Bangladesh releases a major strategic policy document

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The Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a major foreign policy document on April 24, one day before Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina embarked on 15-day tour to Japan, the US and UK. Titled *Indo-Pacific Outlook*, the document inclines towards the US-led anti-China Indo-Pacific policy while attempting to maintain a delicate balance between the Washington and Beijing.

Hasina discussed issues related to the Indo-Pacific as well as economic and security policies during her visits to Japan, where she spent four days, and the US, from April 29 to May 4. She spent the rest of her trip in the UK to attend the coronation of King Charles III.

The *Indo-Pacific Outlook* (IPO), which was drafted in February, formulates 15 key objectives without naming any specific country. It does not fully align itself with the US-initiated Indo-Pacific-Strategy (IPS) elaborated in December 2021 but repeats all the slogans used by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken—the need to defend "the rules-based order," "international law," "freedom of navigation," and freedom of "overflight."

Translated into plain language these propaganda phrases are part of Washington's military-strategic offensive against its rivals—Russia and China—and to reassert US global hegemony.

This was exemplified in her inaugural address to the 60th convention of the Institution of Engineers in Bangladesh on May 13.

According to the *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha*, the country's national news agency, Hasina denounced the imposition of US sanctions on Bangladesh, declaring: "There is now a tendency to impose sanctions, and sanctions on those by whom we contain terrorism. We have made a decision. I have said that I will not buy anything from those who will impose sanctions."

Hasina's speech was a reference to Washington's imposition of sanctions in December 2021 on senior officials of Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) over human rights abuses. She previously denounced the sanctions, claiming that the notorious para-military RAB had played a major role in stopping terrorism.

Washington imposed these sanctions, not out of any concern for human rights but as a means to pressure the Hasina government to break its ties with China and to fully embrace the US-led war drive against Beijing.

Bangladesh is heavily dependent on revenues from apparel exports to the US. On February 10, the *Business Standard* reported that Bangladesh's clothing exports to the US grew by 36.4 percent to $US9.75 billion year-on-year in 2022, and that the country's current share of the US apparel market is almost 10 percent.

At the same time, the Hasina's administration is attempting to placate China, an essential source of foreign direct investment (FDI) which topped $940 million in the 2022 fiscal year.

"China has been the largest trading partner" of Bangladesh for the past 12 consecutive years, a Chinese embassy official told the *Financial Express* last December. The big business newspaper reported that trade volume between the two countries increased by 58 percent in 2021.

China is the largest military hardware supplier to Bangladesh which is also an active partner in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. China is involved in several infrastructure projects, including the financing and construction of a Bangladeshi submarine base where two submarines purchased from Beijing are anchored.

Washington has welcomed the Hasina government's *Indo-Pacific Outlook* document. In an exclusive interview with the *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha* last

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week, Afreen Akhter, the US deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, said: “Broadly, we see lot of synergies between our two documents, our strategy, and your [Bangladesh’s] outlook. We both are focused on building economic prosperity in the region and through infrastructure, through our substantial development projects.”

On May 12, S. Jaishankar, external affairs minister for India, now a frontline state in the US-war drive against China, said: “I am truly glad that Bangladesh has joined the company of those [countries] who have done so by issuing its own Indo-Pacific strategic document.”

Other elements of Bangladesh’s document were reflected in the Japan-Bangladesh Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership announced on April 26 by Hasina and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The statement accepted “freedom of navigation overall and overflight of the high seas and civil aviation safety” and called for the maintenance of “regional and international peace, stability, and prosperity.”

Although the joint statement did not specifically mention Russia, it indirectly blamed it for the war in Ukraine, designating it as an “invasion,” and a “violation of international law, in particular of the UN charter.” It was a “serious threat to the international order based on the rule of law, with ramifications well beyond Europe, including in the Indo-Pacific,” the statement said.

Hasina also signed seven Memoranda of Understanding and one agreement, including on infrastructure and defense, with Japan during her visit. Japan has been one of the main foreign investors in Bangladesh. In fiscal year 2020–2021, it invested $2.63 billion, the highest aid donor for that fiscal year.

Hasina’s engagements in the US were limited to meetings with World Bank and the IMF officials. “No official meeting took place between her and the US government,” the *Diplomat* reported on May 9.

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, however, met with US Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland at the Ninth US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue. Momen reportedly stressed Bangladesh’s new strategic document in order to highlight how Dhaka has inclined towards the US strategic offensive against China.

On March 20 last year, Nuland visited Bangladesh to pressure the Hasina government to align itself with the US-led NATO war operations against Russia. Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen indicated that Dhaka desired to maintain a balance between the US and Russia. After Nuland’s visit, however, Bangladesh, along with 139 other countries, voted for a March 24 UN General Assembly resolution accusing Russia of creating a “dire humanitarian situation” in Ukraine.

The Bangladeshi economy was devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia. The war led to a 25 percent depreciation of its currency, a 28 percent fall in foreign reserves, inflation rising to an average 8.14 percent—with price hikes in fuel, electricity and essentials—leading to a cost-of-living crisis and the eruption of nation-wide protests.

Beijing’s measured response to the Hasina government’s new *Indo-Pacific Outlook* document is reflected in an opinion piece by Dr. Liu Zongyi in the *South China Morning Post*.

Secretary general of the South Asia and China Center at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Liu writes: “I view the release of this document not only as an initiative for the country to maintain its diplomatic independence and pursue its own national interests but also a move made under constant pressure to pick a side.”

While Bangladesh is still trying to maintain a balancing act between Washington and Beijing, its *Indo-Pacific Outlook* and subsequent statements point to a shift towards the US as it seeks investment from Japan and the US, and economic assistance from the IMF and World Bank.

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