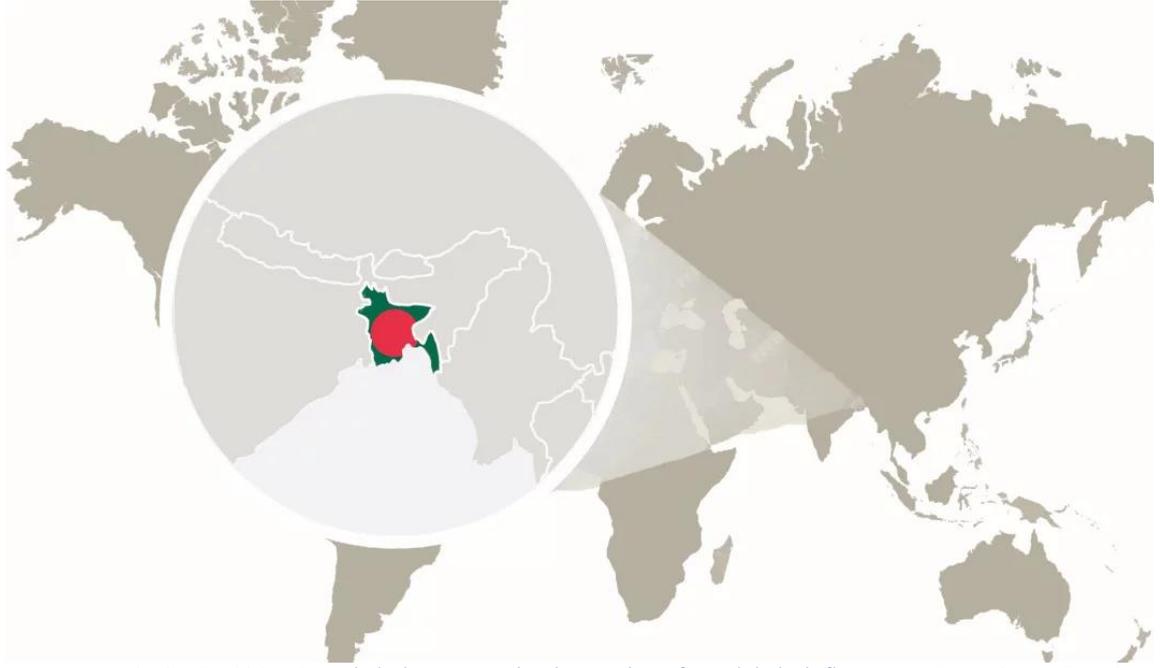


Building Narratives for Bangladesh's Foreign Policy - Maximizing Soft Power through Public Diplomacy

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[Source: Askari, Rashid. "Bangladesh's strategic imperative for global influence". December 17, 2023. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/334122/bangladesh's-strategic-imperative-for-global>]

On August 5, the people of Bangladesh envisioned a new nation where freedom, justice, and democratic rights would triumph over injustice, discrimination, and widespread human rights abuses. Over the past 16 years, Bangladesh has endured an authoritarian regime where even the mere expression of basic democratic rights was deemed anti-national or against the regime. However, a renewed Bangladesh, filled with hope, will undoubtedly require a fresh policy approach, with new dynamics and dimensions in foreign affairs emerging as one of the top priorities.

While there are numerous debates, it is undeniable that the current interim government, led by Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus, with the support of students and the general public, presents a prime opportunity to transform theory into practice. At this stage, discussions around foreign policy might be premature, as the interim government has more immediate priorities such as constitutional reform, establishing law and order, and fostering a democratic environment where free and fair elections are no longer a distant prospect, unlike under the previous regime.

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At this point, it is worth considering the ideal foreign policy for Bangladesh under the interim government. Given Bangladesh's critical geostrategic and geopolitical location, where major powers such as China, India, the UK, France, and even the USA have significant geo-economic and geo-security interests, the country's foreign policy cannot be confined solely to the realm of soft power or public diplomacy.

Maximizing Influence: How Public Diplomacy Amplifies Soft Power

Bangladesh, with its rich cultural heritage, the political values solidified by the July uprising, and its evolving foreign policy, has the potential to shape both its global and regional soft image. At this juncture, one may explore the concept of 'soft power', first introduced by Joseph S. Nye in 1990, primarily through the lens of America's image in global politics. Since then, the idea has spread globally, with emerging great and middle powers such as China, Japan, South Korea, India, Brazil, Qatar, and Turkey employing soft power to advance their own narratives and foreign policy interests. For countries like Japan and China, investment and economic engagement are central, while for India and South Korea, fostering cultural attraction is of greater importance. Meanwhile, in nations such as Turkey and Qatar, humanitarian, diplomatic, or defense engagement is positioned as a key aspect of their soft power.

In this context, although Bangladesh is a relatively small country in South Asia, its strategic location and resources reveal its potential for global influence. By utilizing its existing assets—such as historical connections, cultural appeal, tourism, education, language, sports, media, cuisine, film, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic initiatives—Bangladesh can play a significant role in both the international and regional arenas. These elements can help shape a positive global image and strengthen the country's institutional narrative within its foreign policy framework.

In its initial phase, the current interim government can focus on building soft power through public diplomacy. Given the vast scope of soft power, which largely develops organically, the most critical aspect to address is implementing effective public diplomacy that benefits both the people and the government of Bangladesh. This can be approached through three key institutional strategies. Considering the primary elements of soft power, Bangladesh already possesses values, culture, and policies, especially following the student led masses revolution of August 5. However, what Bangladesh currently lacks is robust institutional development to enhance public diplomacy. The interim government could focus on four institutional areas to cultivate “the power of bonding,” particularly within the Asian region.



[Source: RANE Worldwide. “As the Dust Settles at Home, Bangladesh Turns Its Attention to Foreign Policy”. March 8, 2024. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/dust-settles-home-bangladesh-turns-its-attention-foreign-policy>]

Educational and Diaspora Institute

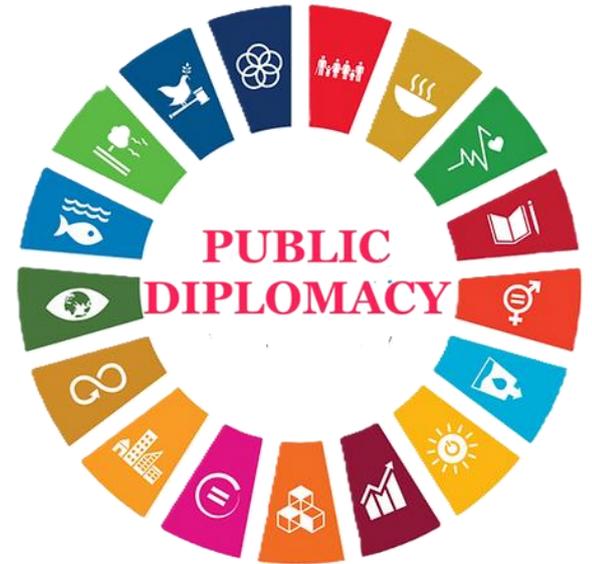
Firstly, the current government should maximize educational attraction of Bangladesh as a tool of soft power. For public diplomacy, establishing an institution that connects both the Bangladeshi diaspora and international communities with the socio-cultural landscape of Bangladesh is essential. This institution would focus on addressing the challenges faced by Bangladeshis abroad and the diaspora, while fostering socio-cultural and economic relations among Bengali and related communities, who have long suffered from the absence of an institution dedicated to supporting their needs and initiatives. For example, the Bangladeshi diaspora in the West and Middle East, as well as Bengali ethnic minorities or marginalized groups in neighboring countries, could greatly benefit by this proposed institute.

The institution could offer scholarships to deserving and underprivileged students from the diaspora and related communities. It could also organize cultural and educational exchange programs with youth from Tripura, West Bengal, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, or even underprivileged populations in India, Pakistan, and China. Additionally, it could facilitate joint scientific projects, language initiatives, and research exchanges, similar to the UK's Commonwealth, the EU's Erasmus, the USA's Fulbright, China's Confucius Institute, or Turkey's Burslari program.



Civilizational and Heritage Institute

The second public diplomacy initiative that the current interim government could develop is the creation of a “Civilizational Institute” for the purpose of “power of bonding”. This institute would serve as a bridge between civilizations, focusing on the identity and history of the Bengali community and exploring its connections with other major civilizations, such as the Chinese, Indus, Persian, Arab, Greek, and Turkic civilizations. The goal of this institute would be to foster connections rather than confrontations, emphasizing civilizational dialogue that promotes collaboration, investment, and deeper historical ties.



The institute would prioritize civilizational-based communication, aiming to generate intellectual and cultural exchanges that lead to greater cooperation. Its primary activities would include joint and collaborative research programs, lecture series, reports, and publications. By uncovering the historical links between civilizations and positioning Bengal civilization as a central figure, the institute would emphasize the “culture of peace” as the core of its discussions. This would encourage a deeper understanding of shared heritage and promote harmonious relations between different cultures and nations.

