a significant achievement, masks the deeper qualitative issues of skills mismatch and educational inequality. The increase in basic literacy has not translated into a proportional increase in the modern, high-value skills required for economic sovereignty.

Perhaps the most significant contradiction is the phenomenon of 'brain drain,' where a country's investment in its most talented individuals is ultimately lost to other countries. The key drivers are a combination of economic disparities, the perceived low quality of local education and research facilities, and political instability and corruption (Sibomana, 2019). The consequences are dire: a loss of potential GDP growth, a weakened talent pool for domestic institutions, and an effective 'export' of the nation's human capital and intellectual sovereignty (Sibomana, 2019). The following figure illustrates the challenges of Bangladesh's educational landscape.

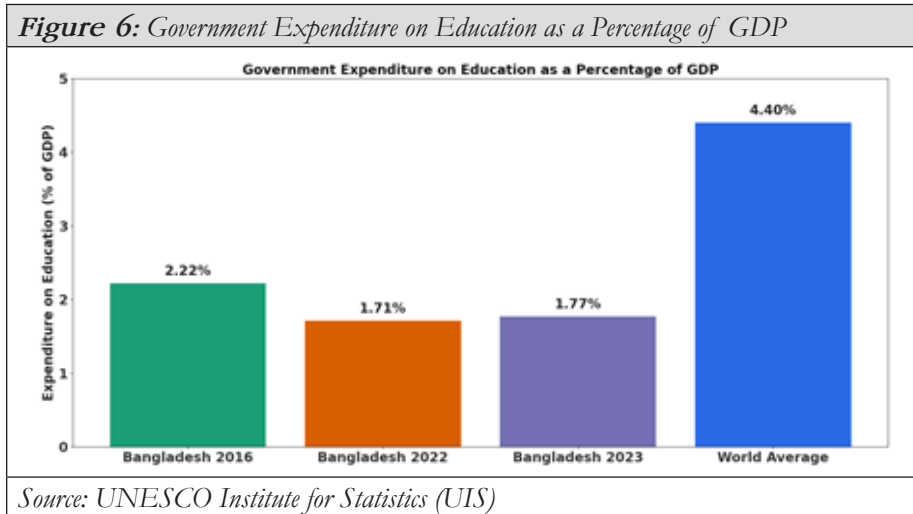


Figure 6 reveals that Bangladesh's investment in education is less than half the world average. Such significant underfunding directly impacts teacher salaries, curriculum modernisation, and the availability of technological resources. Consequently, it creates an educational environment that struggles to nurture innovation and retain top talent.

SURVEY FINDINGS: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF BANGLADESH'S EDUCATIONAL VULNERABILITIES

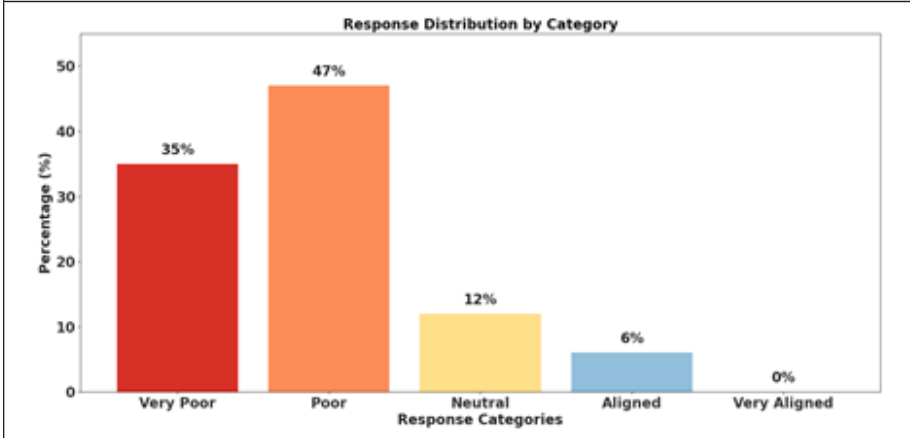
While the historical and theoretical analysis establishes education's strategic importance, the contemporary challenges facing Bangladesh create significant vulnerabilities to its sovereignty. The findings from the SENS survey provide empirical weight to these concerns, revealing a striking consensus among key stakeholders on the system's shortcomings.

The Curriculum-Sovereignty Deficit

A foundational challenge is the deep-seated mismatch between educational curricula and the demands of the modern, globalised economy. Survey respondents expressed overwhelming concern in this area. As shown in Figure 7, a staggering 82% of stakeholders believe the current national curriculum is poorly aligned with the needs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a clear indictment of

the system's failure to produce a future-ready workforce. This curriculum deficit directly undermines economic sovereignty by limiting the nation's capacity for innovation and high-value production.

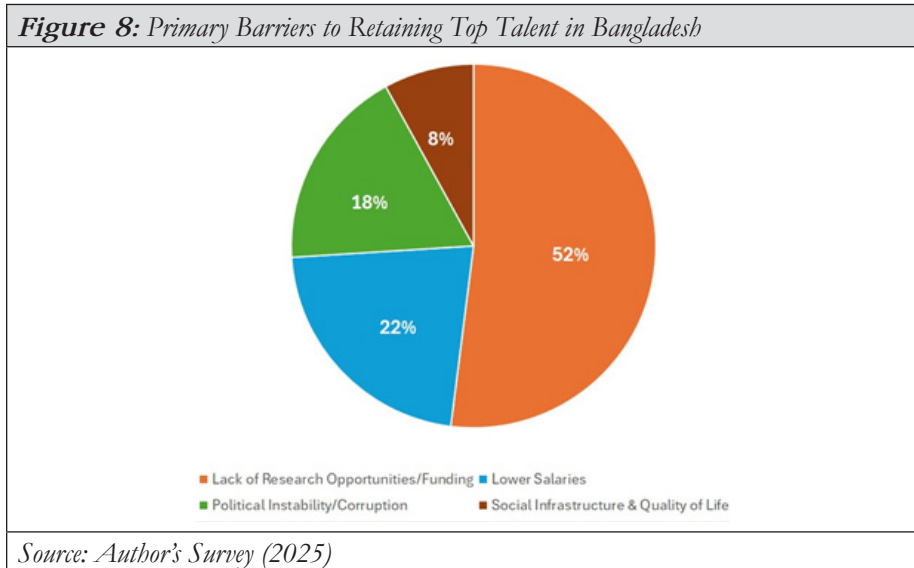
Figure 7: Stakeholder Perception of Curriculum Alignment with the 4th Industrial Revolution (N=220)



Source: Author's Survey (2025)

The 'Brain Drain' as a Direct Threat

Perhaps the most critical threat identified is the phenomenon of 'brain drain'. The survey confirmed that this is not a peripheral issue but a central strategic concern. An overwhelming 88% of respondents rated the 'brain drain' of skilled graduates as a 'Severe' or 'Very Severe' threat to Bangladesh's long-term economic sovereignty. This represents a direct hemorrhage of the nation's most valuable asset-its human capital. To understand the root causes, the survey asked respondents to identify the primary barrier to retaining top talent. The results, illustrated in Figure 8, point decisively towards systemic issues within the country's professional ecosystem.



The data indicates that while economic factors are significant, the primary driver is the lack of a robust research and innovation environment. This finding suggests that simply increasing salaries will be insufficient; a fundamental overhaul of the academic and professional landscape is required to transform brain drain into brain circulation.

Consensus on Underinvestment and Strategic Priorities

The survey revealed a near-unanimous belief that current resource allocation is inadequate. When asked if government spending on education is sufficient to achieve Vision 2041, 91% of stakeholders responded with a definitive “No.”

This consensus on underinvestment leads to the critical question of prioritization. As shown in Table 1, when asked where increased investment should be directed, stakeholders clearly favored areas that directly enhance economic and technological sovereignty.

Table 1: Top Priority for Increased Educational Investment (N=220)

Investment Priority	Percentage of Respondents
STEM & Technology Education	41%
Vocational & Skills Training	34%
Teacher Development & Salaries	13%
Primary Education	12%
Total	100%

Source: Author's Survey (2025)

The strong preference for STEM and Technology Education underscores a strategic desire to shift Bangladesh from a labor-based economy to a knowledge-based one. This aligns with the imperative to build homegrown technological capabilities, particularly in areas critical to national security, such as cyber security, which was reinforced by 92% of respondents supporting stronger military-academic collaboration.

COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS: INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES

Finland: Education for National Resilience

Finland holds the top position in The Economist’s Educating for the Future index. Additionally, the OECD previously identified Finland as ranking second globally for its highest performing graduates in an analysis from 2016. Its core principles are equity, quality, and trust. By providing free, high-quality education to all citizens regardless of their social or economic background, Finland has successfully avoided creating social inequality between an educated elite and an uneducated lower class. This egalitarian approach builds a highly competent and adaptable populace, which is crucial for a small state navigating a complex and unpredictable global environment (Morgan, 2014).

For Bangladesh, the Finnish model offers a critical lesson in using education to bridge internal divisions. By focusing on equitable access and quality across

all regions, Bangladesh could build the foundational social cohesion necessary for long-term stability and resilience by countering the deep socio-economic divisions that currently exist within its education system.

A key factor in this success is the high quality of Finnish teachers, all of whom are required to hold a master's degree (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024). This high level of professionalisation develops a culture of trust as it allows for significant autonomy in the classroom and a focus on individualised support rather than standardised testing. In fact, nearly 30% of children in Finland receive some form of specialised help during their first nine years of schooling.

South Korea: Education as Economic and Defense Power

South Korea's rapid transformation - from a war-torn, impoverished nation to a global economic powerhouse - is often attributed to its strategic investment in education. The government pursued a highly coordinated, state-led strategy - first, prioritizing universal foundational education, and then systematically cascading investment into higher levels of education to meet the needs of its industrialising economy. This strategic alignment is quantifiable: South Korea's tertiary education enrollment rate skyrocketed from under 10% in the 1970s to over 68% by the year 2000, creating one of the world's most educated workforces in a single generation and directly fueling its economic miracle (Spindelman, 2023). This strategic alignment between educational policy and economic development ensured that the educated workforce could be absorbed by the expanding economy at each stage of growth.

The South Korean model provides a powerful case for Bangladesh to address its pervasive curriculum-market mismatch. A long-term, state-driven strategy that aligns educational output with national economic goals - particularly in high-growth sectors like technology and manufacturing - could effectively transform the country's labor force from one dominated by unskilled labor to a highly skilled, high-value one.

Singapore: Education as a Survival Strategy for Small States

Singapore, a small city-state with no natural resources, has built its entire survival strategy on the development of human capital through education. From its post-independence days, education was a top policy priority. The results of this long-term vision are stark: Singapore's GDP per capita surged from \$485.5 in 1965

to over \$90,674.1 by 2024, a transformation directly linked to its sustained high investment in an adaptive, skills-focused education system (World Bank Open Data, 2024). The Singaporean system has evolved to emphasise not just academic rigor but also adaptability, character formation, and a “Learn for Life” philosophy to ensure its population can remain globally competitive (Kwek et al., 2023).

The lesson for Bangladesh is that a nation’s prosperity and security in a volatile global climate depends on its ability to continuously adapt. Singapore’s model reinforces the idea that an investment in human capital is the ultimate survival strategy for a country that must navigate a complex geopolitical environment and compete in a knowledge-driven global economy.

Rwanda: Education for Post-Genocide National Unity

Rwanda’s use of education as a tool for national healing and reconciliation after the 1994 genocide are a poignant and highly relevant case study. The pre-genocide education system had encouraged divisionism by labeling students by their ethnic group. In response, the post-genocide government made education a basic right for all children, regardless of background. More importantly, it revised the national curriculum to promote critical thinking, empathy and unifying historical narratives rather than divisive ones (Sibomana, 2019). This deliberate use of education to combat genocide ideology and build a shared national identity is a powerful example of how a nation can use its education system to heal from internal strife and fortify social cohesion a crucial component of non-traditional security. This model offers an important lesson for Bangladesh, a nation with its own history of internal political and social divisions, demonstrating that curriculum can be a powerful tool for fostering unity.



EDUCATION AS SOFT POWER AND GLOBAL STANDING

The Instruments of Education Diplomacy. Education diplomacy is the strategic use of educational and culture exchange programs to advance a nation's foreign policy goals and projects its soft power. Major world powers have long used this instrument. The United States, for example, has the Fulbright Program, the British have the British Council, and China has its Confucius Institutes (Ngamsan and Walsh, 2013). These programs are not just for language teaching or academic exchange; they are a mean to project a nation's values, culture and policies, building long-term influence and trust among foreign publics (Smith, 2014). The success of these initiatives relies on their ability to generate a favorable image of the host country, thereby acquiring the power to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion.

Bangladesh's Potential for Soft Power Projection. Bangladesh possesses significant but under-utilised soft power assets. Its most globally recognised success is the campaign for linguistic and cultural rights that led to the declaration of February 21 as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO. This achievement, rooted in the 1952 Language Movement, demonstrates the power of a nation's cultural heritage to resonate on a global scale and project its values of pluralism and resilience (Rana, 2025). Bangladesh has the potential to internationalise its language and culture through educational diplomacy. While initiatives like the Bangla Language Fellowship Programme (organized by the 'American Institute of Bangladesh Studies) exist, they are often driven by foreign institutions. Bangladesh could proactively promote Bangla language and cultural studies, utilising its academic institutions to attract international students and scholars and position itself as a center for South Asian studies.

The Diaspora as 'Education Ambassadors'. Bangladesh's diaspora is a powerful yet under-utilised resource for soft power projection. Beyond their economic contributions through remittances, the diaspora contributes to a phenomenon known as 'Brain Circulation'. Bangladeshi students and professionals working in academia, research, and policy-making abroad become 'informal ambassadors' for their country (Rana, 2025). They act as conduits for policy and knowledge exchange, linking domestic institutions with their international counterparts and raising Bangladesh's intellectual capital and standing in global academic and policy-making spheres. While the brain drain remains a challenge, cultivating

strong, enduring connections with the diaspora can transform this linear loss into a circular gain of knowledge and influence.

Integrating Educational Cooperation into Foreign Policy. Bangladesh's foreign policy has historically been guided by a principle of 'Friendship towards all, malice towards none' and a reliance on multilateral diplomacy. Bangladesh must explicitly integrate educational cooperation as a core diplomatic tool to enhance its diplomatic standing and project its influence. A recent example of this is the 'Pakistan-Bangladesh Knowledge Corridor,' a Pakistani initiative that grants scholarships to Bangladeshi students for higher education (Prothom Alo, 2025). While this demonstrates a foreign country's use of education as a diplomatic gesture, it also highlights the need for Bangladesh to adopt a more proactive and reciprocal posture in education diplomacy. By leading similar initiatives in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh could position itself as a regional educational leader.

POLICY MEASURES TO ENHANCE SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH EDUCATION

The preceding data analysis demonstrates that while education has been instrumental in the birth and early development of Bangladesh, the nation must adopt a strategic, long-term approach to secure its future sovereignty. The following policy implications are derived directly from this study's theoretical framework and empirical findings, offering a data-driven roadmap to transform education from a social service into a strategic pillar of national power.

Foundational Curriculum Reforms. The government must undertake a comprehensive reform of the national curriculum. The urgency of this is highlighted by the survey findings, where a staggering 82% of stakeholders believe that the current curriculum is poorly aligned with the needs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The reform must bridge the gap between policy and practice by instilling patriotism, civic values, critical thinking, and a non-communal spirit. Drawing a lesson from Rwanda, history and civic education must be reformed to foster a more inclusive national identity that acknowledges historical wounds but emphasises unifying narratives and social cohesion, directly addressing internal divisions that threaten non-traditional security.

Strengthening STEM and Defense-Linked Research. In order to achieve technological and economic sovereignty, Bangladesh must significantly increase its investment in STEM education and research. This recommendation is strongly supported by the survey data, which shows that 41% of stakeholders—a clear plurality—identified STEM and Technology as the top investment priority. The establishment of state-backed cyber security research institutes is crucial for developing homegrown solutions and creating a ‘cyber brigade’. This approach would not only secure the nation’s digital infrastructure but also create high-value jobs that could mitigate the brain drain and place Bangladesh as a regional leader in cyber security.

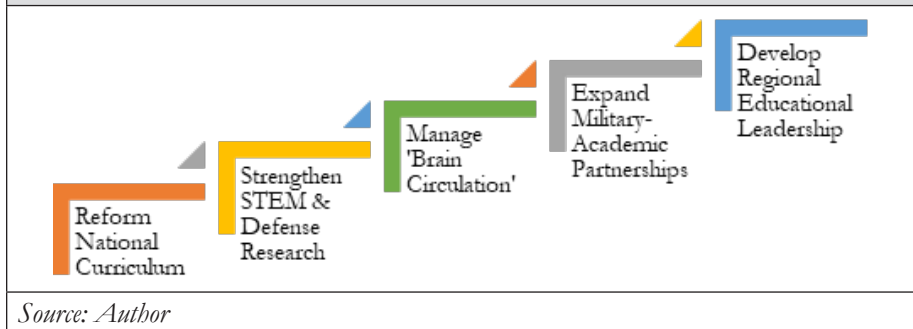
Brain Circulation, Not Brain Drain. To combat the economic and intellectual losses caused by brain drain—a threat rated as «Severe» by 88% of survey respondents—policymakers must shift their focus to actively managing ‘brain circulation’. This policy must directly address the primary barrier to talent retention identified in the survey, where 52% of experts cited a lack of research opportunities and funding as the key driver. This requires a multi-pronged approach: providing financial incentives, improving research facilities in high-tech sectors, and actively engaging the diaspora through formal platforms for collaboration, such as joint university research projects and diaspora-funded foundations.

Military-Academic Partnerships. Bangladesh should formalise and expand partnerships between military and academic institutions. This strategic direction has the overwhelming backing of the nation’s expert community, with survey data revealing a near-unanimous 92% of respondents supporting stronger collaboration on national security research. The National Defence College (NDC), Bangladesh and the Military Institute of Science and Technology (MIST) should expand their partnerships with civilian universities to drive innovation in defense-related technologies like AI, robotics, and cyber defense, directly bolstering national security.

Regional Educational Leadership. Finally, once the foundational issues identified in the survey are addressed, Bangladesh can leverage its demographic strengths to project soft power and place itself as a regional educational leader. By addressing its internal vulnerabilities, such as curriculum deficits and brain drain, Bangladesh can build a more resilient and attractive higher education sector. Offering scholarships to students from neighboring countries, establishing regional centers for vocational training, and leading research on shared challenges

like climate resilience can then become effective tools to build diplomatic influence, shifting the nation from a passive recipient of educational diplomacy to an active and influential regional player.

Figure 10: A Strategic Roadmap: Transforming Education into a Pillar of National Power



Source: Author

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and discussion, the following measures are recommended to enhance Bangladesh's sovereignty through strategic educational reform:

- The government should immediately initiate a foundational curriculum reform to align educational outcomes with the needs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (an urgency highlighted by 82% of surveyed stakeholders).
- A strategic increase in investment for STEM and defense-linked research is required, reflecting the top priority identified by the nation's strategic community.
- Policies must be enacted to actively manage 'Brain Circulation', focusing on improving domestic research opportunities, which was identified as the primary driver of brain drain.
- Formal mechanisms for military-academic partnerships should be established and expanded (a measure supported by 92% of surveyed experts).
- Long-term policy should aim to place Bangladesh as a regional educational leader, leveraging its human capital as an instrument of soft power.

CONCLUSION

Sovereignty in the 21st century extends far beyond traditional military and political realms; it is a multi-dimensional concept built upon the pillars of economic resilience, cultural cohesion, and human security. This research, which is empirically substantiated by a survey of 220 key stakeholders in Bangladesh, confirms that education is the foundational instrument for building and sustaining each of these pillars. Bangladesh's history provides a powerful testament to this truth, as its very existence was forged through an educational and cultural struggle.

However, the analysis reveals a significant contemporary paradox. While education helped establish Bangladesh's sovereignty, the nation's strategic community expresses a strong consensus that current challenges are creating new internal vulnerabilities. The overwhelming agreement among stakeholders—where 82% see a curriculum misaligned with the future, 88% rate 'brain drain' as a severe threat, and 91% believe funding is insufficient—lends a data-driven urgency to this paradox. The nation is at a critical juncture where a failure to manage its education system strategically risks exporting its most valuable resource—its intellectual capital—and ceding its future to a trajectory of dependency.

By learning from the diverse experiences of nations like Finland, South Korea, and Singapore, Bangladesh can forge a new path. The preference for South Korea's state-led economic vision, as identified in the survey, suggests a clear appetite for a more deliberate, strategic approach. This requires a profound shift in thinking: to recognise education not as a social expenditure but as a central pillar of national security. The time has come for policymakers to move beyond broad infrastructural goals and implement a strategic, long-term, and holistic educational agenda. The recommendations in this paper are not merely theoretical; they are a direct response to the empirical evidence. Taking these steps is essential for Bangladesh to secure its prosperity, strengthen its resilience, and assert a stronger form of sovereignty in the global arena.

REFERENCES

- Bano, M., 2014. Madrasa reforms and Islamic modernism in Bangladesh. *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(4), pp.911-939.
- Becker, G.S., 1994. Human capital revisited. In *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education*, third edition (pp. 15-28). The University of Chicago Press.

Breton, T.R., 2014. A human capital theory of growth: New evidence for an old idea.

Carretero, M., Van Alphen, F. and Parellada, C., 2018. 23 National Identities in the Making and Alternative Pathways of History Education. The Cambridge handbook of sociocultural psychology, p.424.

Engerman, D.C., 2010. Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1962. In The Cambridge history of the cold war (pp. 20-43). Cambridge University Press.

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024. Teachers and education staff. [Online] Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/euryperia/finland/teachers-and-education-staff> [Accessed 29 August 2025].

GCERF, 2020. Building the Resilience of University Students Against Violent Extremism, s.l.: GCERF.

Glanville, L., 2013. The myth of “traditional” sovereignty. *International Studies Quarterly*, 57(1), pp.79-90.

Habib, A., 2025. Education system fails to create skilled workforce. [Online] Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/education-system-fails-create-skilled-workforce-3857731> [Accessed 2025 July 2025].

Hossain, Md & Kader, Md. Abdul & Baktiar, Ektiar. 2024. The Indispensable Role Of Bengali Intellectuals In The Liberation War: Silenced But Not Subdued. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 29. pp.42-51. 10.9790/0837-2911104251.

Korff, B.S., 1923. The problem of sovereignty. *American Political Science Review*, 17(3), pp.404-414.

Krasner, S.D. ed., 2001. Problematic sovereignty: Contested rules and political possibilities. Columbia University Press.

Kwek, D., Ho, J. and Wong, H.M., 2023. Singapore’s Educational Reforms toward Holistic Outcomes:(Un) Intended Consequences of Policy Layering. Case Study. Center for Universal Education at The Brookings Institution.

Lee, R., 2022. The Language Movement of Bangladesh. [Online] Available at: <https://globalpoliticaltheoryproject.pages.wm.edu/2022/05/16/the-language-movement/> [Accessed 20 July 2025].

Lima Jr, A.F.D., 2007. The role of international educational exchanges in public diplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 3(3), pp.234-251.

Mihalyi, D., 2025. How International Students Impact U.S. 'Soft Power'. [Online] Available at: <https://www.aacrao.org/resources/newsletters-blogs/aacrao-connect/article/international-students-impact-u.s.-'soft-power'> [Accessed 12 July 2025].

Morgan, H., 2014. Review of research: The education system in Finland: A success story other countries can emulate. *Childhood Education*, 90(6), pp.453-457.

Ngamsang, S. and Walsh, J., 2013. Confucius Institutes as instruments of soft power: Comparison with international rivals. *Journal of Education and Vocational Research*, 4(10), pp.302-310.

Nishat, N.J. and Hossain, M.P., 2022. 1971 Killing of the 'Bengali'Intellectuals: An Analysis from the Perspective of the 1948 Genocide Convention. *Contemporary Challenges: The Global Crime, Justice and Security Journal*, 3, pp.4-27.

Nye, J., 2005. *Soft power and higher education*. Harvard University, 14.

Plum, C., 2011. *From Nazism to Communism: German Schoolteachers under Two Dictatorships*.

Prothom Alo, 2025. What agreements, MoUs were signed between Bangladesh and Pakistan. [Online] Available at: <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/7dr7zr4hkq> [Accessed 26 August 2026].

Rana, A., 2021. Relationship between Education and Human Security. [Online] Available at: <https://thehumansecurity.org/relationship-between-education-and-human-security/>[Accessed 05 July 2025].

Rana, F. H., 2025. Brains without borders: How Bangladesh's youth are shaping soft power diplomacy. [Online] Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/brains-without-borders-how-bangladeshs-youth-are-shaping-soft-power-diplomacy-1155966> [Accessed 19 July 2025].

Raschke, C., 2024. *Sovereignty in the 21st Century: Political Theology in an Age of Neoliberalism and Populism*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Rivera, E.L., 2023. Cultivating the spirit: Catholic educators, primary education and pedagogy in Early Third Republic France. *Paedagogica Historica*, 59(6), pp.1269-1287.

Sasaki, T., Saito, Y. and Hosoya, T., 1957. ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE SOCIETY AFTER WORLD WAR II Education. *Japanese Sociological Review*, 8(1), pp.83-113.

Sen, A., 1980. Famines. *World development*, 8(9), pp.613-621.

Sen, A., 2002. Basic education and human security. Extraído de: <http://www.humansecuritychs.org/activities/outreach/Kolkata.pdf>.

Sibomana, E., 2019. The role of education in the healing process in Rwanda. [Online] Available at: <https://thewellspringfoundation.org/resources/the-role-of-education-in-the-healing-process-in-rwanda/> [Accessed 15 July 2025].

Siddiqui, T., 2001. Migrant worker remittances and micro-finance in Bangladesh.

Smith, B., 2014. Bangladesh opens HE sector to foreign providers. [Online] Available at: <https://thepienews.com/bangladesh-opens-sector-foreign-providers/> [Accessed 12 July 2025].

Spindelman, D. 2023. Investing in Foundational Skills First: A Case from South Korea. *RISE Insight Series*. 2023/052. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2023/052

Thaden, E.C. ed., 2014. *Russification in the Baltic provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*. Princeton University Press.

UNDP, 1994. *Human Development Report 1994*, New York: UNDP.

World Bank, 2025. GDP per capita (current US\$) - Singapore. [Online] Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=SG> [Accessed 22 October 2025].

White, C., 2022. The importance of educational exchanges in international relations, by Candace White. [Online] Available at: <https://credo.unisi.it/newsroom/blog-post/importance-educational-exchanges-international-relations-candace-white#:~:text=The%20role%20of%20exchanges%20in,international%20goodwill%20through%20interpersonal%20contact> [Accessed 15 July 2025].

AUTHOR

Major Md Akther Hossan, psc, AEC was commissioned with the 30 BMA Special Course in the Army Education Corps on 24 December 2008. He completed his honors and master's degrees in English Literature from the University of Dhaka. He is also a graduate of Defence Services Command and Staff College, Mirpur. He has served as General Staff Officer, Grade-3 at Headquarters 111 Infantry Brigade and Headquarters 14 Independent Engineer Brigade. He also served as Instructor at Army Medical Corps Centre and School as well as at Bangladesh Military Academy. He participated in the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo as a CIMIC officer with BANBAT 1-20. Major Akther has also completed Diploma B2 level in French from Alliance Française, Dhaka and served as an interpreter in the Central African Republic with BANBAT-6 and BANBAT-7. The officer is pursuing MPhil higher research study programme in BUP. Currently, he is serving as the General Staff Officer, Grade-2, at the Education Directorate, Army Headquarters.

Email: aktherdu@yahoo.com



SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT, DENSITY TRENDS AND LIVABILITY ASPECTS FOR METROPOLITAN PLANNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR RAJSHAHI CITY

Muhammad Waresul Hassan Nipun

Assistant Professor, Department of Urban and Regional Planning
Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET), Rajshahi

&

Farhana Muna

Urban Development Specialist at Tiller, Dhaka

National Defence College, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh

(Received: 31st August 2025; Accepted: 18th November 2025; Published: 30th November 2025)

Abstract: Cities and adjacent settlements are in a continuous process of change, readjustment and evolution around the world. Due to rapid urbanization, migration and population growth Rajshahi is experiencing rapid density growth, transformation in city livability and spatial development. The aim of the research was to undertake an in-depth study of spatial development growth pattern, density gradients and livability attributes in Rajshahi Metropolitan area in order to formulate recommendations for improving city planning system and ensure sustainable growth of the city. The study explored the spatial development growth pattern using multi-temporal and multi-spectral Landsat 8 OLI and Landsat 5 TM satellite data sets. Besides the change in land use pattern, density attributes (population, residential and structural density) with the help of BBS and RMDP GIS databases. In addition, sky view factor (SVF) and kernel density estimation were used for better understanding of density attributes. Moreover, the livability aspects were investigated using the questionnaire survey, key informant interviews and focus group discussions with the local residents. Results from the study reveals that, the built form of the study area has increased to almost twofold in last 30 years. Subsequently the decadal change in spatial growth clearly indicates that vegetation, waterbody and bare land portion is exhibiting decreasing trend gradually. The results also revealed that both the gross and net population density is rising steadily but the residential and structural density has been significantly increased in the last 20 years. Hence, livability of the study area is impacted to a great extent and demanding density planning for the city to increase the livability and functionality of the city.

Keywords: *Urban Growth; Spatial Expansion; Density Transformation; Livability Indicators; City Functionality and Sustainability.*

© 2025 NDC E-JOURNAL, all rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Cities and adjacent settlements are in a continuous process of change, readjustment and evolution around the world. In Bangladesh cities are growing at a breakneck pace due to rapid urbanization, migration and population growth (Khan, Hossain, and Reza, 2017). Cities are growing all over the world, but in developing countries, they are growing at a breakneck pace. Because of the rapid growth of the city, it sometimes happens in unexpected ways. Bangladesh has one of the highest population densities in the world (UN Habitat, 2013). Like many other metropolitan cities in Bangladesh, Rajshahi is also experiencing rapid density growth as well as transformation in city livability and spatial development (Kashem et al, 2009). The research has provided information on Rajshahi's current spatial development growth pattern, density trends, and livability issues. The work also discussed the implications of metropolitan planning on Rajshahi's persistent spatial growth pattern, density trends, and livability problems, with suggestions given to improve the sustainable growth, livability, and functionality of the city.

Metropolitan areas worldwide are generally undergoing rapid and transformative changes into what has been described as urbanization, shaping how we live, work, and interact with one another (Brenner & Schmid, 2014). Specifically, in most towns, the result has been a building up vertically or horizontally into what was agricultural land and natural boundaries, implying a change in land use and cover (Cheng, 2010). Taking this question into consideration, Rajshahi city, in northwestern Bangladesh, then forms an interesting subject matter, whereby spatial development, density trends, and livability aspects are some of the most critical components developing the city. These all combine dynamically to result in significant implications for the sustainable planning of Rajshahi concerning the well-being of citizens. With that in mind, this study rummages through the multi-faceted landscape of Rajshahi city to analyze how spatial development, population density trends, and livability aspects intervene in the process of affecting the urban morphology and, therefore, must be important in discussions on metropolitan planning in a world where situations are changing even faster today. These dimensions individually investigate how forces shaping Rajshahi's future can be better comprehended in turn to provide broad lessons for other cities around the world in comparable conditions.

The city of Rajshahi, one of the eight metropolitan cities of Bangladesh, has been spontaneously developed from the British colonial period with little

planning intervention and regulations (Doza, 2008). With the demand of time, in many ways the importance of the city increased substantially but planning system and policy has not been followed for development control and the city has been allowed to grow in an unplanned way (Kashem et al, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to undertake an in-depth study of spatial development growth pattern, density gradients and livability attributes in Rajshahi Metropolitan area in order to formulate recommendations for improving Rajshahi's city planning system and ensure the city growth and development in a planned and sustainable way. The study is an endeavor to examine the implications of Rajshahi's metropolitan planning in order to improve the city's sustainable growth, livability, and functionality.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of the research is to undertake an in-depth study of spatial development growth pattern, density gradients and livability attributes in Rajshahi Metropolitan area in order to formulate recommendations for improving Rajshahi's city planning system and ensure sustainable growth of Rajshahi city. The verifiable specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- To explore the spatial development growth pattern, density trends and livability aspects of Rajshahi city.
- To examine the spatial growth pattern, density and livability implications for metropolitan planning of Rajshahi city.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Spatial Growth, Density and Livability

Urban space is a dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon. Cities and settlements around the world are in a continuous process of change, readjustment and evolution. Though change and adaptability are fundamental aspects of lively and growing settlements yet when change is too fast or out of context, it creates problems of harmonious development (Doza, 2008). Furthermore, cities are complex systems made up of many interacting aspects. Relationships between the physical aspects of cities can be used to identify spatial patterns of urban form, which are continually changing and influencing the urban life. Such patterns

affect the livability of urban spaces (Martino, Girling and Lu, 2021). Urban spatial growth is characterized by a succession of built-area expansions over the terrain. This expansion has a spatial pattern, particularly due to topographic and physical factors that combine in various ways. Spatial development as a function is important in promoting growth that is long-term, impacting quality of life. Spatial development as an issue in spatial planning and urban governance is central because it determines the long-term viability of cities. The spatial growth of an urban or regional area is a process that, over time, spreads out both horizontally and vertically. Spatial growth thus refers to the physical expansion of cities and regions because of population growth and economic activity and infrastructure investment. Horizontal growth has come to mean the outward growth of a city or region, often associated with suburbanization, leading to sprawl and the potential fragmentation of communities. It can also have the implication of growing demand for transportation and infrastructure that can stress existing resources. Vertical growth involves the use of increasingly taller buildings and higher-density urban development. This latter type of growth is associated with business districts and downtowns; it conserves land and resources and encourages efficient infrastructure use.

Density, on the other hand, has a big impact on how cities are built and how they function (Nipun, 2016). Density quantifies the population within a specified area, typically articulated as the number of individuals per hectare (p/ha) or dwelling units per hectare (du/ha). It can also be articulated in alternative area units, such as square kilometers or acres (UN Habitat, 2013). Density is comprehended from two viewpoints: perceived density and physical density. Perceived density is significantly affected by socio-cultural norms and individual cognitive characteristics (Alexander, 1993 as referenced in Satu, 2014). Conversely, physical density is affected by various factors, including transportation infrastructure, planning policies and laws, and architectural design (Acioly and Davidson, 1996). Physical density serves as an objective, measurable, and neutral spatial metric, represented through people density and building density. The numerators may represent the quantity of individuals, families, households, habitable rooms, bedrooms, housing units, dwelling units, or floor area, contingent upon the context (Forsyth, 2003). Density has also a significant impact on the planning and management of spatial development at both the city and neighborhood levels, which has an impact on livability. The term “livability” is increasingly employed to denote quality of life issues that are crucial for the long-term welfare of individuals and communities. The word includes factors such as environmental quality, safety, health, affordability, community cohesion, convenience, and the availability of

neighborhood amenities including parks, open spaces, walkways, grocery stores, and restaurants. Collectively, these assets contribute to creating environments that are enjoyable and conducive to living (Wheeler, 2001). Despite the emergence of livability-focused urban planning movements in recent decades (Wheeler, 2001), a cohesive theoretical framework or standardized definition of livability is absent (VCEC, 2008), and the term varies in meaning across individuals. Kamp et al. (2003) defines livability as the facets of the person-environment relationship that, in its broadest interpretation, which includes several attributes contributing to a comfortable living environment. The location must be well managed and largely free from disturbances, congestion, noise, hazards, air pollution, filth, litter, and other undesirable intrusions (Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987). Myers (1987, pp. 108-9) defines livability as “the quality of life within a community, shaped by the shared characteristics experienced by residents and their subjective assessments of those conditions.” The common attributes encompass tangible elements, including transportation availability, public infrastructure, social amenities, and economic prospects, as well as intangible aspects such as sense of place, safety perception (Throsby, 2005), service accessibility, comfort, health, mobility, air quality, and social networks (Howley et al., 2009; Kaido, 2005).

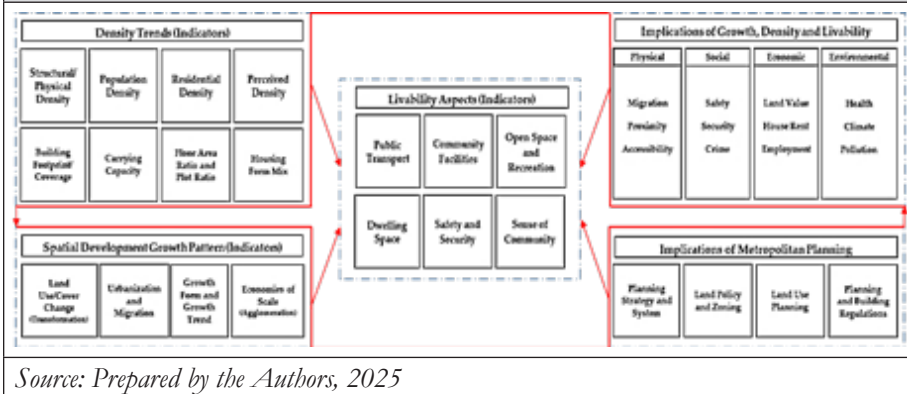
Livability refers to the quality of life within a community, determined by the shared qualities encountered by residents and their subjective evaluations of such conditions. Therefore, livability fundamentally pertains to the attributes or quality of a location that individuals and groups appreciate (Satu, 2014). Consequently, in the evolution of a city, strongly interconnected spatial growth pattern, density, and livability aspects are continually influencing the character and functionality of a city, as well as bringing various implications for the city and its dwellers. Therefore, to ensure the city growth and development in a planned and sustainable way, it is necessary take advance planning preparation considering the domains of spatial growth pattern, density, and livability aspects implications of the city and its surroundings.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK LINKING URBAN DENSITY, SPATIAL GROWTH, LIVABILITY, AND METROPOLITAN PLANNING

A conceptual framework has been developed depicting the visual representation of the relationship between variables of the study. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that links urban density, spatial growth, livability, and metropolitan

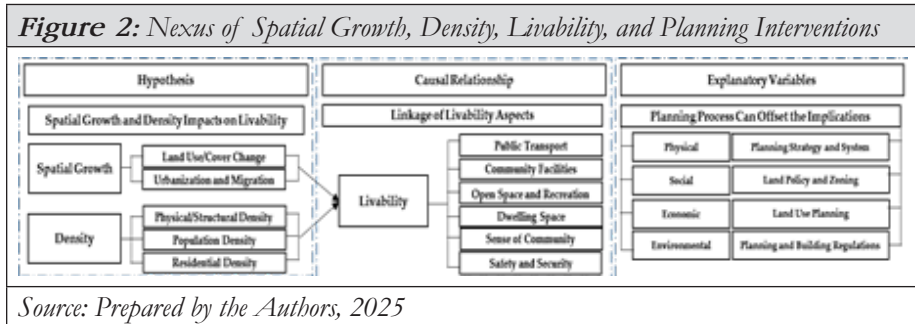
planning. It shows that different density trends (structural, population, residential, and perceived density) and spatial development patterns (land use change, urbanization, growth trends, and agglomeration) directly influence various livability aspects, such as public transport, community facilities, open space, dwelling space, safety, and sense of community. These livability outcomes then shape the broader implications of growth and density across four dimensions: physical (migration, accessibility), social (safety, security, crime), economic (land value, rent, employment), and environmental (health, climate, pollution). Finally, the challenges and opportunities demand intervention through metropolitan planning strategies that include land use planning, zoning, regulations, and planning systems to ensure a sustainable and balanced development of the city.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Urban Density, Spatial Growth, Livability, and Metropolitan Planning



Source: Prepared by the Authors, 2025

An experimental design of this research was developed based on the hypothesis that presents a visual representation of the expected relationship of the variables of the study. Subsequently, Figure 2 presents a conceptual research framework showing the impact of spatial growth and density on urban livability, causal relationships, and the role that can be played by planning processes in addressing their implications. It begins by hypothesizing that such growth (land use change, urbanization, migration) and density (structural, population, residential) affect livability. The section of the causal relationship highlights the linkage that binds aspects of livability: public transport, community facilities, open space, dwelling space, sense of community, and safety. Finally, the explanatory variable sets that planning processes, through strategies, zoning, land use planning, and building regulations, can mitigate the physical, social, economic, and environmental challenges presented by growth and density.



RESEARCH GAP

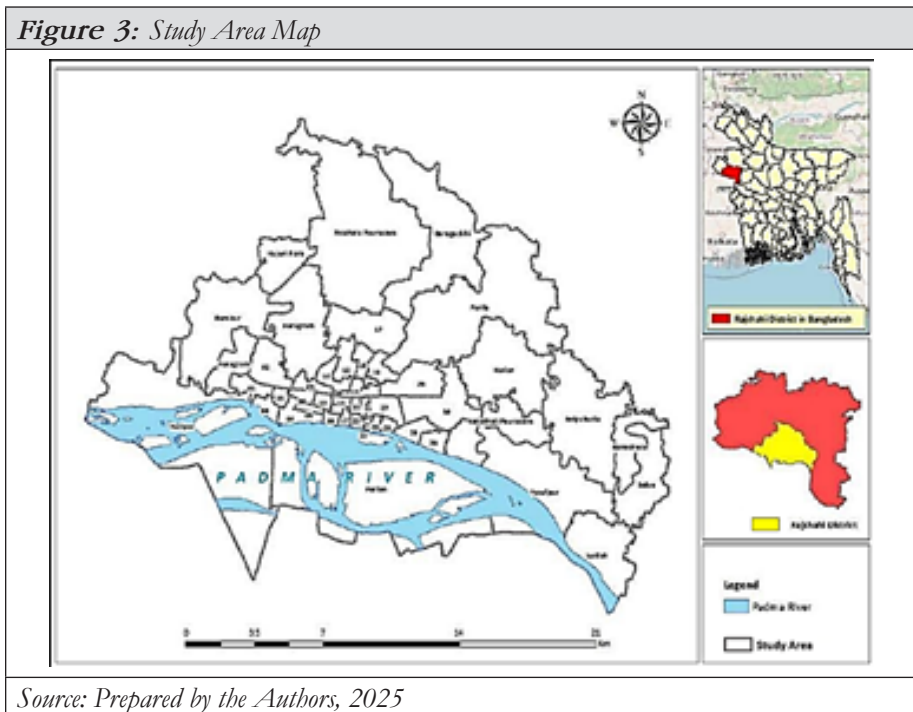
The critical review of related studies regarding the research clearly denotes a lack of studies on spatial growth pattern, density trends and livability attributes particularly in the context of Rajshahi city of Bangladesh. While a limited number of related studies in the context of Dhaka city of Bangladesh have been conducted in recent years, however, a big number of studies have made an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the spatial development growth pattern, density trends and livability aspects in urban environments. Although, almost all the studies were conducted in developed economies where strong planning systems exist, a negligible number of studies in the context of developing countries have been conducted. Recent research on the urban expansion of Rajshahi has revealed rapid spatial growth and fragmented development patterns, mainly driven by infrastructure and accessibility considerations (Ashaduzzaman, 2017; Dey et al., 2021). However, most of these studies have only considered land use and how it changes over time, ignoring livability factors such as access to public services, public transport, open and green space, and environmental quality. Furthermore, existing studies predominantly rely on coarse-scale spatial analyses, ignoring neighborhood-level changes in density and livability crucial for effective urban planning (Haydar et al., 2024; Salan, 2024). Compact city theories suggest that densification can make cities more sustainable, but there is inadequate evidence from medium-sized cities like Rajshahi to resolve the trade-offs between compactness, livability and environmental comfort (Bibri, 2020; Dessi, 2015). Therefore, this study will investigate the integration of spatial expansion and density analysis with quantifiable living factors to guide urban planning in Rajshahi. The research explores: (1) the changes of Rajshahi's spatial growth and density patterns in the last three decades; (2) the bearing of different density regimes on the livability factors such as public transport, community facilities,

open space and recreation, dwelling space, sense of community and finally, safety and security; and (3) planning interventions that can optimally reconcile growth management and livability improvement for Rajshahi's sustainable urban future (Jodder, 2025; Zolfani, 2023; Komarolya, 2025). Moreover, the empirical evidences of these studies show that study of spatial development growth pattern, density trends and liability aspects are context specific. Clearly, in the context of developing countries like Bangladesh, more research is required to understand how spatial growth patterns, density, livability attributes along with its implications are experienced and examined for the planning system and policy formulation. The study is an endeavor to fill the above-mentioned gaps.

METHODOLOGY

The study area for the research (Figure 3) was the Rajshahi Metropolitan Area covering the entire Rajshahi City Corporation area, adjacent 11 Unions and 3 Paurashavas. The research is primarily exploratory in nature, and mixed method research is the main research technique that frames the research procedure.

Figure 3: Study Area Map



Source: Prepared by the Authors, 2025

The research has used a mixed method research design employing multiple methods of data collection including site reconnaissance survey and physical observation survey for studying the density attributes and trends, household questionnaire survey, key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD) for investigating the livability aspects, and Landsat satellite image analysis and physical feature survey records for exploring the spatial development growth pattern. The study explored the spatial development growth pattern of the study area for 1992, 2002, 2012 and 2022 using multi-temporal and multi-spectral Landsat 8 OLI and Landsat 5 TM satellite data sets. Besides the change in land use pattern from 2004 to 2022 were identified with the help of RMDP GIS database. Furthermore, the density attributes and trends of the study area were explored considering the population density, residential density and structural density using BBS and RMDP GIS databases. In addition, sky view factor (SVF) and kernel density estimation were used for better understanding of density attributes and trends of the study area. Moreover, the livability aspects were investigated using the questionnaire survey with the local residents of the study areas. Finally, the spatial growth pattern, density and livability implications for metropolitan planning were examined with the help key informant interviews and focus group discussions with the local residents.

From October to December 2023, a structured household questionnaire survey was carried out in the study areas to investigate the livability scenario covering the entire Rajshahi City Corporation area, adjacent 11 Unions and 3 Paurashavas under the jurisdiction of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area (RMA). The study applied cluster random sampling to make sure that people from diverse socioeconomic classes were represented in the survey of 384 households under each of the administrative units of the study area. There were four primary parts of the questionnaire: socio-demographics of the respondents, opinion about the perception of density, residents experience and opinion about the livability aspects like public transport, community facilities, open space and recreation, sense of community, sense of safety, dwelling space and perceived livability as well as overall satisfaction on the livability aspects. The sample size for the household questionnaire survey was determined using Cochran's formula (1977), $n_0 = (Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)) / e^2$; which provides a statistically reliable method for estimating sample size when the population is large and the proportion of attributes in the population is unknown. Hence, a sample size of 384 households was considered statistically sufficient to represent the population of Rajshahi city with 95% confidence and 5% margin of error. Moreover, a total of 12 key informant

interviews (KII) with professionals and stakeholders, such as urban planners of Rajshahi Development Authority (RDA), officials from the Rajshahi City Corporation, academic specialists, NGO representatives, and local community leaders. The KII guide included themes related to urban growth management, policies that control density, infrastructure adequacy, housing challenges, and institutional capacity. Interviews were semi-structured to allow respondents to elaborate on policy gaps and planning implications for livability improvement. In addition, 3 FGDs were conducted with community members, youth groups, and women’s associations representing various types of neighborhoods in order to understand collective experiences of urban livability. Each session had 8 to 10 participants, a mix of men and women from varying age groups. In the FGD guide, the moderator explored issues such as safety in public places, constrained mobility, environmental hazards, and access to social amenities. Respondents were encouraged to identify local priorities and potential planning interventions to improve the quality of urban life.

Table 1: Sampling Framework for Household Survey, KII, and FGD

Data Collection Method	Sampling Technique	Sample Size	Key Themes / Areas of Inquiry
Household Questionnaire Survey	Cluster Random Sampling	384 Households	Socioeconomic profile, residents experience and opinion about the livability aspects and overall satisfaction on livability status
Key Informant Interviews (KII)	Purposive Sampling	12 Key Informants	Urban growth management, density control, infrastructure adequacy, institutional capacity and service delivery, planning practices and policy exercise
Focus Group Discussions (FGD)	Purposive and Snowball Sampling	3 FGDs (8–10 Participants)	Livability perceptions, safety, mobility, social interaction, environmental concerns, service accessibility

Source: Author's Preparation, 2023

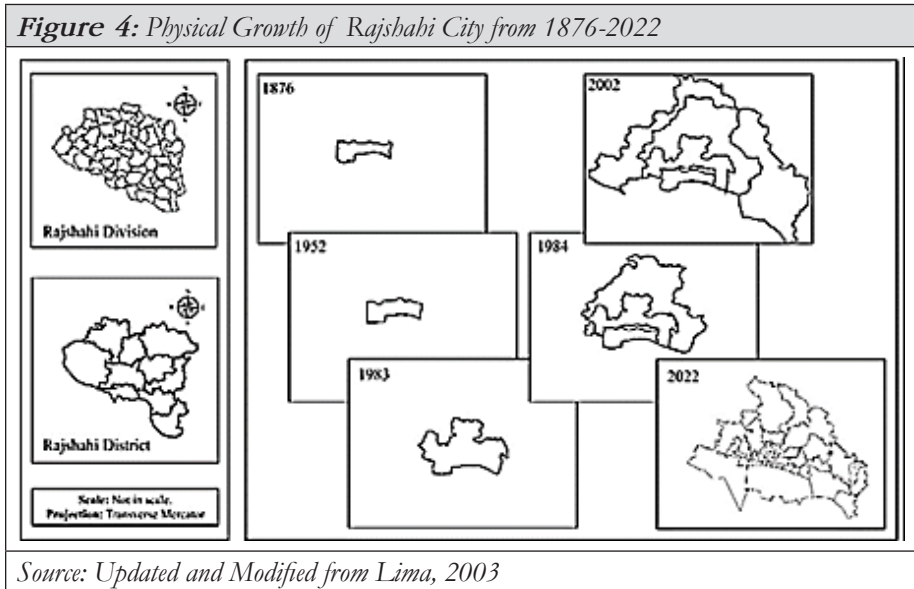
After collecting the necessary required data, all data has been assembled and processed manually for the analysis. MS Excel, SPSS and ArcGIS have been used to compile, process and analyze the collected data. The accuracy, clarity and quality of datasets have been strictly ensured through maintaining data justification and validation with notable literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spatial Development of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area (RMA)

Physical Growth of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

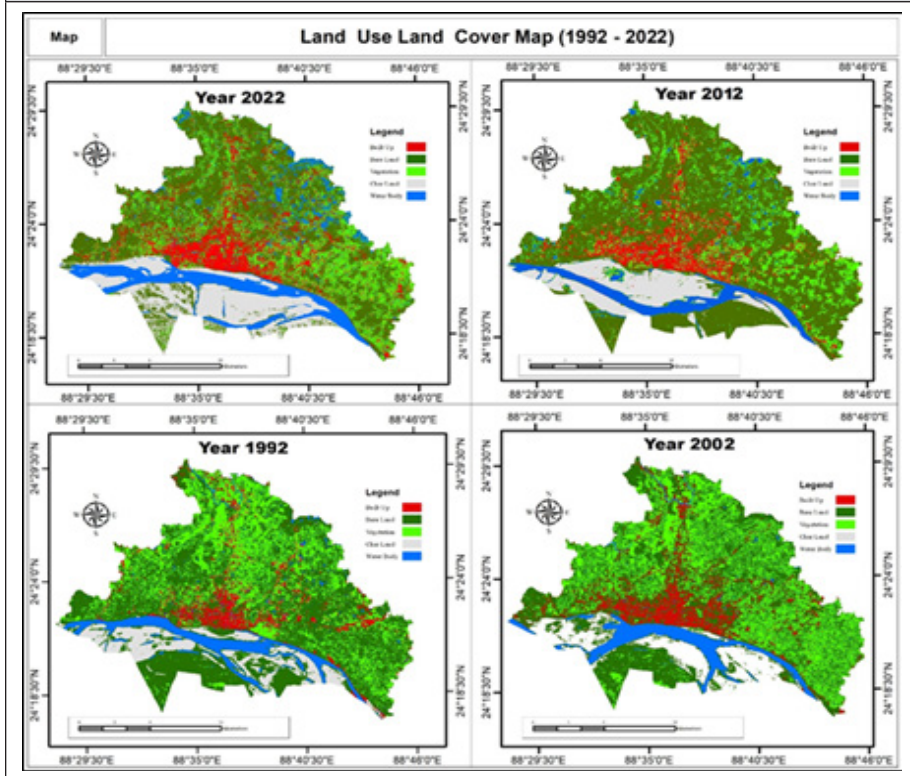
A number of factors impeded the physical growth and development of the city (Figure 4). Rajshahi, like other regional cities, suffered from Kolkata's colonial primate city development. Silk and indigo trade declines and river channel deterioration hurt the town's economy. The railway's completion in the early 1930s aided town development, although its proximity to the northern edge of the build-up region and river alignment limited typical growth. Between the railway and the river, the town could only grow along the Natore Road like a ribbon. Linear city growth has created a broken urban structure, particularly land use and traffic. Recent advances in the northward extension of the city across the railway line have highlighted the railway's role as a major obstacle to interurban mobility. Administration developed largely westward towards the administrative quarters. The formation of the University, BCSIR Laboratory, and two large-scale companies in the eastern part of the city provided a new growing push in the opposite direction. Of course, these developments have increased the city's linear extent, emphasizing Natore Road's dominance as the principal urban artery.



Decadal Land Use Land Cover (LULC) Change

A number of factors impeded the physical growth and development of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area. From the LULC change analysis (Figure 5), it has been found that, built up area is gradually increasing due to the transformation of both vegetation and bare land area. Spatial analysis results from the study reveals that, the built form portion of the Rajshahi Metropolitan Area has increased to almost twofold in the last 30 years. Subsequently, the decadal change in spatial growth clearly indicates that vegetation, waterbody and bare land portion is exhibiting a gradual decreasing trend. In addition, the residential and mixed land use is climbing, but persistent spatial growth is impacting negatively due to gradual decreasing trends in agricultural, open space and recreational land use over the study area.

Figure 5: Decadal LULC Change Map of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area (1992-2022)

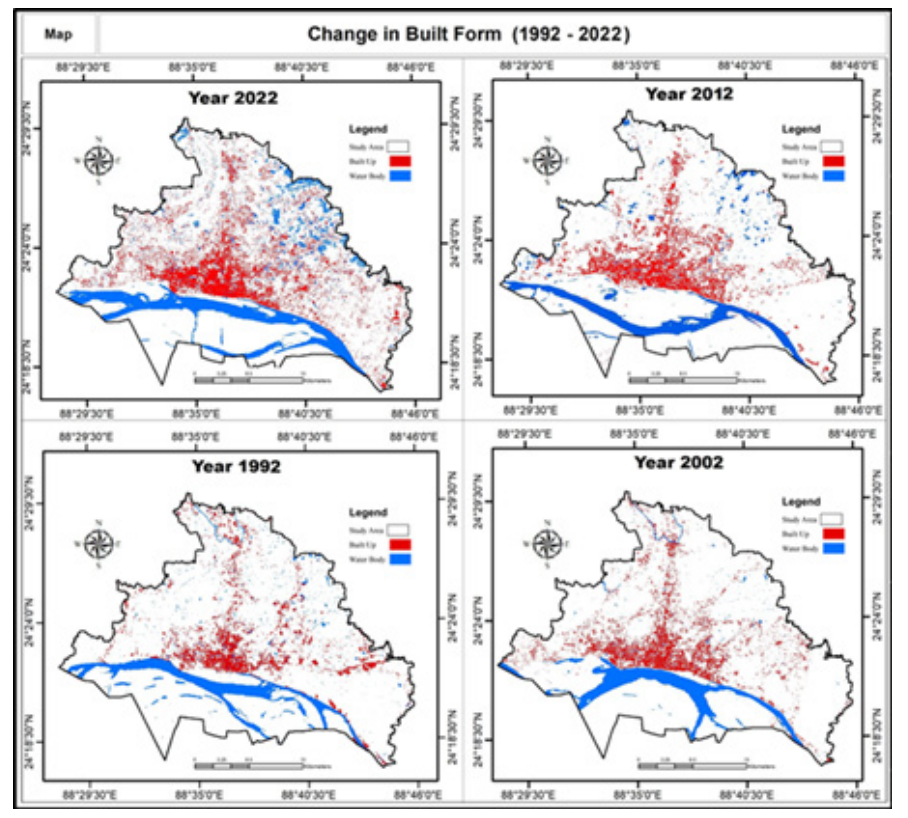


Source: Author's Preparation, 2023

Decadal Change in Built Form

This following figure (Figure 6), illustrates the increasing trend in urban development and the expansion of the built environment in the Rajshahi Metropolitan Area over the period of 2004 to 2022. The built form has consistently grown in terms of both the absolute area and its proportion to the entire region. The spatial analysis of the decadal change in built form reveals that, in 1992, the built form covered an area of 24.5235 square kilometers, which represented approximately 6.70% of the total area. By 2002, the built form had expanded to cover 29.6632 square kilometers, accounting for approximately 8.11% of the total area. In 2012, there was further growth, and the built form extended to 33.5561 square kilometers, constituting around 9.18% of the total area. The most significant change occurred by 2022, with the built form covering 45.5839 square kilometers, making up roughly 12.47% of the total area.

Figure 6: Decadal Change in Built Form of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area



Source: Author's Preparation, 2023

Land Use Pattern Change

Table 2 shows the change in land use pattern over the period of 2004 to 2022. Inside the study area, the core urban part is mostly changing its land use pattern to accommodate diversified activities and the rural fringe, mainly in agricultural use, is getting converted due to urbanization. Moreover, the increase in residential and mixed land use is occurring, although the ongoing spatial expansion adversely affects the progressive decline of agricultural, open space, and recreational land use throughout the study area.

Table 2: Land Use Comparison (2004 and 2022) of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

Land Use Category(s)	% in 2004	% in 2022
Agriculture	43.39	41.63
Administration	0.06	0.42
Assembly	0.09	0.16
Brick Field	0.09	0.55
Commercial	0.37	0.25
Char Land	10.82	11.16
Educational	1.62	1.38
Health Care	0.11	0.11
Institutional	0.03	0.05
Industrial	0.31	0.39
KPI	0.27	0.77
Mixed use	0.03	0.32
Open Space	2.38	0.18
Road	1.89	2.26
Public Utilities	0.27	0.14
Residential	19.80	22.78
Railway	0.10	0.19
Waterbodies	18.37	17.26

Source: Author's Calculation Based on RMDP GIS Database 2004 & 2022

Density Trends of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area (RMA)

Population Density in Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

Table 3 shows how population density in the Rajshahi Metropolitan Area has changed over time (2004, 2011, and 2022), considering both gross density (population per acre including all land uses) and net density (population per acre in residential areas only). The City Corporation remains the most densely populated and shows steady growth. Pourashavas and Unions, though less dense, are experiencing faster proportional growth, indicating urban expansion and peri-urbanization around Rajshahi city.

Table 3: Population Density in Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

Administrative Unit(s)	Gross Density (Per Acre)			Net Density (Per Acre)		
	2004	2011	2022	2004	2011	2022
City Corporation	33	39	46	97	99	103
Pourashavas	6	7	8	22	25	31
Unions	3	4	5	19	23	27

Source: Author's Calculation Based on RMDP Report, 2022 and BBS, 2011 & 2022

Residential Density in Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

Residential density reveals the concentration of built-up structures available for occupation expressed in the number of habitations per acre. Concurrently, Table 4 shows the residential density of 2004 and 2022 which clearly indicates a trend of increased residential density in different administrative units of the study area over this period. The findings indicated that both gross and net population density are gradually increasing, while residential and structural density has dramatically risen over the past 20 years.

Table 4: Residential Density in Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

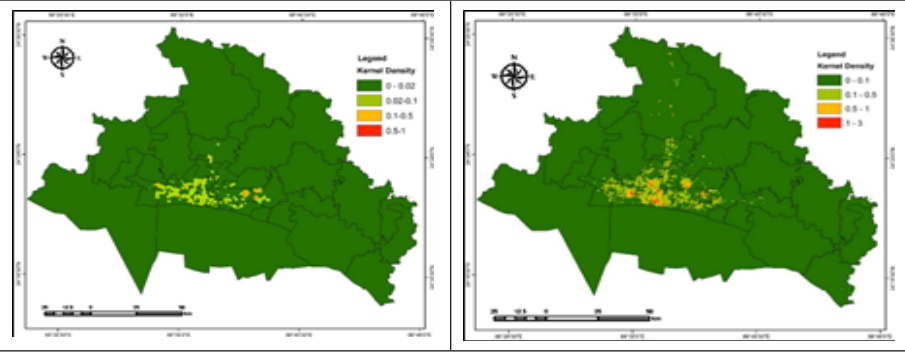
Administrative Unit (s)	Residential Units Density (Per Acre)	
	2004	2022
City Corporation	69	85
Pourashavas	84	85
Unions	87	97

Source: Author's Calculation Based on RMDP Report, 2022

Change in High-Rise Buildings

Using kernel density tool, the intensity of high-rise residential development in two periods of 2004 and 2022 has been analyzed (Figure 7). Only few darker colored cells were in the 2004's high-rise residential intensity map, but the intensity of high-rise residential development is much higher in 2022.

Figure 7: Intensity of Residential High-Rise Buildings of 2004 (in Left) and High-Rise Buildings of 2022 (in Right)

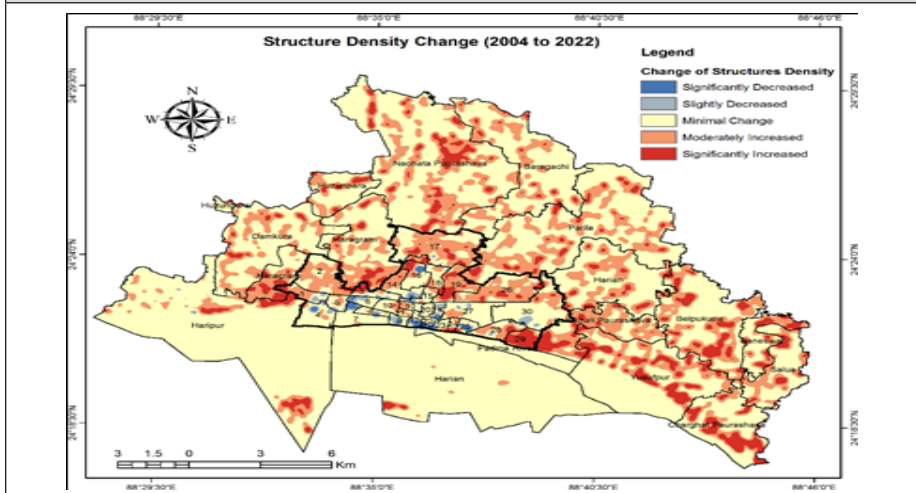


Source: Author's Preparation, 2023

Change in Structural/Building Units

Using kernel density tool, it has been found that intensity of structural units has significantly increased over the last 18-years (Figure 8) as a majority of the areas have experienced significant structural development as a result of residential and commercial development. This figure clearly indicates the rapid growth in structural development, and is also useful for tracking changes in the built environment and urban development over this 18-year period.

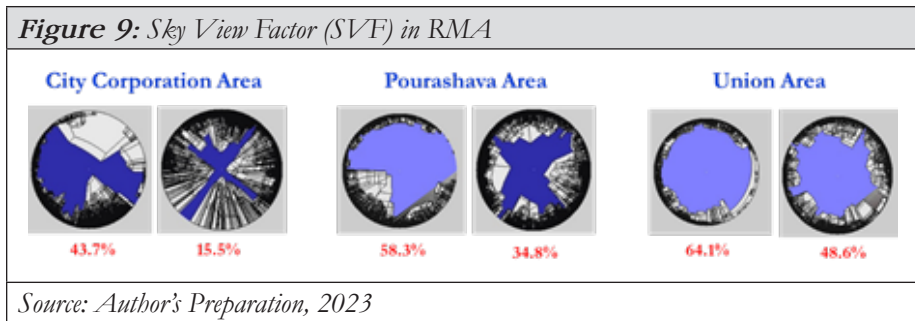
Figure 8: Structural Density Change in RMA



Source: Author's Preparation, 2023

Sky View Factor (SVF)

Sky view factor is a geometric ratio that expresses the fraction of the visible sky at the observer’s location. The SVF is expressed as a percentage and represents the proportion of the sky visible from a particular location. The sky view factor indicates the relationship between the visible area of the sky and the area covered by urban structures. In the different residential areas of the Rajshahi Metropolitan area there selected 5 points randomly on the roads of the each of the administrative units of the study area for measuring or calculating sky view factor (Figure 9). The values are calculated by using the software ‘TownScope’ version 3.2.



More SVF means low density and less SVF means high density. In this study, the City Corporation has the highest maximum SVF at 43.7%, while the Pourashavas and Unions have maximum values of 58.3% and 64.1%, respectively. In addition, the City Corporation has the lowest minimum SVF at 15.5%, while the Pourashavas and Unions have minimum values of 34.8% and 48.6%, respectively.

Livability Attributes of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area (RMA)

Livability Index Score of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

A comprehensive assessment of livability has been examined considering various dimensions related to public transport, community facilities, open spaces, community sense, safety, and dwelling spaces across different administrative units of Rajshahi Metropolitan Area, ultimately resulting in an overall livability index (Table. 5). Additionally, the table presents the Overall Satisfaction Score, which combines the mean satisfaction scores across all livability dimensions. The City Corporation has an overall satisfaction score of 3.60, Pourashava scores

are slightly higher at 3.75, and Union has the highest overall satisfaction score of 4.00. Lastly, the table categorizes the administrative units based on Density Pattern, classifying them as High, Medium, and Low. The City Corporation falls under the High-density pattern, Pourashava is classified as Medium, and Union is categorized as Low density.

Table 5: Overall Livability Index of the Rajshahi Metropolitan Area

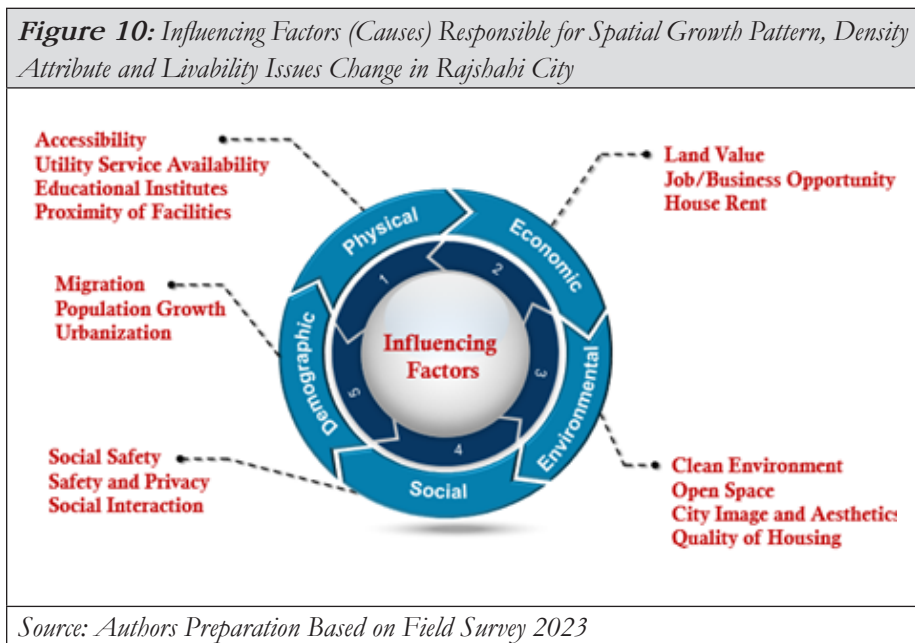
Livability Issues	Administrative Units (Mean Satisfaction Score)		
	City Corporation	Pourashava	Union
Public Transport (Travel Modes, Purpose of Travel, Frequency, Easiness of Accessibility, Waiting Time)	4.6	3.2	3.0
Community Facilities (Available Facilities, Required Time for Access)	3.4	3.4	3.0
Open Space and Public Space (Activities at Open Spaces, Required Time for Access, Required Facilities for Open Spaces)	3.0	4.1	4.9
Sense of Community (Community Belongingness and Connectedness, Social Contacts, Civic Affairs Participation)	2.8	4.1	4.9
Sense of Safety (Criminal Offences, Safety Condition)	4.0	3.9	4.0
Dwelling Space (Size and Condition Dwelling Spaces, Available Utility Services)	3.8	3.8	4.2
Overall Satisfaction Score	3.60	3.75	4.00
Density Pattern	High	Medium	Low

Source: Author's Calculation Based on Field Survey, 2023

Implications for Metropolitan Planning

Influencing Factors (Causes) Responsible for Spatial Growth Pattern, Density Attribute and Livability Issues Change

In recent decades, the landscape of cities has changed significantly because of rapid urban population growth. Rajshahi, the capital city of north-western Bangladesh is also experiencing such rapid spatial urban growth, density shift and corresponding livability change in the city development trend. The following factors (illustrated in Figure 10) are responsible for spatial growth pattern, density attribute and livability issues change in Rajshahi city-

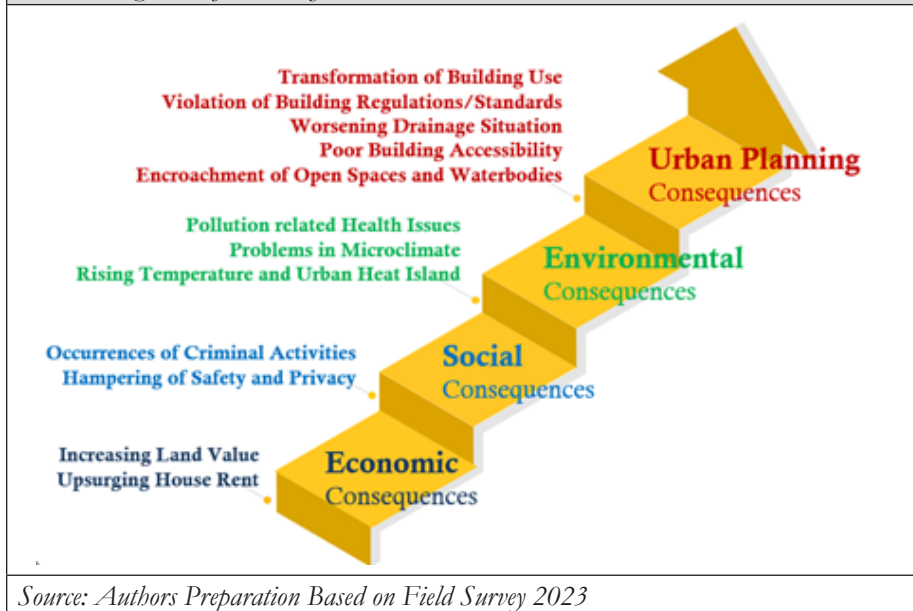


The spatial growth pattern, density attributes, and livability issues of an area are influenced by a complex interplay of various factors. These factors often interact and may lead to complex and dynamic changes in the spatial growth pattern, density attributes, and livability issues of a given area. The relative importance of each factor can vary significantly based on the specific location and the stage of development. Successful urban planning and policy-making require a comprehensive understanding of these influences and their interconnections.

Consequences of Spatial Growth Pattern, Density Attribute and Livability Issues Change

Rajshahi Metropolitan area has been experiencing significant changes in its spatial growth pattern, density attributes, and livability issues over the years. These changes have several consequences both positive and negative as depicted in Figure 11. Some of the consequences that have been revealed from this study based on field survey in the study areas are discussed here. Changes in spatial growth pattern, density attributes, and livability issues of Rajshahi are resulting in significant consequences for communities and regions as presented in Figure 8. These outcomes are mostly negative although some of them are positive depending on how these changes are managed and implemented.

Figure 11: Consequences of Spatial Growth Pattern, Density Attribute and Livability Issues Change in Rajshahi City



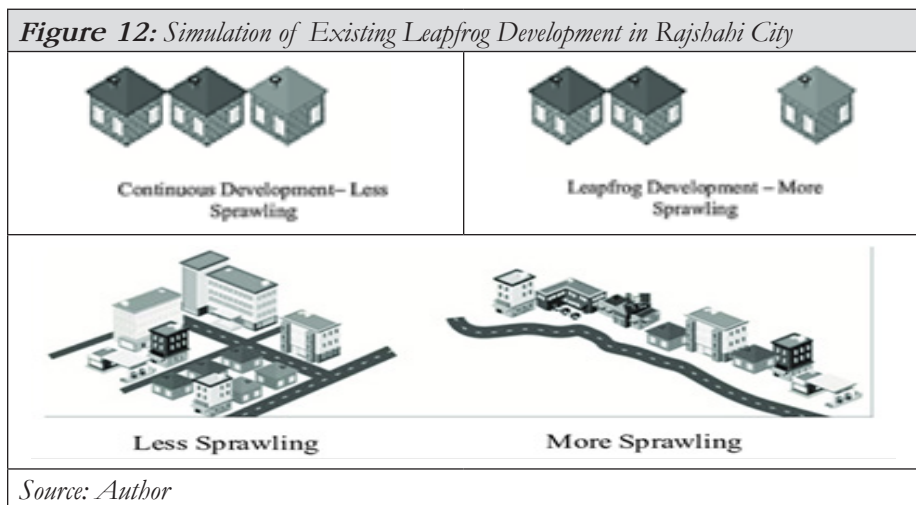
These changes in spatial growth patterns, density attributes, and issues of livability have their consequences at many dimensions and may affect a community or region in a multitude of ways. The city authorities and planners need to take up these consequences in the context of sustainable urban development, efficient land use, and improved infrastructure to ensure that the growth of Rajshahi leads to a more inclusive, equitable, and livable city for all its residents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research suggests that some appropriate guidelines are necessary to avert the prevailing scenario of spatial growth pattern, density trends and livability aspects of Rajshahi city and to minimize the detrimental effects of spatial growth pattern, density trends and livability aspects for the metropolitan planning. Following are the recommendations made of this research; grouped in three categories,

Recommendations for Spatial Growth Management

Rajshahi city must consider the green development strategy for managing its spatial growth in order to ensure that the future of the city will be balanced and livable. Findings suggest giving priority to infill development in established urban areas while restraining periphery extension through strict zoning and defining urban growth boundaries. The heat island effect can be reduced and the city can be made more livable by increasing the amount of green and open areas through controlled mixed-use development strategies (Dessi, 2015; Zolfani, 2023). Statutory stakeholders like Rajshahi Development Authority (RDA) and Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) should also employ spatial data analytics and scenario modeling to make judgments so they can plan for future density pressures and make infrastructure expenditures based on those plans (Dey et al., 2021; Haydar et al., 2024). All of these strategies will allow the RDA and RCC to manage spatial growth in a way that protects the environment and make Rajshahi metropolitan area more livable.

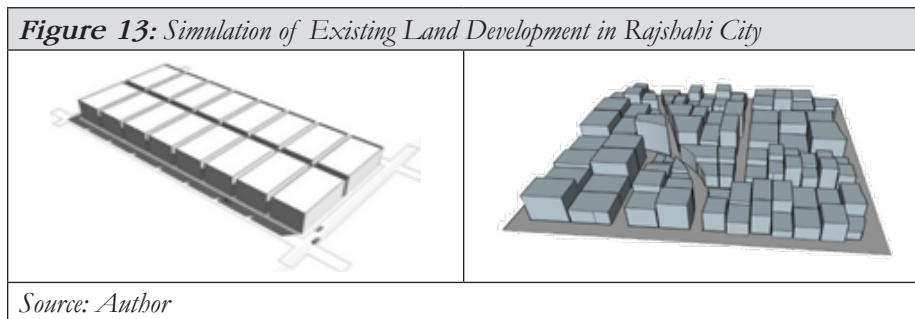


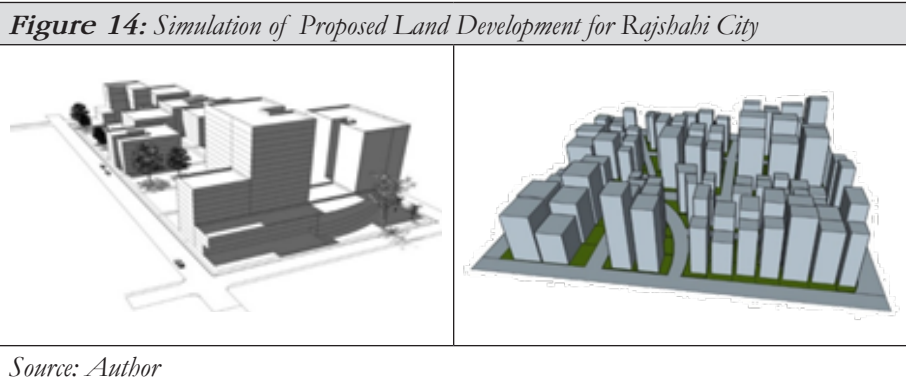
Based on empirical field observation, the study highly recommends that the fixation of the urban services boundary for Rajshahi city is crucial for managing the city's spatial growth in a sustainable and organized manner. Unplanned outward expansion of housing and real estate property markets is observed into surrounding areas of Rajshahi city. Hence, such 'Leapfrog Development' (as depicted in Figure 12) need to be controlled. Some other spatial growth management proposals for Rajshahi include:

- Land Subdivision Control
- Building Height and Building Permit Control
- Fiscal Zoning and Density Control

Recommendations for Density Control

Retaining Rajshahi city as livable and environmentally friendly, it is important to control density well to balance compact urban growth. RDA urgently need to establish guidelines and regulations as provision of the Master Plan or developing by laws to fix population density, residential density and structural density standards in the city. This kind of initiatives can make the best use of property, stop sprawl, and make sure everyone has fair access to city services (Bibri, 2020; Nipun et al., 2016; Dessi, 2015). Adding green buffers, open spaces, and vertical greening systems can help lower the stress of heat in cities and make them more livable (Rahman et al., 2024; Salan, 2024). It is also important that density regulations be evidence-based on infrastructure capacity and livability indexes to ensure that population density does not exceed the limits of services and the environment (Haydar et al. 2024). These strategies together encourage a compact but livable city, helping Rajshahi move toward better urban resilience and sustainable density management.





The residential and mixed-use plots in Rajshahi city have been developed in a less dense but fragmented manner, causing inefficient land use and increased infrastructure costs (Dey et al., 2021; Haydar et al., 2024). To resolve this, land readjustment and plot reconstruction methods should be applied to stimulate compact development, particularly in unplanned and underutilized areas, as shown in Figure 13 and 14, where simulations are prepared by using the software ‘SketchUp’ 2025 version. This would greatly optimize the use of urban space and enhance service delivery (Bibri, 2020; Dessì, 2015). Such changes might make the city more connected, accessible, and livable. These approaches will support Rajshahi in moving toward sustainable and efficient use of space in city living. Other specific recommendations regarding density control are:

- Fixation of Density Standard and Restrictions on Mixed Use
- Enforcement of Planning Rules and Regulations (FAR, MGC, MOS)
- Land Zoning and Satellite City Formation

Recommendations for Livability Increase

Enhancing urban livability in Rajshahi city requires a variety of measures that include environmental, social, and spatial planning. The study suggests that to make Rajshahi a healthier and more welcoming city, more green and blue infrastructure networks, access to public services, healthcare, and education, and improve facilities for walking and biking need utmost attention and fiscal allocation (Rahman et al., 2024; Zolfani, 2023). Incorporating mixed-use zoning and public space revival can enhance local economies and increase social interaction, adding to neighborhood vibrancy and community well-being (Komarolya, 2025; Jodder,

2025). All of these steps will eventually make Rajshahi city a better place to live, one that is more responsive to climate change.

Figure 15: Simulation of Proposed Parcel Based Land Development



Based on empirical field observation, the study highly recommends that Parcel-based land development approach (as illustrated in Figure 15, where the simulation is prepared by using the software ‘Lumion’ 2025 version.) need to be practiced to enhance livability in Rajshahi City. By following the principles and addressing the specific needs of Rajshahi city, it is possible to increase livability while accommodating urban growth. Besides, creating a “Green City” and providing functional green spaces to increase livability in Rajshahi City, more initiatives are needed to enhance the quality of life for residents, and mitigating environmental issues. Some other specific proposals for enhancing livability in Rajshahi city include:

- Green City Building and Provision for Green Spaces
- Improvement of Utility Services and Community Facilities
- Growth Management and Density Control

CONCLUSION

The study has provided a holistic view of the spatial development, density trends, and livability aspects of Rajshahi City. The study reveals that between

1992 and 2022, Rajshahi City grew quite quickly, with the built-up area growing by over 45% and the vegetation and open areas shrinking by roughly 32%. The average population density has been continuously rising more steadily, while the residential and structure density has been rising much faster over the past 20 years. It shows that core wards are becoming more densely populated. Spatial study indicates urban growth and sprawl in newly urbanized periphery zones, depicting the environmental consequences of unregulated densification. Dey et al. (2021); Hasnat (2022); Rahman et al. (2024) mentioned in their studies that higher densities have enabled better access and brought more services closer, but at the cost of making cities less livable by removing open, green, and blue spaces and worsening microclimatic comfort. Recent evidence has been found regarding the compact city trade-offs. Bibri 2020; Dessì 2015 in their study results imply that Rajshahi City needs balanced regulation of density and special attention to green and blue infrastructure to ensure that urban growth is sustainable, as well as livable. However, addressing the causes-influential factors-of spatial growth, density, and trends in aspects of livability, its resulting challenges, and harnessing the identified consequences and opportunities requires serious consideration by leaders, planners, and residents for a sustainable, vibrant, and livable future of the city. By addressing the causes-influential factors-of spatial growth, density, and trends in aspects of livability, its resulting challenges, and harnessing the identified consequences and opportunities require serious consideration by leaders, planners, and residents to make Rajshahi City grow sustainably, enabling a better quality of life for all its citizens. The choices made today will reverberate through the city's future, making the responsible and informed planning a necessity for the well-being of current and future generations. The study has also revealed useful policy insights for improving city planning system and ensure Rajshahi city growth and development in a planned and sustainable way.

FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS OF STUDY RESULTS

There needs more research in the field of spatial growth pattern, density trends and city livability aspects to develop it as a strong tool in the planning process of our country. Research in different region such as, urban, sub-urban and rural to fix the indicator by which can be identify the levels of spatial growth, density and livability.

- Future studies can investigate livability at the neighborhood level to establish a more critical understanding of city livability from the residents' perspective.

- Forthcoming revisions can include the spatial growth and density trends impacts on the city's infrastructure, transportation and utility services and implications of these trends on urban planning and livability.
- Further studies can incorporate this study to identify strategies limiting the urban spatial growth in Rajshahi Metropolitan Area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to the Directorate of Research and Extension of Rajshahi University of Engineering & Technology and University Grants Commission, Bangladesh for awarding the 'Research Grant'. This funding has been instrumental in supporting the research endeavors and has significantly contributed to the successful completion of the aforementioned research project.

REFERENCES

- Acioly, C. and Davidson, F., 1996. Density in urban development (Vol. 8). Lund: Lund University, Lund Center for Habitat Studies.
- Alexander, E. 1993. Density Measures: A Review and Analysis. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 10, 181-202.
- Ashaduzzaman, M., 2017. Quantifying urban growth pattern of Rajshahi City Corporation. MURP Thesis, Khulna University.
- Bibri, S.E., 2020. Compact city planning and development: emerging practices and strategies for achieving the goals of sustainability. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 61, 102360.
- Brenner, N. and Schmid, C., 2014. The 'urban age' in question. *International journal of urban and regional research*, 38(3), pp.731-755.
- Cheng, V. 2010. Understanding density and high density. Designing high-density cities for social and environmental sustainability. London: Earthscan.
- Cochran, W.G., 1977. Sampling techniques. John Wiley & Sons.
- Dessi, V., 2015. Environmental sustainability vs livability of the compact city? *Techne - Journal of Technology for Architecture and Environment*, (10), pp. 101-108.

- Dey, N.N., Al Rakib, A., Kafy, A.-A. & Raikwar, V., 2021. Geospatial modelling of changes in land use/land cover dynamics using multi-layer perceptron–Markov chain model in Rajshahi City, Bangladesh. *Environmental Challenges*, 4, 100148.
- Doza, S. B. 2008. Analysis and Identification of the Spatial Pattern in Rajshahi Old Town. M. Arch Thesis, Department of Architecture, Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology, Dhaka – 1000, Bangladesh.
- Forsyth, A. 2003. Measuring Density: Working Definitions for Residential Density and Building Intensity, Design Brief, Number 8. Minnesota, USA: Design Center for American Urban Landscape, University of Minnesota.
- Hasnat, G.N.T., 2022. Assessment of spatiotemporal distribution pattern of land surface temperature in Rajshahi City Corporations. *Urban Climate*, 43, 101136.
- Haydar, M., Hosan, S. & Rafi, A.H., 2024. Assessment of urban expansion susceptibility in major urban units of Bangladesh leveraging machine learning and geostatistical approach. *Journal of Urban Management*, 14(2), pp. 187–200.
- Howley, P., Scott, M. & Redmond, D. 2009. Sustainability versus livability: an investigation of neighborhood satisfaction. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 52, 847-864.
- Huang, G. 2017. Modelling Urban Spatial Growth in Mountainous Regions of Western China. *Mountain Research and Development* 37(3):367–376.
- Jacobs, A. & Appleyard, D. 1987. Toward an Urban Design Manifesto. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 53, 112-120.
- Jodder, P.K., 2025. Urban livability in a rapidly urbanizing mid-size city: lessons for planning in the Global South. *Sustainability*, 17(4), 1504.
- Kaido, K. 2005. Urban densities, quality of life and local facility accessibility in principal Japanese Cities. In: JENKS, M. & DEMPSEY, N. (eds.) *Future forms and designs for sustainable cities*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Kashem, M.S.B., Chowdhury, T.A., Majumder, J. and Rahman, M.A., 2009. Quantifying urban form: A case study of Rajshahi City. *Journal of Bangladesh Institute of Planners*, 2, pp.39-48.
- Khan, A.M., Hossain, S.N. and Reza, F., 2017. Revisiting Density Concepts for City Planning and Its Implications for Dhaka City. *Journal of Bangladesh Institute of Planners*, pp.1-13.

Komarolya, D.V., 2025. Identifying indicators for planning and designing lively urban landscapes. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 243, 105954.

Martino, N., Girling, C. and Lu, Y., 2021. Urban form and livability: socioeconomic and built environment indicators. *Buildings & Cities*, 2(1).

Myers, D. 1987. Community-relevant measurement of quality of life: A focus on local trends. *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 23, 108-125.

Nipun, M.W.H. 2023. Field Survey Report on Spatial Development, Density Trends and Livability Aspects for Metropolitan Planning: Implications for Rajshahi City. Unpublished Field Survey Report, Directorate of Research and Extension, Rajshahi University of Engineering & Technology (RUET), Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

Nipun, M.W.H., Kakon, A.N. and Hossain, S.N., 2016. Growing Residential Built Density of Dhaka City—Causes, Consequences and Solutions: A Case Study on Mirpur Section 2 and Kazipara. *Journal of Bangladesh Institute of Planners*, pp.27-42.

Rahman, M.M. and Hasan, J., 2024. Evaluating the impact of green spaces on urban heat reduction in Rajshahi, Bangladesh using the invest model. *Land*, 13(8), p.1284.

Salan, M.S.A., 2024. Estimating impacts of micro-scale land use/land cover changes on urban environmental variables. *Urban Climate*, 56, 102031.

Satu, S. A. 2014. An examination of the livability of dense urban neighborhoods in Dhaka: the impacts of urban planning. The University of Hong Kong (Pokfulam, Hong Kong).

Throsby, D., 2005. Cultural heritage as financial asset in strategies for urban development and poverty alleviation. In *International Conference for Integrating Urban Knowledge and Practice* (pp. 2-14). Formas.

UN Habitat, 2013. *Urban Planning for City Leaders*. Nairobi, Kenya.

Van Kamp, I., Leidelmeijer, K., Marsman, G. and De Hollander, A., 2003. Urban environmental quality and human well-being: Towards a conceptual framework and demarcation of concepts; a literature study. *Landscape and urban planning*, 65(1-2), pp.5-18.

VCEC 2008. Department of Sustainability and Environment, Inquiry into Enhancing Victoria's Livability. Melbourne: Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission.

Wheeler, S. 2001. Planning Sustainable and Livable Cities. In: GATES, R. L. & STOUT, F. (eds.) The City Reader. London and New York.

Zolfani, S.H., 2023. Evaluation of urban livability based on environmental and amenity indicators. International Journal of Strategic Property Management, 27(2), pp. 145–158.

AUTHORS

Muhammad Waresul Hassan Nipun is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Rajshahi University of Engineering & Technology (RUET), Rajshahi, Bangladesh. He earned his Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning (BURP) degree and Master of Urban and Regional Planning (MURP) degree from Jahangirnagar University and has been actively engaged in teaching, research, and professional practice since then. Muhammad Waresul Hassan Nipun is also a passionate Urban Planner with an enthusiasm in Transportation Planning and Urban Management Sector incorporating Geographic Information System (GIS). He has published several peer-reviewed journal articles in leading national and international journals. He is a member of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP). His research interests include Urban Planning and Management, Spatial Growth Analysis, Transportation Planning and Management, and Housing and Real Estate Development.

Email: waresulhassan@urp.ruet.ac.bd

Farhana Muna is a young enthusiastic urban planner currently serving as an Urban Development Specialist at Tiller, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She graduated from Jahangirnagar University with a Master and Bachelor Degree in Urban and Regional Planning. She is a member of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), and her professional and research interests include urban studies, spatial planning, sustainable urban development, land use planning, and policy analysis. In addition to her excellent academic achievements and professional career, she has a strong interest in exploring various dimensions of Urban Planning. She believes that research serves as a catalyst for bringing positive changes to society, the nation, and humanity at large.

Email: farhana.urpju@gmail.com

NDC E-JOURNAL

Security Through Knowledge



**A Peer Reviewed Professional E-Journal of the
National Defence College, Dhaka, Bangladesh**

<http://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php>

CALL FOR PAPERS

NDC E-JOURNAL invites unpublished, original, and innovative research and review articles on any subject area as per the aim and scope of the journal which should be in between 5000 to 6000 words excluding references. For submission of articles, manuscript template, and authors' instructions, please visit the journal website at: <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php>

Submitted manuscripts will undergo a double-blind peer review process. NDC E-JOURNAL offers faster peer review process. There will be no charges for registration, online submission, the publication of manuscripts, and access to the published articles.



*NDC E-JOURNAL is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License*