


## Responses of Bangladesh and Myanmar to the Ukraine Crisis: A Comparative Analysis from a Neo-Classical Realist Perspective

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### Abstract

*The Ukraine crisis, which began with Russia's military intervention, has violently jolted the modern world. The egregious Russian invasion of Ukraine, on the other hand, has arguably altered the trajectory of the world order. This whiff of war does not exclude any state because all states in the world system are economically, politically, and socially interconnected and dependent on one another. Bangladesh is also feeling the effects of the Ukraine crisis. The crisis has highlighted some challenging aspects of Bangladesh's foreign policy, testing the robustness and independence of its decision-making process regarding United Nations resolutions. Myanmar, like Bangladesh, has appeared befuddled in its response to the crisis. This paper examines how Bangladesh and Myanmar's foreign policy anticipated an unwanted labyrinth by the crisis, which made its moral credibility critical to some extent. Furthermore, the paper discusses how these two countries' foreign policy trajectories became entangled at a difficult crossroads. We used secondary data sources backed up by scholarly works on Bangladesh and Myanmar foreign policy, relevant books, recent reports, and writings on the subject for this article. This paper also sheds light on Bangladesh's U-Turn in supporting and speaking out in support of the UN resolution on Ukraine's humanitarian crisis.*

**Keywords:** Bangladesh Foreign Policy, Russian Intervention, Ukraine Crisis, UN Resolution.

### Introduction

In world politics, war is an unavoidable phenomenon. The jumbled complexity and interconnectedness of war's fragrance in the global system altered political, economic, and cultural courses and discourses. The stench of war is unavoidable for states in the global structure because they are organic components of the global system. When one part of the body is affected, the other parts must suffer the same anguish and complications. However, the ongoing Ukraine crisis is causing a seismic shift in the

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organic body of the world structure, and Bangladesh, a politically promising and economically rising South Asian country, is not immune. Bangladesh, as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement and a peace-loving country, always opposes war between or among states (Karim, 2001). In this regard, Russia's intervention in Ukraine, which began on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, has left Bangladesh in a difficult and unfavourable foreign policy decision regarding the UN General Assembly Resolution 'condemning' the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and his Russian forces' military offensive and aggression in the country.

Bangladesh's stance on the crisis is concerning for its future foreign policy trajectory, as all policies and decisions are interconnected. However, on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the country made a critical decision by abstaining from the UN General Assembly resolution on "Russian aggression against Ukraine" (The Daily Star, 2022). Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and 35 other countries voted against 'condemning' Russia on the issue of the war (Tiezzi, 2022). Bangladesh departed from its customary anti-war stance in such a way that it became entangled with a moral as well as a question of interest in respect of a similar anti-war stance. By the time, Bangladesh had reversed its moral position by supporting Ukraine's resolution of the country's humanitarian crisis on March 24<sup>th</sup> in this year.

Bangladesh's decision to 'condemn' Russian aggression in Ukraine has come as a surprise. Bangladesh's peace-promoting and non-aligned foreign policy have been put to the test. Furthermore, the oblivious statements of Bangladesh's foreign policy decision-makers tangled the issue, disheartening the United States, particularly the Western world, which has been opposed to the aggression since its inception. As a result, Bangladesh anticipates a variety of international pressures, though the recent development will significantly alter the mood. While Bangladesh is experiencing such a crisis, the border country of Myanmar appears to be perplexed in its response to the crisis in light of UN resolutions. Kyaw Moe Tun, the country's UN representative, was appointed during the previous regime and thus does not represent the country's current military regime.

In a nutshell, the first section of the paper examines the pretext for Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The following section summarizes the UN resolution on the Ukraine crisis. This paper begins with a synopsis of Bangladesh and Myanmar's responses from a 'Neo-Classical Realist Perspective' with a comprehensive theoretical framework. The third section discusses the voting trajectory of the South Asian region, while its subsequent parts describe Bangladesh's stance regarding the UN resolution on 'condemning' Russia and bring out some relevant and crucial arguments and questions on its rationality and morality based on Bangladesh's previous voting posture in the UN 'town hall'. Following that, this paper welcomes Bangladesh's recent foreign policy decision on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, while Myanmar's foreign policy trajectory is also

discussed in depth. Before concluding the paper, some policies and contrivances are suggested that can help policymakers pursue a more prudent crisis strategy in the future.

### **Background and Pretext of the Ukraine Crisis in a Nutshell**

Ukraine was one of the first Soviet Union states, and it was an administrative centre that gained independence after the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991. Ukraine's birth bore no resemblance to other states founded, decolonized, or gained independence based on the Westphalian nation-state system (Popescu, 2008). However, the oral oath taken by the US-led NATO and Russia on the issue of halting its Eastward expansion has not been kept by NATO (Snyder, 2020). Despite the fact that Russia returned all of its nuclear warheads and weapons from its former administrative centre, Ukraine, to the Kremlin, it was sceptical of NATO's oath and expansion. However, Bill Clinton's presidency increased Russia's concern by granting NATO membership to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999 (Szayna, 2001). By the time NATO granted membership to the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia in 2004, the oral oath of not expanding its sphere to the east had been broken (Gragl, 2017). As a result, Putin became more hostile and vulnerable to the West, as well as more ambitious about uniting the other former Soviet Union states. While the Union was shattered into 15 pieces and lost its dominance over half of the world in 1991, Putin, the then-KGB agent, broke down and 'possibly' devised a plan to re-unify the union. According to his dissertation, Malinova says, "the breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century" (Malinova, 2018).

Furthermore, Vladimir Putin has always emphasized the political and cultural similarities between or among the former Soviet Union states and Russia. As a result, he had two goals: one realist, to ensure its security by opposing NATO, and one constructivist, to include states that are identical in terms of identity, norms, language, and culture (Morozov, 2004). As a response to NATO and the West, Putin invaded Georgia in 2008 under the guise of ensuring the security of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two proxy states or breakaway states created by Putin (Bechner, et al. 2018). Putin occupied Crimea 2014, a strategically important part of Ukraine (Ozcelik, 2015). Victor Yanukovich's dual-track policy was unable to prevent Russia's infamous expansion (Zafar, 2015).

Following the end of the dual-track policy, current Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky pursued a West-centric policy, desperate for EU and NATO membership. This notion made Putin more vulnerable and aggressive, as Russia's security, according to him, is gravely threatened geostrategically as NATO moves closer to its mainland. Given the political crisis and instability, Putin declared Donetsk and Luhansk independent, establishing them as proxy states/breakaway states to legitimize his invasion of Ukraine (Al Jazeera, 2022). However, on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded

Ukraine, waging a limited military and air war on its mainland from the east (Guardian, 2022).

### **Methodology**

This paper seeks to investigate Bangladesh's perplexing and, at times, commendable foreign policy trajectory, with a particular emphasis on UN resolutions on the crisis. This is a qualitative research project based on secondary data. Scholarly and semi-scholarly literature and articles, magazine articles, books, editorials, comments, newspaper content and news, and contemporary discourses by Bangladeshi political bodies were gathered from a variety of offline and online sources. Secondary data for this paper were gathered from various journals, books, articles, recent literary works, and relevant newspaper reports on the subject. The UN official website and various Bangladeshi websites were also used to collect data. The study also focused on Bangladesh's constitution and its provisions regarding war and humanitarian crises. The central questions of this study, however, are: 'How did Bangladesh's foreign policy trajectory become entangled in an unusual and critical predicament regarding the Ukraine Crisis?' and 'How has Myanmar's regime been perceived differently in comparison to Bangladesh in terms of representation?'

The endeavour to discover the current political development and response from Bangladesh on the issue is also discussed in this paper with bold praise in order to expound a succinct but entire theatre of the crisis and its connection with Bangladesh's foreign policy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### *Bangladesh and Myanmar's Responses: A Neoclassical Realist Explication*

Realism is a prominent theory in International Relations that explains world politics through the lenses of power politics, self-interest, and anarchy (Crawford, 2005). With numerous sub-branches, the overall concept of realism is divided into three broad strands: Classical Realism, Neorealism, and Neoclassical Realism (Lomia, 2020). Classical realism sheds light on the 'brutish, self-interested, and self-help' notion of human beings, which observes 'rationality' from the perspective of individual and state interest maximization (Korab-Karpowicz, 2010). Conversely, neorealism or structural realism addresses the issue of anarchy in the international system, in which states pursue their policies in response to the actions of great powers (Lomia, 2020).

In addition to the two preceding concepts, neoclassical realism is widely defined as a foreign policy theory that seeks to explain world politics by considering the international system and political environment in which states interact and conduct their foreign policy (Taliaferro et al., 2014). While classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau, Thucydides, Niccol Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and E. H. Carr emphasized 'human

behavior' in their depictions of realism, neorealist scholars such as Kenneth Waltz emphasized the 'anarchy of world structure and international system' (Brown, 2009). On the other hand, neoclassical realist scholars such as Jennifer Sterling-Folker, Thomas Christensen, Fareed Zakaria, William Wohlforth, Gideon Rose, and Randall Schweller place a strong emphasis on the formulation of states' foreign policies, which are primarily influenced by the international political environment through domestic politics (Lobell et al., 2009).

Neoclassical realism is regarded as a bridge between classical realism and neorealism, a new branch of realism that emerged in the 1990s. "The scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system, specifically by its relative material power capabilities," Rose contends. Because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level, the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex" (Rose, 1998).

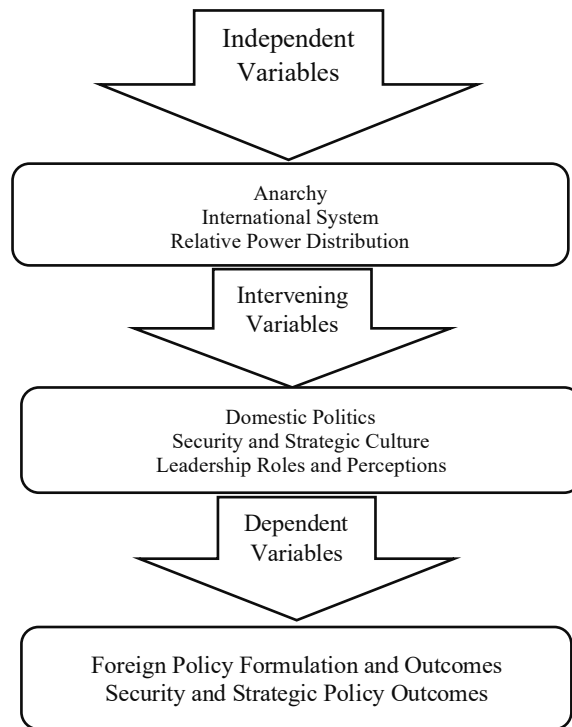


Figure 1: Neoclassical Realist Theoretical Framework. (Source: authors, 2022)

Neo-classical realism explains how states formulate foreign and other policies in response to and taking into account the issues, opportunities, and constraints posed by the international structure and system. Domestic or internal factors shape and reshape state responses in this regard, including diverse factors such as the nature of domestic politics and regimes, the relationship between the state and its society, leadership perceptions and qualities, security and strategic culture, and so on (Rose, 1998). To summarize, neoclassical realism establishes a synergy between the international system, i.e. system-level and state-level variables, through a theoretical framework in which system-level factors are treated as independent variables and domestic factors, such as

strategic cultures and leadership perceptions, are treated as intervening variables. As a

result, the dependent variable, foreign and security policy formulation, emerges from the independent and dependent variables, international system and domestic political culture and leadership (Figure 1).

### *Bangladesh's Response toward Ukraine Crisis*

Bangladesh's foreign policy is heavily influenced by the principles of 'friendship to all, malice toward none' and the Non-Aligned Movement, the majority of which are enshrined in articles 25 and 63 of the Bangladesh constitution (Rashid, 2010). Despite this, foreign policy decision-making is always cumulative and based on the situation and event. However, in relation to the Ukraine crisis, Bangladesh initially abstained from voting in an earlier UN resolution, claiming that "the resolution was not for stopping war, but rather for reprimanding Russia," as explained by the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh (The Daily Star, 2022). Aside from that, in the second resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, Bangladesh demonstrated wit and foresight by voting in favour of the Ukrainian people. Bangladesh has gone through some layers in these decision-making processes, where, in addition to domestic factors, international systematic drives played an important role. Domestic actors were the same in both resolutions. First and foremost, Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, makes foreign policy decisions. The role of Bangladesh's foreign minister is revealed later, and the decision is implemented at the final layer, where, in the case of Bangladesh, it was represented by Rabab Fatima, the country's representative to the United Nations. However, critics argue that, in addition to that domestic structure, the international system has influenced Bangladesh's foreign policy decisions regarding UN resolutions. While Bangladesh's decision in the first resolution was influenced by the idea of NAM and the uncertainty of Russia's political trajectory, the second resolution was pushed by the primacy of the US and US leaders such as Victoria Nuland (The Daily Star, 2022), despite the fact that the resolution was humanitarian in nature. Despite this, a group of academics rejects the argument by defending Bangladesh's decision-making rationality and dominance (Figure 2).

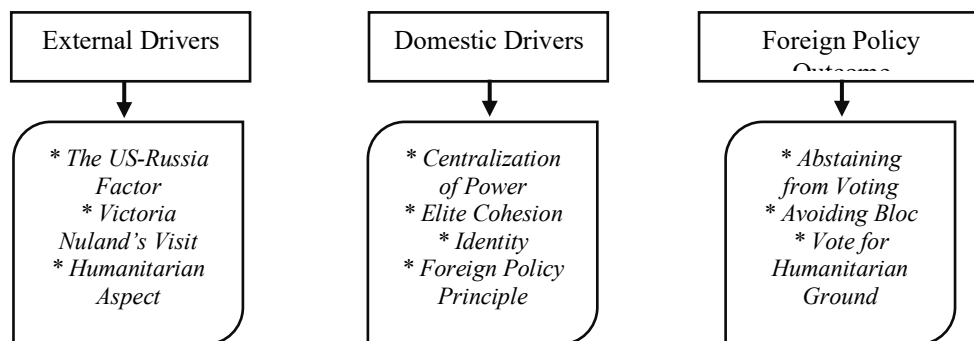


Figure 2: Bangladesh's Response from Neoclassical Realist Lens. Source: Authors, 2022

### *Myanmar's Response toward Ukraine Crisis*

Unlike Bangladesh, Myanmar's voting record at the UN did not reflect the country's current regime. Myanmar's military regime did not become competent enough to garner significant support in its favour after taking power in February 2021. However, Myanmar's vote in both UN resolutions represents the country's UN representative seat, which is held by Kyaw Moe Tun, who does not represent Myanmar's current military regime (Tiezzi, 2022). Moe Tun was appointed by the civilian government, which was deposed by a coup in 2021. Myanmar's military junta, on the other hand, has expressed strong support for Russia's military intervention, but the representation in UN resolutions was different due to the representative Kyaw Moe Tun (Tiezzi, 2022). However, through the lens of neoclassical realism, it is clear that Myanmar's decisions in UN resolutions were heavily influenced by secondary actors such as Moe Tun. He was the primary actor in the absence of a civilian government because the military regime had no opportunity to play a robust role. When independent variables are considered, it can be argued that the role of the international system, given the US's dominance, is what drove Moe Tun and other officials to vote in favour of Ukraine in both UN resolutions (See Figure 3).

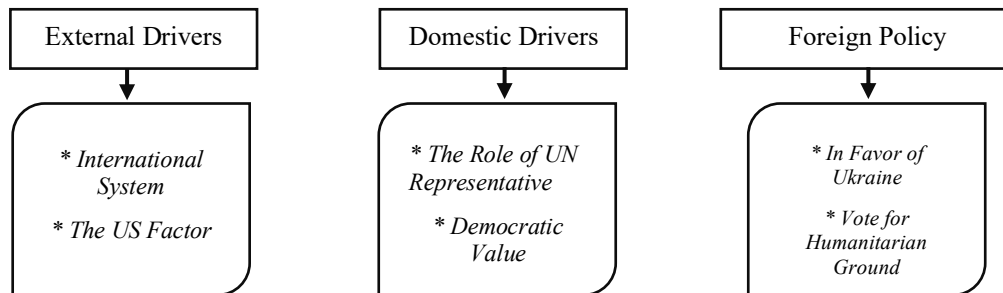


Figure 3: Myanmar's Response from Neoclassical Realist Lens. Source: Authors, 2022

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***United Nation's First Resolution Regarding the Ukraine Crisis and South Asian Voting Trajectory***

On February 27, 2020, the United Nations Security Council Resolution-2623 called for a special and emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly about Russian aggression and invasion in/of Ukraine (United Nations, Security Council calls an emergency special session of the general assembly on Ukraine crisis, adopting resolution 2623 (2022) by 11 votes in favour, 1 against, and 3 abstentions 2022). The session was convened by Albania and the United States to unite the members in their opposition to

Russia's attack on the country. Russian Federation voted against the resolution in the P-5 (permanent five members) and the other ten non-permanent Security Council members, while India, China, and the Arab Emirates abstained. Because this was a procedural resolution, no permanent member could exercise their veto power.

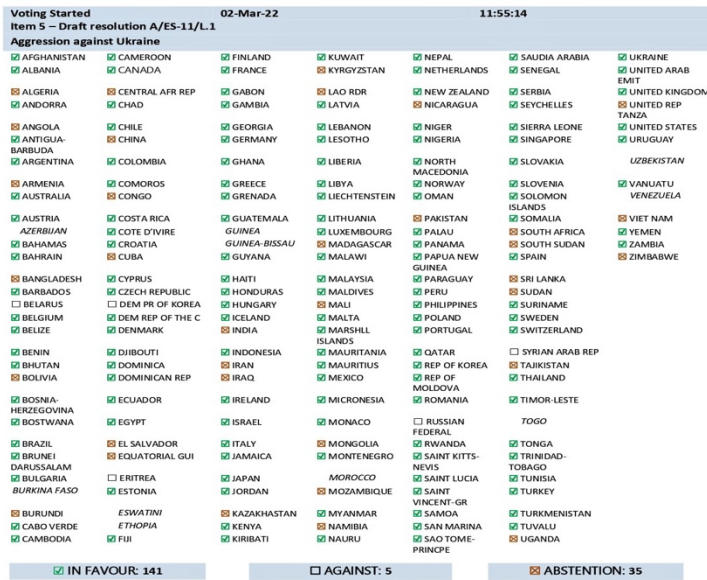


Figure 4: List of Votes: The First UNGA Resolution Regarding Ukraine Crisis (Al Jazeera 2022).

Shahid, adopted a resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanding an end to its military offensive in the country.

During the session in the world's 'Town Hall,' 193 UN member states were present and spoke with one voice, and 141 countries voted in favour of the resolution "condemning" Russia and urging it to stop its military aggression against Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Among the remaining countries, 35 abstained from voting on the resolution, 12 did not vote at all, and five countries-North Korea, Syria, Eritrea, Russia, and Belarus-voted against it (Figure 4) (Al Jazeera, 2022). The voting patterns of South Asian countries, particularly the abstentions of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan in the resolution, drew the attention of world leaders and powerful countries.

The voting trajectory in South Asian countries is divided into two factions. The four South Asian countries of Afghanistan, Nepal, the Maldives, and Bhutan voted in favour of the resolution, while the remaining four countries of, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh abstained from voting (Tiezzi, 2022). The voting gestures of the significant

Following that, on February 28, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly held its 11<sup>th</sup> 'emergency special session' to address Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although the session began on February 28, 2022, it was temporarily adjourned on March 2, 2022, due to the adoption of 'United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1' (United Nations, 2022). The United Nations Assembly presided over by Abdulla

South Asian countries, on the other hand, surprised the Western powers. They expected Bangladesh and others to support their anti-war stance, despite the fact that the countries took no specific side—neither against Ukraine nor against Russia.

***Bangladesh's Response toward the First UN Resolution on Ukraine Crisis: An Unwanted Labyrinth***

From the perspective of foreign policymakers, Bangladesh's stance toward the UN resolution condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine—an independent and sovereign country—was neutral. They argue that Bangladesh chose the right path by abstaining from voting in the resolution because Bangladesh's foreign policy is based on "friendship to all and malice toward none" (Akbar & Khan, 2017). Similarly, other major and significant South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan, as well as Bangladesh, have refrained from taking sides by abstaining from voting. The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh argued in the General Assembly Special Session on the resolution that "Bangladesh is in favour of peace, as always, and does not want war. And Bangladesh is deeply concerned about the war's predicament and hopes that the UN Charter will be followed to end the crisis. Ukrainians must be safe, and the UN Secretary-General must take the lead in resolving the crisis. Bangladesh voted for peace and desires peace, which is why it did not vote" (Bdnews24.com, 2022).

In contrast, Bangladesh's foreign policy has been engulfed in a difficult grip, creating a stumbling block that is unavoidably difficult to overcome. The subsequent oblivious statements made by Bangladeshi politicians and policymakers made the decision and its dealing gesture more critical to the Western world and overall world stage. 'We abstained from protecting our own interests,' said Bangladesh's current Planning Minister. We are UN members, not employees (Kaler Kantho 2022). And it's not just us; there are many others who have abstained as well.' The unknown labyrinth grew in size when Bangladesh's Foreign Minister stated, "the resolution was not to stop the war, but rather to blame and reprimand Russia" (The Daily Star, 2022). In addition, he emphasized, "the significance of international law and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty" (Shovon, 2022). Although the words used in the resolution were for 'condemning,' not 'reprimanding' Russia and her aggression and urging her to end the war,' the interpretation made by Bangladesh's Foreign Minister was, to a large extent, deficient to the United Nations. Though Bangladesh's neutral and non-aligned stance on the Russia-Ukraine crisis can be justified, it is the country's neighbours' foreign political pressures and politicians' rash statements that have led the country to take a side in the ongoing crisis.

**Obviating from the Crux and Recent Development of Bangladesh's Voting Gesture in the UNGA Resolution**

The United Nations Security Council called a meeting on the Russian resolution titled "growing humanitarian needs in Ukraine" on March 24, 2022. The Russian resolution was remarkably defeated in the UN Security Council by other Security Council members because it made no mention of the 'Russian invasion,' which exacerbated the crisis and left millions of Ukrainians without food, shelter, or water. To be adopted by the UN Security Council, Russia needed nine 'Yes' votes from 15 permanent and non-permanent members. However, Russia received only strong backing from China, while others abstained or did not vote.

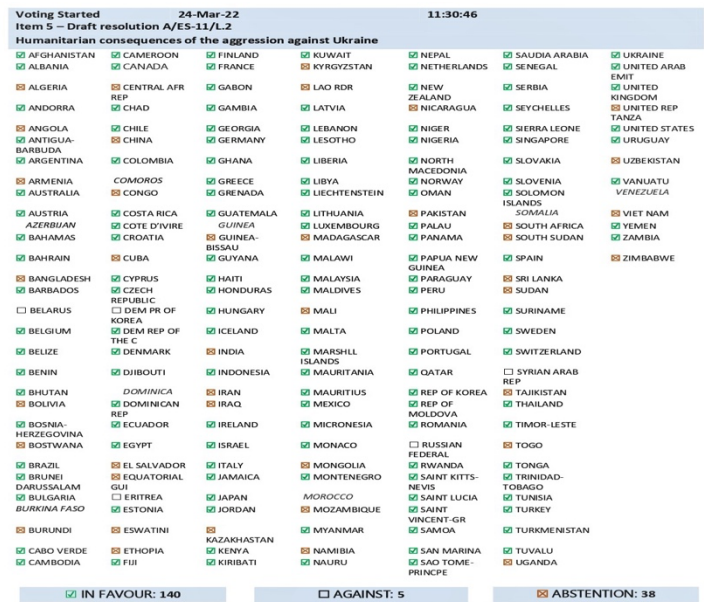


Figure 5: List of Votes: The UNGA Resolution on the Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine (United Nations 2022)

its "customary" stance of "friendship to peace, malice toward war" (The Daily Star, 2022). From the perspective of the region's humanitarian crisis, Bangladesh found a solid ground to defend its stance in the resolution because the Ukrainians had experienced the most hardship in a month. Articles 25 and 63 of Bangladesh's constitution advocate for the promotion of "international peace, security, and solidarity" and condemn all forms of war, conflict, and crisis against civilians (Ministry of Law, 2022). Bangladesh's early abstention in the resolution was unusual, but it has now shifted back on track by voting in favour of Ukraine's hardships and rainy days.

On the same day, the UNGA debated a resolution on the "humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine" drafted by Ukraine and co-sponsored by more than 90 countries. In this resolution, 140 countries voted in favour of it, while 38 abstained and five voted against it (Figure 5) (United Nations, 2022). Bangladesh voted in favour of the resolution, demonstrating its ability to maintain

Apart from the founding principle of Bangladesh's foreign policy led down by the then president of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 'Friendship to All, Malice Towards None,' the major aspect of Bangladesh's foreign policy stems from Article-25 of the Bangladesh constitution. The article and its sub-sections primarily advocate "the promotion of international peace, security, and solidarity." Section C of the article, in particular, supports the principles of raising one's voice in support of oppressed people. The section specifically states, "Support oppressed peoples around the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism, or racism," which focuses on and favours the oppressed people's hardships and basic rights. Furthermore, Bangladesh's rise has been marked by oppression and struggle. In 1971, the people of Bangladesh were forced to endure a long and heinous war in which they lost their lives, were forced to flee their homes, families, and friends, and were forced to give up all their property and rights. Such hardships and struggles endured by the people of Bangladesh over the course of nine months paved the way for the future trajectory of Bangladesh's foreign policy, which led Bangladesh to be more peaceful and in favour of suppressed people and peaceful countries, rather than suppressors or oppressors.

Despite abstaining from the previous resolution condemning Russia, Bangladesh raised its voice in support of 'peace, humanitarian aspects, and human rights,' demonstrating to the world that Bangladesh always prefers peace over war. Critics may argue that this resolution is highlighted the humanitarian aspect rather than condemning the Russian invasion, but it clearly mentions the word "aggression," implying that the Russian Federation is to blame for the invasion. Nonetheless, Bangladesh's foreign policy maintains a low profile in high-risk areas, demonstrating a rational and moral stance. "We are not forced," Bangladesh's Foreign Minister stated. We voted for human rights and humanitarian concerns" (Bd24report.com, 2022). The decision was made following the visit to Dhaka of US Under-Secretary for Political Affairs Ambassador Victoria Nuland, who subtly pushed Bangladeshi policymakers to reconsider their stance. She urged Bangladesh to be vocal and take its side in the Ukraine crisis (The Daily Star, 2022).

### ***Votes and Moral Stance of Bangladesh in the UN vs Assumption of the Strategically Powerful Countries: An Observation***

Bangladesh's previous voting trajectory in the UN on the issue of sovereignty suggests that this country is motivated by its "moral stance" rather than the hypothesis of powerful countries' effects on its foreign policy. Bangladesh's vote boycott was an outlier in light of the Ukraine crisis. However, Bangladesh's previous responses to UN resolutions on war have always favoured the victim country. Bangladesh, on the other hand, was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for two years, from 1979 to 1980 and again from 2000 to 2001 (Krishnasamy, 2003). In 1979, on the issue of Cambodian sovereignty and Vietnamese aggression, Bangladesh raised its voice and voted in favour of ensuring Cambodian sovereignty from Vietnamese interference,

though the Russian veto reigned in and prevented the resolution from being implemented (Lescaze, 1979).

On January 6, 1980, in response to the Soviet Union's aggression in Afghanistan, Bangladesh strongly condemned the Soviet Union's heinous invasion (Dil, 1980). In the same year, on April 26th, Bangladesh strongly condemned the Israeli occupation of Palestine and voted in favour of Palestine, though the resolution was also blocked by the US veto (Riaz, 2022). In the case of Afghanistan's sovereignty, Bangladesh supported its sovereignty and unity in 2001 (Riaz, 2022).

Bangladesh voted against the Soviet Union and in favour of Afghanistan at the Sixth Emergency Session of the United Nations. In the Seventh Emergency Session in 1980, Bangladesh voted in favour of Palestine's sovereignty and integrity, opposing the US vote. In the Eighth Emergency Session in 1981, Bangladesh expressed its positive support for Namibia's independence, while the United States and 24 other countries abstained (Riaz, 2022). The UN called its Ninth emergency session in 1982 to address the issue of Israeli occupation in Syria's Golan Plateau, resulting in a resolution condemning Israel. Bangladesh, with its traditional pro-peace stance, voted against Israel, siding with the US. Finally, from 1997 to 2018, Bangladesh consistently supported Palestine's rights, integrity, sovereignty, and independence during the tenth session (Riaz, 2022).

These data show that Bangladesh has always favored victim states and against occupier, expansionist, and aggressive states, regardless of how powerful they were or were. This posture indicates that Bangladesh is always firm in its determination to spread and maintain peace and integrity. This trajectory, however, has taken a new turn and shape, with a new and unexpected U-turn to the context of not 'condemning' Russia. Many small states, including those from South Asia, such as Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, expressed unequivocal and explicit support for war-torn Ukraine and its people. When an aggressor attacks an independent and sovereign country, the most important thing a state can do is provide 'moral support' that goes beyond any 'material monism'. As a result, while Bangladesh's previous stance may have appeared neutral, it was not, and its subsequent stance made it clear that Bangladesh is always vocal against war and in favour of humanitarian aspects.

### **Myanmar's Military Regime and its Response to the Ukraine Crisis**

#### *Myanmar Military Regime and its relations with the West*

One must first understand Myanmar's political history and foreign policy to comprehend Myanmar's military regime and diplomatic relationship with the West. Myanmar has gone through several significant political changes since its inception (Jabin, 2020). Myanmar was ruled by the British for 64 years, beginning in 1824, and then by the military, sometimes as a dominant actor in government or as a self-appointed president

of the country, until 1988 (Ullah, 2011). A brief period of democratic government in the country's political history is no less surprising and intriguing for scholars as well as domestic and international media. Myanmar's democratic government is currently in exile. Furthermore, the country, which has traditionally relied on strict neutrality in its foreign policy, desires such policies in regard to international relations with other foreign countries that would protect the country's economy, save the country from disintegration-economic crisis, ethnic and communist insurgency (Devi, 2014; Jabin, 2020). As a result, Myanmar pursued a policy of non-alignment and neutrality, joining the British Commonwealth, and the government at the outset of independence, refrained from any political, military, or economic ties with any country while also attempting to maintain a friendship with all (Ullah, 2011). The military effectively cut the country off from both foreign and regional affairs. However, while these policies kept Myanmar less threatened by the super rivalry, they came at a high cost to the country.

### ***Why Did Myanmar abstain despite the Military's tilt toward Russia?***

The Russian intervention in Ukraine and the ensuing humanitarian crisis have drawn the attention of both the people and the government of Myanmar. The widespread media coverage of the Ukraine crisis caused a brief break from the usual strife, and skirmishes occurred in Myanmar (Theresa, 2022). Though Ukraine and Myanmar have similar landmasses and population sizes, they share one accurate point of similarity: they share the geopolitical predicament of bordering extremely powerful authoritarian neighbours – Russia and China, to name a few. Since the ravages of war flood screens around the world, the people of Myanmar have grown increasingly sympathetic to the ferocious and violent activities in Ukraine that have forced hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to flee their homes (Theresa, 2022). However, in light of the observations of Myanmar's legal representatives, the Generals found themselves in a far more difficult position regarding 'how to respond and/or act' over the Ukraine crisis. To put it accurately and academically, Russian military intervention in Ukraine appears to have polarized the world (Wansai, 2022). Not only Southeast Asian countries but also ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) members were divided on how to respond to an explosive issue far from their shores, which some commentators claim could lead to World War III. Meanwhile, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning "Russia" as an invader of Ukraine and demanding that Russian troops withdraw immediately. After a two-day intense debate in the assembly, 141 out of 193 United Nations member states voted for the non-binding resolution, and Myanmar, a military-led country, surprisingly, voted in favour of Ukraine, demanding Russian withdrawal from Ukraine immediately (Wansai, 2022).

Furthermore, Myanmar's de facto government issued a statement in support of Ukraine, saying, "The National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar strongly condemns unprovoked acts of war against Ukraine and its people. Ukraine's current situation is a violation of the United Nations Charter and international law, and it

is not a good example for the twenty-first century. Furthermore, it will be a significant impediment to the maintenance of international peace, security, and human development. Myanmar expresses its support for the people of Ukraine" (VOA, 2022). Though a day before, Myanmar's military junta placed themselves at odds and expressed its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and justified the action of the Russian President by saying "point number one is that Russia has worked to consolidate its sovereignty, and I think this is the right thing to do. The second goal is to demonstrate to the world that Russia is a world power" (VOA, 2022).

As a result, Myanmar's opposing views and, later, the 'abstention vote' in the UNGA resolution can be explained in a variety of ways. The fact that Myanmar is still represented at the UN by the ambassador of the pre-military coup administration explains the schism. The ambassador stated that "The people of Myanmar are suffering similarly as a result of the Myanmar military's inhumane acts, atrocities, and crimes against humanity" (Wansai, 2022). Another point to consider is that there are currently two actors speaking for Myanmar: the military junta installed through a coup and an outspoken UN envoy who speaks for the National Unity Government (NUG), which is the civilian body that supports them and voted for the National League for Democracy-led players in the November 2020 election. According to the Junta, China has the right to invade Myanmar at any time if the country fails to uphold China's political and economic interests. On the contrary, the NUG expressed that "the terrifying, escalating attacks on Ukraine - conducted from air, land, and sea - have already claimed an unknown number of lives and driven tens of thousands of civilians from their homes. Myanmar urges (Russia) to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty. Myanmar expresses its support for the people of Ukraine" (Wansai, 2022). Since there are two groups of actors in Myanmar, the Military Junta, the NUG, and the People, all acting at the same time, and the country is not immune to regional influences, it is on a path that will preserve its own geopolitical interests while also ensuring peace, security, and solidarity. Whatever the situation, it is critical for Myanmar to maintain a strategic balance in its foreign policy between the rising powers, China and India, and the Western powers.

### **Rohingya Crisis and a Comparative Discussion on the Bangladesh and Myanmar's Responses to the Ukraine Crisis**

Bangladesh voted 'abstention' during the first UNGA special resolution condemning Russia for intervening in Ukraine's sovereign territory. The country also agreed and voted "in favour" during the second UNGA resolution on Ukraine's humanitarian crisis. Though it appears that Bangladesh was forced to adopt the 'neighbourhood syndrome' in order to emphasize a peaceful solution to the current crisis, as did other South Asian countries, through talks led by the UN secretary general, a broad, far-reaching, and fair vision compelled the country to choose the voting path, and that is the issue of 'Rohingya Refugees' (Prothom Alo, 2022). Prior to the emergence of the Ukraine crisis,

the Rohingya crisis had been a significant, and perhaps the most difficult, source of concern for the region and the world since 2017. Regardless of what is on others' bucket lists of priorities because priorities change over time, the Rohingya crisis is a more significant issue for Bangladesh than the Ukraine crisis. Except for the potential global economic consequences, the country has viewed the Ukraine crisis as distant and unrelated to its interests (Shovon, 2022). Furthermore, as a rational actor, Bangladesh should always consider its own geopolitical interests.

Furthermore, India and China, as key regional powers and neighbours, have been cruel to Bangladesh during the Rohingya crisis, whereas the West (the US and EU) have shown far more sympathy and acted rationally to support the country throughout the crisis (Shovon, 2022). The United States extended financial, humanitarian, and administrative assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar. The United States has also raised its voice against the mass atrocities on civilians by Myanmar's military in a widespread and systematic campaign against the Rohingya and called it 'A Genocide'. Bangladesh, which has long been a refuge for the 110,000 persecuted Rohingyas and is attempting to repatriate them to Myanmar with full citizenship status and human dignity, will require US assistance to manage this massive burden (Habib, 2021).

Henceforth, a specific decision such as 'voting' in the UNGA resolution condemning Russia is a result of geopolitical circumstances as well as the Rohingya issue, in which Bangladesh wishes to avoid upsetting the West (the United States and the European Union), the East (China and Russia), and its neighbours (India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) (Shovon, 2022). Similarly, two important factors influenced Myanmar's voting path in the UNGA special resolution on the Ukraine crisis. To begin, it is critical for Myanmar to maintain good relations with the West in order to ensure its security and geostrategic interests regarding the Rohingya issue. Second, the UNGA vote was cast by non-military personnel (representing Myanmar's *de facto* government), indicating that democratic behaviour has been reflected in Myanmar's voting trajectory. Following that, it became clear that the 'Rohingya crisis' played a critical role in the responses of two significant Southeast Asian countries- Bangladesh and Myanmar- to the Russia-Ukraine issue at the UNGA.

Myanmar's response to the Ukraine war through United Nations resolutions differs greatly from Bangladesh's response approach. The conflict stems from the disparity between the current Tatmadaw regime's order and principles and the appointed UN representative. The representative, Kyaw Moe Tun, appointed by Aung San Suu Kyi, is still in charge of the United Nations seat. As a result, Moe Tun voted in favour of Ukraine in accordance with the principles of civilian government. Despite Tatmadaw's unwavering support for Russian intervention, the country's UN representation changed the outcome. However, while the representative's preference represents a human rights value, the grave dichotomy is that under both the Suu Kyi regime and the Tatmadaw

regime, more than 1.5 million Rohingya people were oppressed and displaced, and are now living in Bangladesh, India, and a few other countries. They were confronted with the heinous reality of ethnic cleansing and genocide, which implies that regardless of which parties Moe Tun voted for in the United Nations, their version of supporting human rights in the Ukraine crisis is meaningless unless and until they ensure justice for and safe repatriation of the Rohingya people.

### **Conclusion**

Bangladesh, as a South Asian country, is experiencing an economic and geostrategic uprising. Bangladesh's geographical location and geostrategic importance suggest that the country must be circumspect in making decisions whenever a political conflict, war, or economic disaster breaks out around the world. However, political analysts believe that the Ukraine crisis will rekindle bloc politics, polarization between the West and the East, and ideological conflict (Hazarika & Ramesh, 2022). Bangladesh should reconsider its position independently and discreetly, without any outside pressure that could undermine the credibility of its decision-making power. Although Bangladesh's previous vote was highly critical, the country's subsequent stance should be applauded. Given the situation, Bangladesh's policymakers must be as cunning as a fox, as strong as a lion, and as quick as a cheetah. However, the previous decision to abstain appeared to be correct and neutral from various perspectives, but the ongoing pressures from the Western world, as well as the voting patterns of the majority countries, have created an uneasy situation for Bangladesh. As the war appears to be dragging on for days, months, or years, the country may be forced to choose between two camps soon. Bangladesh later supported Ukraine's resolution of the humanitarian crisis. Morally, Bangladesh is on the right track right now; however, it should keep an eye on current events.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, has remarkably developed an image and identity on the global stage over the last few decades in which Bangladesh is viewed and weighed as a peace-promoting country for its strong voice against any conflict, war, or aggression anywhere in the world (Biswas 2018). Her unwavering determination to achieve DC (Developing Country) status by graduating from LDC (Least Developed Country) with a basket of heavier and bulkier successes of enthralling development projects and their completion—such as the Padma Bridge, Metro Rail, Ruppur Nuclear Power Plant, Payra Power Plant, Karnapuli Under-Water Tunnel, and Matarbari Deep Seaport—a significant increase in the GDP of \$409 billion and overall economic progress and political stability—c (Byron, 2021).

Myanmar, on the other hand, has a highly diverse array of responses in this regard. Because the country's current military regime is known for having a covert leaning toward Russia, and the UN representative is also not representing the country's actual 'say and decision,' it can be seen as a puzzle in their voting trajectory and overall response. As a result, from a neoclassical realist standpoint, Myanmar's statesman could

not play a central role in decision-making; rather, Kyaw Moe Tun, as a unitary actor, played a critical role in the country's decision-making. Bangladesh, on the other hand, celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence last year. During the golden jubilee, all great and major powers, including the United States, United Kingdom, China, Russia, France, Japan, and India, demonstrated their friendly and non-interference gesture to Bangladesh. In addition, everyone is aware of Bangladesh's position and leadership in the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement). Given that, Bangladesh is now in such a strong and remarkable position that she may not make any rash decisions. As a result, the only prospect Bangladesh can now promote is 'friendship to peace, malice towards war'. To uphold its customary role for peace and against war and to keep the world focused on the Rohingya crisis, Bangladesh can engage in diplomatic advocacy with others in order to bring an end to this war while Myanmar continues to struggle with the military regime and their severe detachment from the outside world.

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