

Bangabandhu and the world

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In the last three and a half decades that have elapsed since the days of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the world has undergone significant changes. These changes relate not only to the great advances in science and technology, but also to the socio-economic and political structure of the world society. A discussion of Mujib's foreign policy therefore transports one a great deal back not only in time, but also in the geopolitical context in which he pursued his foreign policy objectives.

To gauge the extent of these changes one has only to recall that the first Foreign Minister to visit Dhaka (as it was then spelt), the capital of the newly emerged Bangladesh, was Otto Winzer of the German Democratic Republic -- a country since reunified with West Germany -- and that one of the much trumpeted first visits of a Head of State to Bangladesh was that of President Tito of Yugoslavia, then regarded as a great leader of the non-aligned world.

Another instance of these vast changes can be that Sheikh Mujib's first ever official visit abroad took him to the late, but not much lamented, Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). He traveled to Moscow with technical stopovers in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Tbilisi, of the then Soviet State of Georgia, now the

leader of the Awami League, the thoughts that Sheikh Mujib had expressed from time to time regarding foreign policy were largely in the context of a united Pakistan. This is, however, not to say that even in those days he did not have East Pakistan's transformation into an independent nation in mind. "The American Papers," a document released by the US State Department at the expiry of their Official Secrecy Period, bears out this point. Joseph Farland, US Ambassador in Islamabad, in a message on the state of Pakistan, in November 1969, referred to Sheikh Mujib as "the uncrowned king of East Pakistan." In a statement sent in January, 1971,

Archer Blood, American Consul General in Dhaka, informed his government that Sheikh Mujib's "oft quoted refrains" were that East Pakistan was a part of South Asia unlike West Pakistan, which was a part of the Middle East. In the American Consul General's opinion Sheikh Mujib's ideas, in the context of post-election Pakistan (December 1970), raised the question as to whether or not an understanding between the elected leaders of the two parts of Pakistan would be possible, or indeed advisable, from Sheikh Mujib's point of view. The American Consul General found it impossible even to imagine Sheikh Mujib running the government, sitting in Islamabad, "separated from the

Bangladesh's membership of the OIC stood it in good stead in developing relations with oil-rich Arab countries for the much needed oil at reasonable prices. Bangabandhu attached great importance to Bangladesh's relations with Japan as he believed it would help Bangladesh immensely. Bangladesh became a member of the United Nations in 1974 when China withdrew its veto, but it has to be said to the credit of Sheikh Mujib that, from the very outset, he demonstrated his belief in the importance of Bangladesh having cordial and friendly relations with that country.



With Pakistan premier ZA Bhutto and Algerian president Houari Boumedienne at a reception in Lahore during OIC conference in 1974.

problem cooperation with India was necessary not only on the Farakka issue, but also for control-

receive universal recognition, although, as our independence struggle progressed, sympathy for our cause snowballed. The world was, at that time, not used to the disintegration of countries on ethnic and linguistic lines. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and the like came later. Here, one would be tempted to suggest that Pakistan itself was a break-away country when, in 1947, it was created as a result of tripartite negotiations between the British government, the Congress and the Muslim League. However, Pakistan, even if it is looked upon as a breakaway country, was not born as Bangladesh was, through the barrel of the gun. The Biafra war, in Nigeria in the 60s, was hardly a happy precedent for Bangladesh for it had failed to achieve Biafra's independence. And, as in love, war and politics, nothing fails like failure. Bangladesh, therefore, may be viewed as the forerunner of ethnic states that have appeared on the world map in recent years.

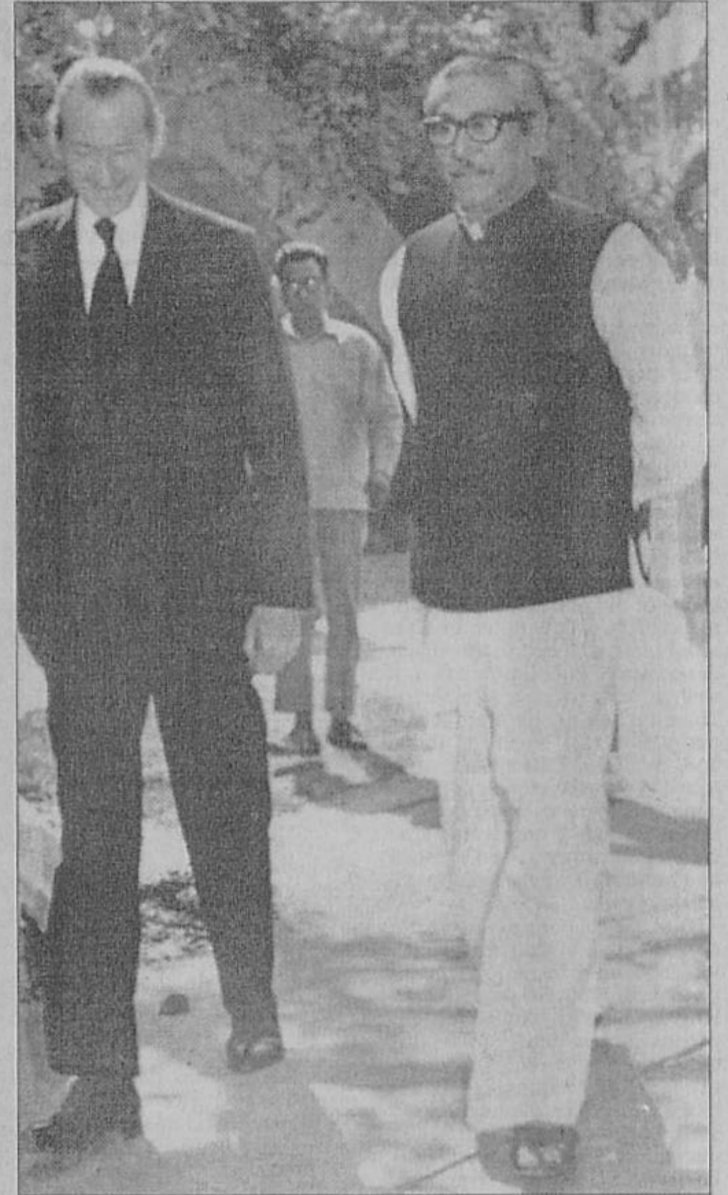
Bangladesh was born in the 70s in an unfavourable international political and economic setting. The Cold War was on, with all its attendant complexities for a new-born country, although it may be argued that the state of the then bipolar world helped the creation of Bangladesh through a short, bitter, albeit bloody war. To make matters

were, therefore, among the major challenges that Sheikh Mujib faced because, without recognition, Bangladesh had little chance of accessing international help for its war-ravaged economy.

Sheikh Mujib then took three steps that were to have a bearing on Bangladesh's gaining rapid recognition from the comity of nations. First, and foremost, was the withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib allayed the fears of his countrymen by declaring, on his return to Dhaka from Islamabad via the circuitous, but comparatively safer, route via London and Delhi, that the Indian troops would leave "whenever Bangladesh so wished." In February 1972, when he went to Calcutta (now Kolkata) to thank the people of India for their help and support during Bangladesh's Liberation War, he was received by Madama Indira Gandhi, and they jointly addressed a large public rally. It was then that the date of withdrawal of the Indian troops from Bangladesh was announced, and on the appointed day, which was March 12, 1972, the Indian

be found wanting in our cooperation with all concerned for creating an area of peace in south Asia where we could live side by side as good neighbours and pursue constructive policies for the benefit of our people. History will not forgive us if we fail in this challenging task."

However, in those initial days, the development of Bangladesh's relations with India engaged Sheikh Mujib's close attention. It was full of complexities, yet essential for Bangladesh's smooth development. J.N. Dixit was the Deputy High Commissioner of India in Dhaka in the days following the Liberation. He later on rose to be Foreign Secretary, and in the present government in India he was appointed as the National Security Adviser. Dixit passed away a couple of years ago, unexpectedly and prematurely. During my professional career as a diplomat I got to know him very well and we became good friends. In one of his books on Indo-Bangladesh relations entitled "Liberation and Beyond," Dixit makes some interesting observa-



With Kurt Waldheim during the UNSG's visit to Dhaka in 1973.

were not to be swamped by its identification with West Bengal and India." Dixit thought that for this reason Sheikh Mujib wanted Bangladesh to be recognized as a significant Muslim nation in South Asia. I have quoted Dixit somewhat extensively only because my assessment of Bangabandhu's policy towards India was, to a great extent, similar to his.

As a professional diplomat, I saw Bangabandhu as a symbol of Bangladesh's freedom and independence. He used to encourage professional diplomats in the formulation of Bangladesh's foreign policy and was a great source of inspiration. In his mind, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a very important place in the formulation of the country's foreign policy and he had, in general, great faith in professional opinions. I have seen him overcome countless obstacles in his endeavour to create a strong and dynamic foreign policy for Bangladesh. I have seen him holding his own among many other state leaders both at home and abroad, pursuing his own goals with single-minded devotion, clarity and determination.

Bangladesh's membership of the OIC stood it in good stead in developing relations with oil-rich Arab countries for the much needed oil at reasonable prices. The export of Bangladeshi workers to the oil-rich countries of West Asia commenced in his time, when a couple of Bangladeshi construction companies were awarded contracts in those countries. During my tenure as Ambassador in that area, in the post-Mujib period, I have seen the high esteem and regard in which the Gulf rulers held him.

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which he was able to introduce Bangladesh and to establish rapport with a large number of world leaders.

Bangladesh became a member of the United Nations in 1974 when China withdrew its veto, but it has to be said to the credit of Sheikh Mujib that, from the very outset, he demonstrated his belief in the importance of Bangladesh having cordial and friendly relations with that country. He had, in his younger days as a politician, visited China twice and his political mentor, Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, was the first Prime Minister of Pakistan to have visited that country. Developing friendly relations with China had always been high on Sheikh Mujib's agenda, and soon after the creation of Bangladesh, a high level Bangladesh trade delegation visited the then Canton fair and, besides business negotiations, established contacts with the Chinese authorities if only to underline the priority that Bangladesh attached to developing Sino-Bangladesh relations. To Sheikh Mujib, the Chinese veto in the United Nations was a passing cloud that had to clear up sooner than later.

In 1974, when he went to New York to address the UN General Assembly, Henry Kissinger met him in New York and Bangabandhu went on to Washington to meet President Ford. Thereafter Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, visited Bangladesh and hopefully gained the impression that "baskets" do not always have to remain "bottomless." Early personal contacts with US leaders such as Senator Edward Kennedy gave Sheikh Mujib the opportunity of expressing his thanks for the warm support our independence move-



With Indian premier Indira Gandhi at Delhi airport on April 10, 1974 on his way back home.

capital of an independent country. Likewise, he traveled back to Dhaka from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) via Tashkent of the then Soviet Union, which is now the capital of an independent Uzbekistan. Bangladesh Biman then possessed no long-range aircraft (not that it does so now in any dependable measure) and these stopovers were necessary as no direct flight from Dhaka to Moscow, considered advisable in the poorly pressurized Ilyushin 18 aircraft lent by the Kosygin government for the visit.

After the Second World War, with the fall of colonialism, many new nations were born on the continents of Asia and Africa. Leaders of those nations, for instance, Nehru, Jinnah, Nkrumah, Sukarno and the like, had, during the period before the independence of their countries, the opportunity to deliberate on the likely foreign policy blueprint for their respective countries. But Bangladesh's appearance in the world map was so sudden and dramatic that under those circumstances it was not possible to indulge in any concrete thinking in that area in the much divided, and acrimonious, bipolar world of the day.

Before the war of liberation, as

people of East Pakistan." In his opinion, if Sheikh Mujib found that his role as Prime Minister of united Pakistan would hurt East Pakistan's interests, he would "seek to strike out on his own as the leader of an independent East Pakistan." In another report sent during the same month, Archer Blood said that Sheikh Mujib believed in non-alignment and wanted Pakistan to break away from the two military pacts, viz. Cento and Seato.

Archer Blood said that Sheikh Mujib desired improved relations with India, as in that, he saw partial solutions to East Pakistan's problems. Sheikh Mujib believed that the Farakka problem could only be resolved in the light of improved relations between Pakistan and India. The American Consul General told his government of his own belief that Sheikh Mujib was well disposed towards the US. He also mentioned to his government that Sheikh Mujib had toured China twice and was "impressed" by that country even though he saw the limitations of the "oppressive side" of China's governance.

On January 7, 1970, the US embassy in Islamabad reported that Sheikh Mujib believed that in order to solve the water sharing

ling floods in East Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib was aware of the need for foreign assistance in solving the problem of water sharing. The report further says that two American diplomats, while meeting Sheikh Mujib, asked him what he would do if the Pakistani parliament was unable to reach consensus on the Constitution. In his reply Sheikh Mujib was reported to have said: "We will try. If we cannot agree then we can't."

In explaining this response, the American ambassador informed his government that if discussions regarding the constitution failed, then East and West Pakistan "might go their separate ways." In June 1970 the American Consul General in Dhaka reported to his government that Mujib, in an interview, had said that the Pakistan military and civil intelligence, and other government agencies, were trying to influence the country's politics and that if it was not stopped: "I will proclaim independence and call for a guerilla action." This is precisely what Bangabandhu did on the morning of March 26, 1971 in his historic declaration of independence of Bangladesh.

The birth of Bangladesh, in the early 70s, as an independent and sovereign state after breaking away from Pakistan, did not readily



With the Queen of Britain at Buckingham Palace.

worse, at that time there was a sudden rise in oil prices which impacted unfavourably on the economic situation of the newly emerged country with practically no assets. The United States was then preoccupied with the opening up of its relations with China, and was using the good offices of President Yahya Khan of Pakistan. The US administration would have, therefore, looked upon our war of independence as an ill-timed distraction. However, it has to be stated that whereas the government of the Western countries were, at best, indifferent to our cause the people, including those of the United States, appreciated the reasons leading to our liberation struggle, and had considerable sympathy for it.

Sheikh Mujib was in a Pakistani jail when Bangladesh was liberated, and most of the world waited, and watched, as Bangladesh commenced its quest for recognition. Sheikh Mujib's return to Bangladesh on January 10, 1972, eased the situation somewhat, but did not automatically cause a spate of international recognitions. Securing international recognition quickly, and obtaining membership of the international agencies, including the United Nations,

had coincided, it had not in any way negated the reality of Bangladesh's independence.

The second constructive step that Bangabandhu took was to display a positive attitude towards Pakistan, trying to forget the past bitterness. Bangladesh displayed a mature attitude in the tripartite Indo-Pakistan-Bangladesh conference that hastened the process of normalization. Unfortunately, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who paid a visit to Bangladesh in 1974 when the country was going through very difficult days economically, misread our mood and viewed our eagerness to negotiate outstanding issues as signs of weakness. He then displayed an attitude that, alas, impeded the healing process.

Third, Sheikh Mujib displayed remarkable statesmanship by underlining the importance of cooperation among the countries of the sub-continent. On February 5, 1972, he declared in Calcutta: "It is my earnest hope that there will, at last, be peace and stability in the subcontinent. Let there be an end, once and for all, to this sterile policy of confrontation between neighbours. Let us not fritter away our national resources but use them to lift the standard of living of our masses. As for us, we will not

only and ammunition seized by India.

In Dixit's words, even though Sheikh Mujib knew that during those early days of Bangladesh's existence the country needed India's assistance, he did not wish Bangladesh to become dependant on its large neighbour to an excessive degree. Sheikh Mujib, Dixit said, feared that if Bangladesh was not cautious the neighbouring giant, India, could unduly influence its policies. For this reason, Sheikh Mujib wanted the Indian "connection and influence" to lessen over time. According to Dixit, Bangabandhu also wanted the Muslim countries of the world to recognize Bangladesh's "Bengali and Muslim identity." Sheikh Mujib wanted friendly relations with India, at the same time wishing Bangladesh to build political, economic and technology based ties with all major countries in the world. Sheikh Mujib never wanted Bangladesh to be looked upon in any manner as India's "client state."

According to Dixit, Sheikh Mujib also believed that Bangladesh should give priority, not just to its Bengali linguistic and cultural identity, but also, to its Bengali-Muslim identity "If the country



Meeting with Saudi King Faisal.



With Japanese premier Kakuei Tanaka while visiting Japan in 1973.

would help Bangladesh immensely. Bangabandhu's visit to Japan, in October 1973, was an eventful one. During the visit he focused on Japanese assistance for the bridge over the Jamuna river which was completed in 1998 and appropriately named Bangabandhu Bridge.

Sheikh Mujib took time off from his pressing schedules at home to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings in 1973 and 1975, in Ottawa and Kingston respectively, and the nonaligned summit in Algiers in 1974, during

ment received from the US public and which eventually laid the foundation of Bangladesh's relations with the United States.

It was in the short span of an otherwise turbulent three and a half years, and in spite of innumerable odds, that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was able to establish Bangladesh in the comity of nations. And he did so with great courage, tact and statesmanship.

The author is former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.