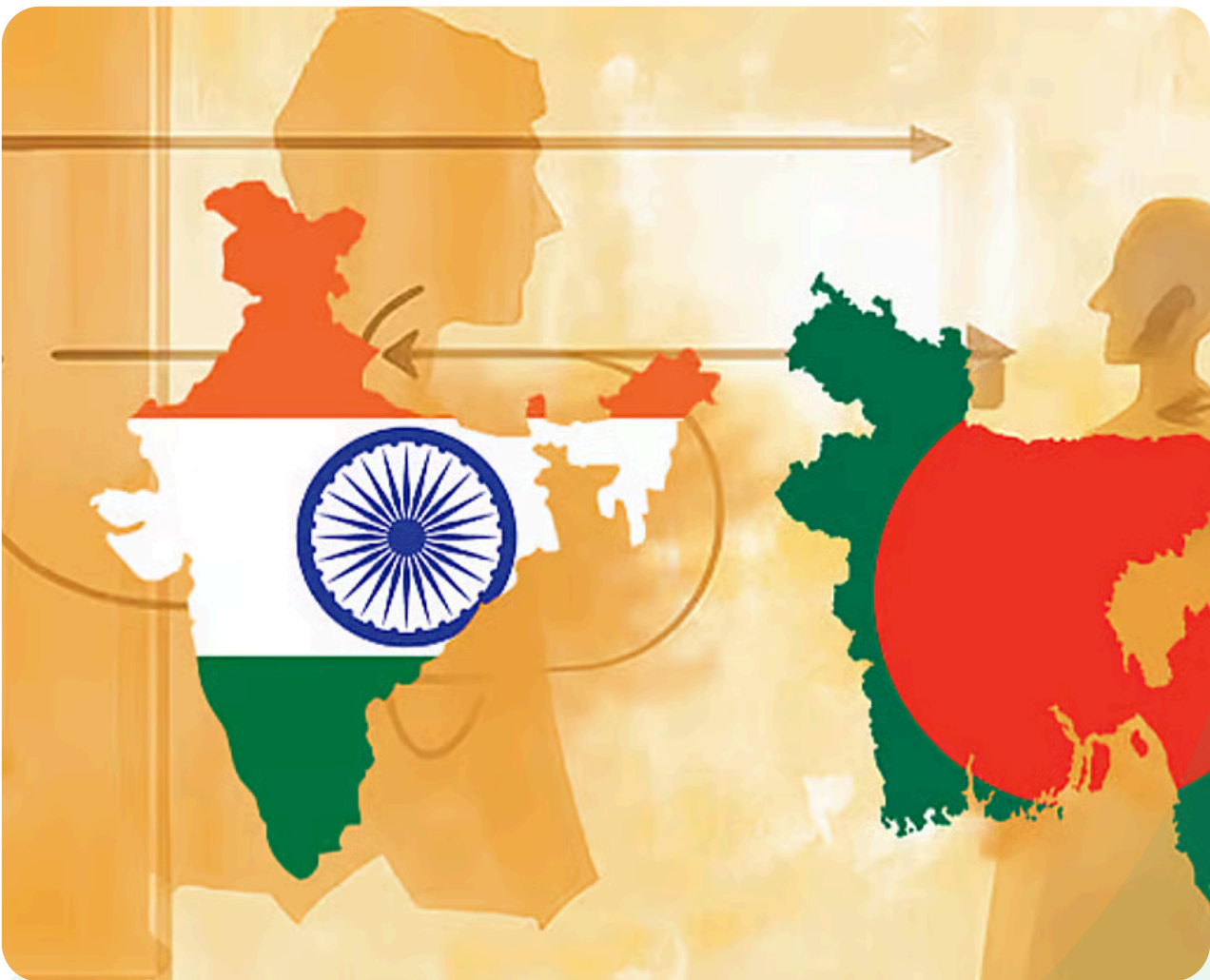


BEYOND THE BINARY: THE RISE OF ASYMMETRIC REALISM IN BANGLADESH-INDIA RELATIONS



It is typical of the classical textbook on IR to pose a clear dichotomy to small states existing under the dominance of a larger power, which are either to 'Balance' or 'Bandwagon'. The relation between Bangladesh and India for decades was seen in such a way. At one point, there was an attempt to balance, which meant coldness and ideological conflict, while at another time, it involved bandwagoning based on political confidence and historic bonding.

Yet, the political transformation in Dhaka in 2026 signals the finality of this dichotomy. With the rise of the "Bangladesh First" ideology, Bangladesh has taken the initiative to embark on a third way, "Asymmetric Realism".

THE FAILURE OF TRADITIONAL IR BINARIES

Classic theories such as Kenneth Waltz's Neorealism have difficulty in accounting for the direction that present-day Bangladesh is following, as they view small states as passive actors that are forced to either "align" or "resist."

A

Paradox of Balancing: Aggressive military balancing in case of Bangladesh with respect to India is an exercise in futility. Given its 4,000 km common border with India, the effort to construct a "wall of containment" will inevitably result in strangulating itself economically.

B

Tripping Up by Bandwagoning: Alternatively, bandwagoning, which is based upon patronage politics, has turned out to be a brittle option, giving rise to a "client state" syndrome leading to internal discontent and dependence on political elites instead of stable state structures.

ASYMMETRIC REALISM: A STRATEGY OF RECIPROCITY

Asymmetric Realism acknowledges a fundamental truth: Geography is a condition to be managed, not a fate to be feared. At its core, this emerging strategy is defined by three pillars that offer a new blueprint for small states globally –

A

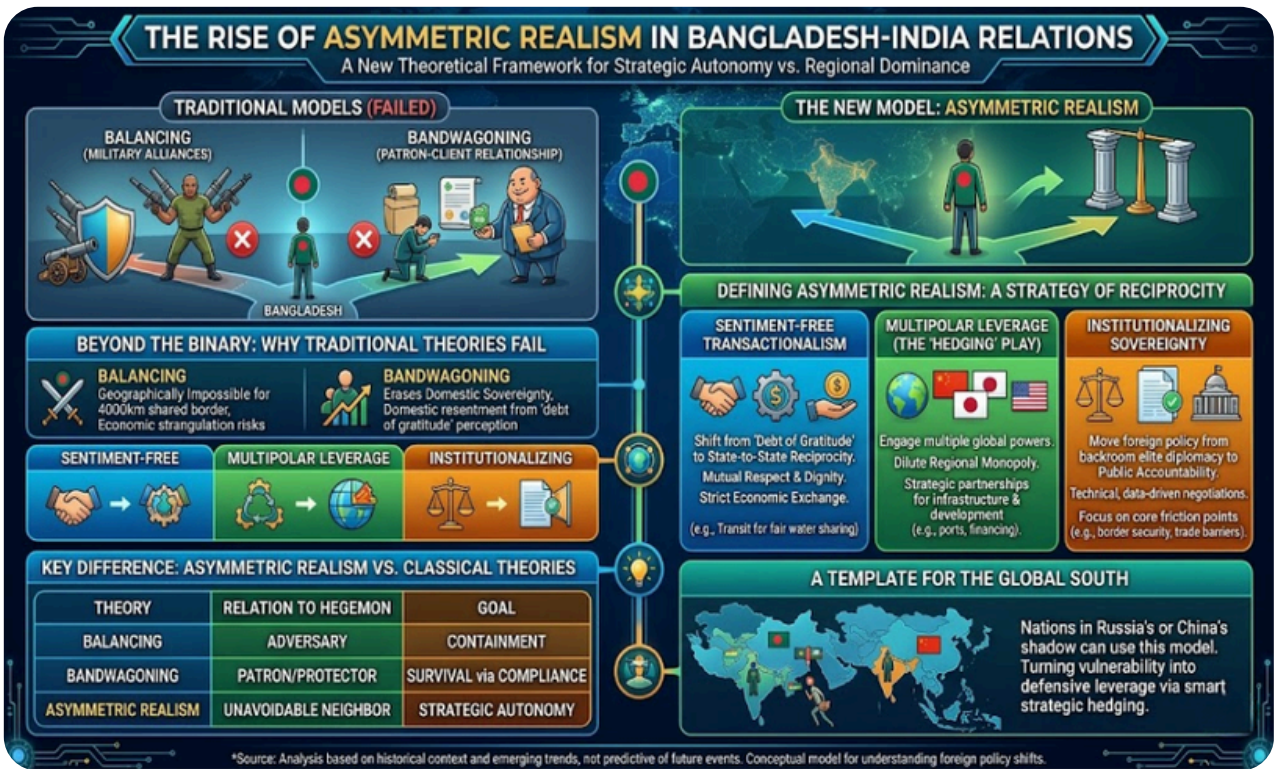
Sentiment-Free Transactionalism: Historic help during the 1971 Liberation War is a foundational pillar of national memory, but it is no longer the currency of modern diplomacy. The change of approach to reciprocity guarantees that all bilateral agreements, starting from power grids to transit channels, will be assessed according to their present-day importance.

B

Multipolar Leverage (The "Hedging" Play): By not having dependence on one hegemonic power, Asymmetric Realism ensures itself to get embedded in the regional infrastructure of several global powers. With alliances being made with the West for trading, with China for financing its industries, and with Japan for developing its ports, Bangladesh is making a situation where the leading nation will have to give better offers to remain relevant.

C

Institutionalizing Sovereignty: The critical change that can be noted is the transition from backstage elitist diplomacy to institutionalized negotiations within foreign policy. As a result of this change in strategy, Bangladesh ensures that the issues concerning water sharing, borders, and trade cannot be traded by elite members who are sympathetic to India for political gain or vested interests.



A NEW MODEL FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Bangladesh is now demonstrating how a country could have strong bonds with a dominant neighbor yet keep away from hegemonic influences at the same time. It is achieved by skillfully engaging in functional interdependence rather than challenging the neighbor in any way.

Through making itself an indispensable part of India's security through access to the Indian northeast, Bangladesh has transformed its geographical vulnerability into a strategic advantage. The relationship would be transformed from one of patronage to one of interdependence.

The "Asymmetric Realism" of the new Bangladesh is a lesson for both its neighbors and great powers; the age of simplistic alliances is gone. Instead, there is a far more practical and pragmatic approach to foreign policy. For other countries, in similar positions in the tug of war between regional behemoths, in Asia Minor, the Middle East, or South or Southeast Asia, the lessons offered by Bangladesh should be taken very seriously. They show that a small country doesn't have to accept either submission (capitulation) or conflict as its sole options. Instead, through professional diplomacy, broad international cooperation, and an internally agreed foreign policy, it can assert itself as a sovereign nation, even in the shadow of a hegemon.