

# Pragmatic Liberalism and President Obama: An Analysis of U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This research seeks to examine the foreign policy of President Obama with special reference to Bangladesh from the point of pragmatic liberalism. Pragmatism means understanding the realities of the situation and making decisions based on thorough research of these realities. Pragmatism opposes strict adherence to ideological beliefs in pursuing foreign policy. President Obama came into power amid one of the most volatile and dangerous times in the history of the United States occupied with two foreign wars, and inherited an economy on the brink of collapse. The key features of Obama's pragmatic liberalism in foreign policy are to promote liberal ideas as long as it does not threaten the national security interests, emphasize diplomacy in solving the conflicts, foster humanitarian issues, develop alliances and multilateral agreements, uphold the major national interests, and strengthen national security defined in terms of economic well-being. The article will analyze U.S. foreign policy toward Bangladesh based on pragmatic liberalism of President Obama.

## Keywords

Obama's foreign policy, pragmatic liberalism, U.S. foreign policy, U.S.–Bangladesh relations, terrorism, domestic security, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), garment exports, labor relations

Foreign policy of a country is influenced by domestic politics, the nature of the political system, and international environment. Therefore, to understand the foreign policy of the United States, we need to have a good grasp of these forces. Balz and Johnson (2010) remarked that during the presidential campaign of 2008, even though Obama talked like a centrist and pragmatist, his advocacy for health care reforms, higher taxes on the rich, and his energy policy made him a liberal.

In terms of foreign policy, he pursued a pragmatic liberal policy. This study will seek to examine Obama's foreign policy from the point of a philosophy, which can be described as a pragmatic liberalism. Pragmatism means understanding the realities of the situation and making decisions based on thorough research of these realities. Pragmatism opposes strict adherence to ideological beliefs in pursuing foreign policy. Pragmatism is defined by Quinn (2011) as conscious preferences for practical solution and pursuing policies based on facts, evidence, and structured rational choices. President Obama campaigned on economic recovery and ending the Iraq War, which was responsible, to a great extent, for the economic trouble in the United States. The contexts in which Obama came into power explain the pragmatic liberal foreign policy of President Obama.

President Obama came into power in the midst of one of the most explosive and dangerous times in the history of the

United States occupied with two foreign wars, and inherited an economy on the verge of collapse. President Obama faced two wars, an ongoing terrorism, and an uncertainty in nuclear proliferation and a low point in United States–Russia relations (Loy, 2011). The new president faced a country stalled by two wars (one from which it struggled to exit, and one it seemed unable to win). His foreign policy faced the worst economic crisis with an unemployment rate of almost 10%. “The annual deficit had gone from an average \$40 billion for the years 1993 to 2000 (with every year showing an improvement over the preceding) to an average deficit of \$250 billion for the years 2001 to 2008” (Loy 2011; 23).

Even though the United States decided to withdraw from Iraq as a result of the apprehension that it cannot keep the troops over a long period of time, it is faced with continuous terrorist threats and the dangers in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the President faced the challenge of building trust and respect in U.S. foreign policy, which under President Bush was perceived by the rest of the world as arrogant. President Obama (2007) was very critical of the way the Bush administration

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responded to the terrorist attacks focusing only on military solution. He was especially critical of the Iraq war, which according to Obama led to the loss of trust in the United States. About 13 months before President Obama came to office, the economy suffered a serious setback with the loss of 4.4 million jobs. Furthermore, Obama realized that in a globalized world, the United States may be the important player, but other countries also have a major role in world politics. Even though the United States remains a significant military, diplomatic, and economic power, it is difficult to lead the global agenda (Lindsay, 2011). The economic crises and the complexities in world politics with the rise of many actors influenced pragmatism in Obama's foreign policy.

On the other hand, liberalism emphasizes the deep held values of the United States: promoting democracy and liberty in general. The key features of pragmatic liberalism include the following features:

1. Promote liberal ideas
2. Emphasize diplomacy in solving conflicts
3. Foster humanitarian assistance
4. Maintain alliances and multilateral agreements
5. Promote the national interest: Preventing terrorism
6. Strengthening domestic security through economic welfare

### Promote Liberal Ideas

President Obama's foreign policy is based on promoting liberal ideas as long as it does not threaten national security interests. The values of democracy and equality are the centerpiece of his presidency. In terms of promoting these values, President Obama was very careful not to endanger the national interests. His cautious approach in the Middle East represents these ideas in foreign policy. President Bush's war in Iraq in the name of establishing democracy was discredited not only around the world but also in the United States because it was perceived as an excuse for the invasion of Iraq. Therefore, President Obama is very cautious in the promotion of liberalism as a foreign policy goal. This approach also explains why he is so hesitant to get involved directly in Syria, which is carrying on massive atrocities. Obama would like to promote liberal ideas as long as it does not involve U.S. military involvement. Obama stated,

I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: No system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other. (Etzioni 2011; 94)

His liberal but pragmatic ideas have been endorsed by other authors. Pragmatism in foreign policy helped Obama in maintaining a delicate balance between American values and the strategic interest in the world (Indyk, Lieberthal, &

O' Hanlon, 2012). President Obama strongly believes in bipartisanship in foreign policy and tries very hard to come up with a consensus. He tries to avoid divisive issues—democracy, defense, markets, and unilateral leadership, and pursues policies that unite the people—stability, disarmament, regulations, and diplomacy (Nau, 2010). His advocacy of solving environmental, health, and immigration problems resonate with the people transcending the national interests. His belief in promoting liberalism is reflected in his speech in May 2009 at the National Archives on national security. He remarked,

I believe with every fiber of my being that in the long run we . . . cannot keep this country safe unless we enlist the power of our most fundamental values. The documents that we hold in this very hall—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights—these are not simply words written into aging parchment. They are the foundation of liberty and justice in this country, and a light that shines for all who seek freedom, fairness, equality, and dignity around the world.

In his second inauguration, President Obama emphasized the values of democracy and commitment to preserve democratic values in the world.

### Emphasize Diplomacy in Solving the Conflicts

In terms of dealing with adversaries, President Obama emphasizes diplomacy over the use of force, which he viewed as the last resort. President Obama realized how threatening and hated President Bush's policy of offensive deterrence was, which led to Iraq war. This experience influenced his disdain for the use of force. Moreover, as a pragmatic, Obama understood the limit of American power. He did understand that American military power has been stretched to the maximum and any further military involvement will be a disaster. As a result, he emphasized diplomacy over the use of force. This explains why he was so reluctant to use force against Iran despite growing domestic pressure to intervene (Indyk et al., 2012). As a pragmatic, as long as it does not threaten vital U.S. interests, he is willing to work with adversaries to solve conflicts. He considers that the use of force should be the last resort in solving the conflicts. His policy of diplomacy with adversaries has been criticized as weak and inefficient. The recent criticisms by Republican Senators John McCain of Arizona and Lindsay Graham of South Carolina for the Ukraine crisis are examples. Despite the criticisms, Obama realized the limit of using of force when the adversary is Russia.

### Foster Humanitarian Assistance

The other element of Obama's foreign policy of pragmatic liberalism is providing humanitarian aid, which broadly

includes economic and development assistance. Obama continuously advocated for humanitarian assistance, providing basic human rights, food security, and removing poverty in the world. Amitai Etzioni (2011) remarked that the central point of Obama's foreign policy is the promotion of basic human rights and refraining from the other rights, which raise moral concern. In terms of humanitarian assistance, protecting the environment has become one of the major goals of President Obama's foreign and domestic policy. Environmental problem can cause major humanitarian disasters in the world. Therefore, Obama believes that the poor countries should be given humanitarian aid to combat environmental problems, which may cause massive disaster in the world. The environmental problems can lead to drought, causing food scarcity. This can cause massive hunger and massive displacement of the world's population. President Obama strongly believes in U.S. involvement in solving global environmental problems.

### **Maintain Alliances and Multilateral Agreement**

President Obama in his second inauguration expressed his commitment for multilateral alliances and to strengthen the institutions that preserve peace. He firmly believes in strengthening alliances and multilateral agreement in solving the problems. As a result of the recognition of the dangers of unilateral decisions, he advocated building alliances, partnership, and the institutions necessary to confront common threats to security (Obama, 2007). His approach toward multilateral agreement is reflected in his dealings with Iran, North Korea, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine. His reluctance to get involved in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine has been criticized by the conservatives. However, one may criticize his policy of escalation in Afghanistan from the point of unilateralism. But Afghanistan is different because Obama inherited the situation in which the U.S. military was actively engaged in war with casualties almost every day. Obama was committed to bring the war to an end. To end the war, Obama believed that the military escalation may help to achieve his goal of finishing the resistance by the Talibans. Furthermore, the Afghanistan war was started by President George W. Bush, who failed to achieve multilateral cooperation. So, he inherited a war in which he did not have a chance to bring together a coalition of several nations.

President Obama pursued a policy of friendship toward Russia and China, considered for a long time as rivals for power in international politics. He believes that the traditional policy of confrontation and hostilities would damage the U.S. national interests. He believes that through a policy of cooperation, and friendship, the United States can achieve the general goals of foreign policy and world peace. President Obama's trip to Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar in 2012 symbolizes the growing U.S. interest in Asia and

the importance of these countries in a global alliance against terrorism. The visit to these countries also signifies the importance Obama places on human rights. His visit to Asia also implies that the United States is not ready to concede Asia-Pacific to Chinese influence. The commitment of the Obama administration to deploy 60% of the U.S. naval forces in the Pacific by 2020, up from about 50% today, symbolizes the importance of Asia in U.S. foreign policy. The Pentagon is training a counterterrorism battalion in Cambodia, despite no serious militant threat to the country.

The Asia trip testifies to the present realities in global politics: a new reality of the emergence of China and India and a de-emphasis on a foreign policy dominated by European politics. The trip symbolizes the importance of Asia in the foreign policy of the United States. Obama was trying to boost his electoral victory by a trip to Asia. He also joined the East Asia Summit. The East Asia Summit includes the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations and eight other nations: the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand.

### **Protect the National Interest: Preventing Terrorism**

President Obama believes that the primary goal of the U.S. foreign policy is the protection of the vital interests. He considers preventing terrorism as the most important element of his foreign policy because the majority of the people in the United States regard it similarly. However, Obama believes that the problem of terrorism must be confronted by multilateral means rather than relying solely on military policy. He believes that the problem of terrorism must be dealt with by the cooperation of other countries, and through the United Nations. He believes that the problem of terrorism should be addressed by multilateral and multivarious ways. President Obama (2007) believes that the forces of moderation in the Islamic world should be helped, and the United States should try to help the poor countries in education, health, and economic development.

However, one of the classic dilemmas is the issue of preventing terrorism and promoting democratic values. The policy makers face the problem of determining to what extent freedom should be allowed so that it does not threaten national security interests. As a pragmatic liberal, Obama's approach is to allow freedom as long as it does not seriously jeopardize the national interests. His reversal on the policy on Guantanamo prisoners reflects this attitude.

### **Strengthen Domestic Security Through Economic Welfare**

Another element of pragmatic liberalism is strengthening domestic security defined as economic potency of the United States. He believes that the United States cannot play a

dominant role in international politics without a strong domestic economic base. The fall of the Soviet Union proves the theory. Obama believed that domestic economic recovery was crucial for any long-term grand strategy. He believed that national security is dependent on economic recovery because to sustain and maintain the military, national economy needs to be strengthened. Moreover, the United States was overextended in wrong places, by involving in two wars, while neglecting the other parts of the world (Drezner, 2011).

In light of the pragmatic liberalism of President Obama, I will investigate American foreign policy toward Bangladesh, a small but populous country, with a democratically elected government and a majority Muslim population.

## U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Bangladesh

The U.S. foreign policy toward Bangladesh is influenced by pragmatic liberalism, a concern for preventing terrorism, and a general concern for general human development. These fit well with the pragmatic liberal foreign policy of President Obama. One of the main concerns of the United States is that Bangladesh does not become a safe haven for terrorism. Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. foreign policy toward Bangladesh received added importance because of its strategic position in South Asia. Bangladesh is strategically important because of its proximity to India and China, the two major powers in Asia. Furthermore, Bangladesh is a moderate democratic Muslim country, which may become a model for other countries. Improving relations with Bangladesh corresponds to the goals of President Obama in terms of promoting moderation and democracy in Muslim countries. With the war on terrorism, the policy makers in the United States were concerned about the poor countries, which may become the targets of the terrorists. The United States wants to make sure that Bangladesh does not become a prey to the terrorists who are looking for an escape route. The failed states are usually the target of the terrorists. The reasons for the failed states are poverty, the lack of education, and the failure to establish the rule of law. Toward that end, the United States is interested in the economic and political development of Bangladesh.

### *Promoting Liberal Ideas*

Based on the pragmatic liberalism ideology of President Obama, the United States is promoting building of the democratic institutions. However, Obama believes that the democratic institutions must be built with the involvement of the people of Bangladesh. The role of the United States is supportive of the democratic institutions. The United States has been assisting in democratic participation, electoral reforms, and increasing transparency in governmental institutions. The United States also emphasizes the development of the civil society and the improvement of transparency and good governance for the success of democracy. Former Secretary

of State Hillary Clinton in her visit to Bangladesh in 2012 reiterated U.S. support for democracy in Bangladesh. She expressed her concern about the labor problem in the garment industry.

Secretary Clinton expressed her dismay about the murder of the labor activist, Aminul Islam. She emphasized the improvement on the rule of law and demanded that the murder of the labor leader must be investigated and perpetrators brought to justice. Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake in his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia on April 5, 2011, expressed deep commitment of the United States to democracy in South Asia including India and the rest of the countries. Deputy Secretary Steinberg in his press conference in Dhaka on April 22, 2010, emphasized how the United States is helping to improve governance in Bangladesh. He pointed to the necessity of creating an environment where democracy can thrive. Assistant Secretary Richard A. Boucher in a press conference at Dhaka on February 9, 2009, also reiterated U.S. commitment to strengthen democratic institutions: the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Human Rights Commission, and the Judiciary.

More than 1,100 people had been killed in a garment factory building collapse in Bangladesh in April 2013. It is one of the worst industrial disasters in the world. On June 27, the United States canceled special status for Bangladesh because it failed to take steps to protect internationally recognized labor rights. The U.S. Trade Act of 1974 prohibits the United States from granting special trade status if the country does not comply with internal labor standards. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO), which had urged the administration to cancel the trade status, welcomed the decision. President Obama made the decision when there was worldwide condemnation against the government of Bangladesh for its failure to ensure safety of the workers.

The USAID also helps Bangladesh in improving governance by developing democratic institutions: functioning of the electoral system, the party system, and parliamentary systems. It also tries to ensure accountability in the government by encouraging peoples' participation in the oversight of the national budget ([www.USAID.gov/2012](http://www.USAID.gov/2012)).

The United States in its Human Rights Report (U.S. Department of State, 2013) was very critical of Bangladesh Government's record on violation of the human rights including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, weak judiciary, and treatment of the opposition ranging from arbitrary arrests and detention without any opportunity to face trial. As a matter of fact, the report includes a plethora of violations including massive corruption. This raises the question as to what extent the United States should take action to pursue its human rights policy in accordance with liberalism. Again, the answer lies with the pragmatism policy of the Obama administration, which prevents proactive involvement in



another country to pursue its goals. The approach of President Obama is to work within by encouraging the civil society to take leadership to reform based on liberal idea. Again, as a pragmatic, he believes in the danger of active involvement in another country to promote its foreign policy goals. Furthermore, the Obama administration realized that the possibility of drastic improvement on human rights under a different government is very slim.

However, the lack of any direct criticism toward the present government for holding the national election on January 5, 2014, in the absence of the major opposition party Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP), and without much participation of the people raises the doubt and concern about U.S. commitment to democracy and liberalism. One justification goes back to my argument that the Obama administration will promote liberal ideas as long as it does not threaten national security. Of course, the election in Bangladesh does not have a direct bearing on the national security of the United States. The lack of criticism by the United States in the recent election can be explained by the distrust of the BNP, aligned with a fundamentalist party, Jamaat-I-Islami (JI). The United States might perceive that the fundamentalist party may get a boost if the present government party Awami League is defeated. That perception by the United States has been bolstered by continuous criticisms of the Awami League of the BNP's alliance with the JI. The Awami League did successfully portray the JI as tied with the terrorist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The continuous strikes during the months of October and November in 2013 further added to the accusation of the Awami League against the BNP and the JI for violence. Therefore, the United States saw a convergence of interest in preventing terrorism as one of the fundamental goals of its policy as stated in following pages. Some thinkers may consider President Obama's policy as opportunist or appeasing to India, which was the first foreign country to endorse the recent election in Bangladesh. I would consider Obama's policy from the same arguments of pragmatic liberalism because the United States considers preventing terrorism is the primary goal of its policy. Furthermore, religious freedom and secularism coincides with the long-term liberal views of the United States. The United States considers the Awami League in its advocacy of secularism as more in conformity with the American constitutional principles of the separation of the church and the state. Again, I will disagree with the view that the United States is appeasing India in its relations with Bangladesh. The United States and India find common interests in preventing terrorism and promoting secularism in its relationship with Bangladesh. The shared values between India and the United States have been reiterated in the secretary of states' message, on January 25, 2014,

What really binds our nations and our peoples together—is our shared commitment to a strong and vibrant democratic heritage. India's transition to democratic independence and emergence on

the world stage was one of the great success stories of the 20th century. Today, it is an inspiration for so many young democracies. ([www.usstate.gov](http://www.usstate.gov))

However, with the formation of the government in India by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), an ultra-rightist party, it will be interesting to see the commitment of the United States and India to the principles of secularism.

### *Emphasizing Diplomacy in Solving Problems*

President Obama believes in diplomacy in solving conflicts. In its relation with Bangladesh, there is no direct military or strategic conflict with the United States. However, the United States emphasizes diplomacy in resolving regional conflicts with neighbors. The Obama administration emphasizes regional cooperation, which is necessary for the development of the countries in South Asia.

The first U.S.–Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue held in Washington, D.C., in September 19–20, 2012, headed by Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Wendy Sherman, and the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary emphasized to build cooperation. The United States encouraged Bangladesh to play an active role in regional cooperation with India, China, Myanmar, and other countries including the efforts in the New Silk Road, and other regional organizations ([www.state.gov/2012](http://www.state.gov/2012)).

Robert Blake emphasized the necessity of improving bilateral relations and resolving longstanding conflicts between India and Bangladesh. He also lauded Sheikh Hasina's landmark visit to New Delhi in January 2010, and former Prime Minister Singh's visit to Dhaka in September 2011, for coming up with a design for putting aside the differences and building bridges.

### *Fostering Humanitarian Assistance*

The other element of the United States foreign policy is to provide humanitarian and economic assistance so that Bangladesh can succeed in joining the successful countries. The economic and political crises can ultimately lead to political instability causing the countries to fail. The failed states can be a breeding ground for terrorism. In Fiscal year 2014, the United States has committed US\$0.05 million in peace and security, US\$1.5 million in Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, US\$7.6 million in health, US\$1.0 million in economic development, US\$3.2 million in environment, and US\$2.3 million in program management ([www.foreignassistance.gov](http://www.foreignassistance.gov)). There were no data for fiscal 2014 for humanitarian assistance. However, the United States provided US\$20.0 million in humanitarian assistance in 2013. The aid may be miniscule compared with other donors. Nevertheless, the effectiveness and breadth of the aid compared with other donors are beyond the scope of this research. The other types of assistance the United States

provide are food security, agricultural development, poverty reduction program, electricity, disaster assistance, and energy development. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and U.S. Embassy in Dhaka organized the Tech Youth Camp to encourage young people to interact with top local technology experts specializing in civic journalism and social activism. The USAID provides assistance in health care services including family planning and child care. It provides funding for early childhood education to deal with the problems of low achievement, poor attendance, and it provided funding for 1,800 preschools and adult education.

The Obama administration made a commitment to stop international trafficking of people subjected to sexual slavery. In 2005, the USAID provided assistance to more than 500 trafficking victims. The Obama administration sent Science Envoy Dr. Rita Colwell to Bangladesh on January 10-13, 2012, to discuss cooperation on global health, climate change, Feed the Future, and women and youth in Science. She was involved in cholera projects in Bangladesh for a number of years. President Obama initiated the Science Envoy Program in 2009 to promote scientific exchange thorough international partnerships.

Since 1971, the USAID has given over US\$5.5 billion in development aid, with half of that amount for food aid ([www.usaid.gov/2012](http://www.usaid.gov/2012)). The aid has led to improvements in living conditions in Bangladesh. The USAID has helped in rural electrification, management of water, tropical, forest and agricultural resources.

### *Maintaining Alliances and Multilateral Agreement*

In terms of geopolitical strategy, U.S. policy toward Bangladesh is guided by President Obama's policy of multiple alliances and multilateral agreement. Pursuant to this goal, the United States is interested in maintaining a general alliance with Bangladesh, not necessarily a military alliance. The United States believes that Bangladesh can contribute to the multilateral agreement through the United Nations. The United States also considers Bangladesh a valuable partner in world peace because it participates actively in peace missions. President Obama strongly believes in nuclear nonproliferation and actively pursued the policy in the world. He successfully negotiated treaties with Russia in the reduction of arms. Bangladesh's nonnuclear stand is in conformity with the U.S. policy. Therefore, in the eyes of Obama, in a multipolar world in the absence of the cold war, a country like Bangladesh can be valuable. Bangladesh can be a good friend in protecting the general interest of the United States, which is to prevent terrorism. He also believes that in a world no longer dominated by cold war with rival alliances, Bangladesh can be a partner in a grand alliance, in protecting human dignity and human well-being. However, the deal with Russia to develop two nuclear power plants in Rooppur, 180 km from the capital may raise some concerns in the

United States. Furthermore, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Russia in January 2013 and the deal to buy US\$1 billion worth of purchases of armored vehicles, transport helicopters, and other weaponry may cause irritation in the United States. Nevertheless, the United States has not come up with any official reaction on the new arms deal between Bangladesh and Russia. The United States would like to see Bangladesh take measures to prevent and control terrorism. Robert Blake emphasized the necessity of regional cooperation and integration and lauded the role of Bangladesh in regional organizations such as Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

In his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Robert Blake emphasized the importance of regional cooperation in South Asia and also cooperation between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. He stated that the regional integration in South Asia will enhance safety and security for the United States. Deputy Secretary Steinberg shared the same sentiment in his press conference in Bangladesh. He emphasized the importance of strengthening the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which would strengthen regional stability, food, and energy security.

The spirit of the multilateral agreement is also emphasized in the solution of environmental problems. President Obama genuinely believes in environmental protection and firmly pursues multilateral approach to the solutions of environmental problems. Therefore, the United States is concerned about the environmental degradation in Bangladesh, especially the problem of global warming, which may threaten the coastal areas of Bangladesh causing massive displacement of people.

### *Promoting the National Interest: Preventing Terrorism*

The Obama administration considers preventing of terrorism as the primary goal of U.S. foreign policy. President Obama believes that the problem of terrorism should be addressed by developing a cooperative relationship with the countries of the world including Bangladesh. In an agreement signed by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, in May 2012 assured cooperation in combating terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational crimes like drugs, piracy, and trafficking of people and arms trade. James B. Steinberg, Deputy Secretary, in a press conference at Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 22, 2010, lauded the cooperation of Bangladesh and India in combating terrorism. The recent U.S. delegates to Dhaka affirmed their commitment to help Bangladesh fight terrorism. The United States is also helping Bangladesh police and the coast guard to free its land border and sea of pirates, drug, and arms dealers, and protect its fish and gas resources.

### *Strengthening Domestic Security Defined in Terms of Economy*

President Obama believes that the domestic security of a country can be sustained through a strong economy, which is necessary for the United States. Similarly, he believed that if a developing country suffers from a bad economy, it may fall victim to terrorism. Pursuant to this belief, the United States is interested in promoting trade and business in Bangladesh.

Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs during the U.S. Trade Show Luncheon hosted by the American Chamber of Commerce at Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 16, 2012, emphasized the partnership between Bangladesh and the United States, which is the largest export market, a leading source of investment, and the third biggest source of remittances. U.S. exports to Bangladesh roughly doubled to more than US\$1 billion in 2011 and helped support around 10,000 jobs at home ([www.us.gov/2012](http://www.us.gov/2012)).

Based on U. S. Trade Representative report, Bangladesh is currently 64th largest trading partner with \$4.2 billion in trade in 2008 and U. S. imports was \$3.7 billion mostly in apparel. President Obama, who committed to double exports by 2015, also wants to increase exports to Bangladesh. Furthermore, the building of the new Silk Road will promote economic growth by improving the infrastructure, which will increase Bangladesh exports to the other countries in South Asia and the world.

Blake, in a Testimony before the Congress, stated that Bangladesh achieved economic success in recent years, sustaining an annual growth rate of roughly 6% a year for the past decade.

Bangladesh still remains among the poorest countries in Asia. Its selection for all three of President Obama's global initiatives—the Global Health Initiative, Feed the Future, and Global Climate Change—could transform the development gains achieved so far into lasting, life-altering improvements. ([www.us.gov/2012](http://www.us.gov/2012))

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Geoffrey Pyatt in his interview with ATN Bangla at Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 11, 2011, emphasized the cooperation of the United States and Bangladesh on economic matters, especially in the garment industry.

One of the major issues in U.S.–Bangladesh relations is the problem of the exports of readymade garments. The labor condition in Bangladesh garment industry has caused serious concern. U. S. Ambassador Mozena in his interview with the National Press Club at Dhaka on July 10, 2012 remarked, “Many company representatives told me about their concerns about buying from Bangladesh. They told me that they are concerned about safeguarding their reputation, they are concerned about workplace safety; they are concerned about the fact that labor cannot freely associate and set up meaningful

unions here.” The murder of the labor leader Aminul Islam caused concern because he worked for Bangladesh Centre for Workers’ Solidarity affiliated with the AFL-CIO, the umbrella American organization for labor unions.

Ambassador Mozena expressed concern because the AFL-CIO made a petition against Bangladesh’s Generalized System of Preference (GSP), a duty free access to the United States, because of its failure to protect labor rights. It is further complicated by Bangladesh’s refusal to ratify the Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement (TICFA), which shows Bangladesh’s unwillingness to protect the labor rights based on international labor declaration. However, TICFA agreement has been recently signed, eliminating one of the obstacles. Mozena also expressed concern over the status of the Grameen Bank (Micro-Credit Bank). He was disappointed at the Bangladesh government’s refusal to give refuge to the Rohingas, ethnic Muslims from Burma. The other issue of high concern was the death of over hundred employees in fire in November 2012, in garment industries. This proves the lack of safety and security measures for workers in garment industries, further complicating the relations with the United States, which has expressed concern for the working conditions.

Bangladesh has also applied for Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) funding, which would provide US\$600 million aid in two phases. The MCA is a U.S. government program that provides grants to poor countries to fight poverty. There are two primary types of Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCA) grants: compacts and threshold programs. Compacts are large, 5-year grants for countries that pass the eligibility criteria. Threshold programs are smaller grants awarded to countries that come close to passing these criteria. To be eligible for the grant, the countries must show improvement in 17 indicators on good governance. Bangladesh has claimed that it has fulfilled 10 of the 17 criteria. However, according to U.S. Ambassador Mozena, corruption is still the most important problem.

In a meeting with a Bangladesh delegation in December 2012, Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake expressed concern over three issues: the status of the Grameen Bank, corruption, and the Bangladesh’s Foreign Donations Regulation Ordinance 2011 Act. In the meeting, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues Melanne Verbeer described Bangladesh as a “model of the world” for improving the lives of women. However, she expressed concern on the status of the Grameen Bank, which had disenfranchised the women borrowers of the bank.

Recently, the Bangladesh government has decided to conduct a study on the garment sector. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, on February 14, 2013, formed a 10-member committee under the leadership of the Labor Minister to examine the garment factories. On May 23, 2014, Bangladesh Commerce Minister Tofael Ahmed requested the visiting delegation of the U.S. Trade Representative to reduce duty on exports, which is considered as discriminatory because Bangladesh

pays around 16% compared with China, which pays only 3%. The Minister also urged the delegation to regain GSP status, claiming that Bangladesh had fulfilled all the conditions. Bangladesh has made improvement in recognizing the worker's rights to form union and in providing safety. Once these improvements are recognized, Bangladesh will regain the trade privileges.

## Conclusion

The policy of the United States toward Bangladesh under Obama is influenced by pragmatic liberalism. The United States is interested in the overall political and economic development of Bangladesh. Toward that end, the United States is providing assistance to Bangladesh. In terms of geopolitical strategy, the United States would like to see Bangladesh become a partner in preventing terrorism and in cooperating in international agreement on nuclear nonproliferation, protecting the environment, and in improving the human development scores. The United States would also like to see Bangladesh improve in governance, which is essential in establishing the rule of law and the legitimacy of the government. The rule of law, economic development, and democratic institutions are necessary for political stability and preventing terrorism. Furthermore, Bangladesh, as a poor moderate Muslim country, can be a good example for other countries, especially Afghanistan and Middle Eastern countries. The foreign policy of the United States under President Obama exemplifies the idealistic goals of the United States so that Bangladesh does not become a failed state, which may become a breeding ground for terrorism. However, the massive violence among the political parties in Bangladesh recently may threaten the emerging democracy. It will be interesting to see what the United States can do to help Bangladesh resolve the violent conflicts between the government and the opposition parties. The United States has asked for restraint and cooperation between the government and the opposition parties.

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