

# FOCUS

## China: Strategy for Welfare

by Waliur Rahman

*Nineteen ninety-five is the Year of the Pig. It is a happy year for China, a year of good fortune and a year of bumper harvest. Even the country's worst flooding didn't make much difference in the march towards achieving their strategic objectives.*

Kissinger's secret voyage to China which was followed by the historic summit.

Interestingly enough, China did not come to the assistance of Pakistan when the crunch came during the War of Liberation in Bangladesh, as was feared by many. Actually Ambassador Kaiser, in his remarks at the Pakistan's Envoys Conference, held in Geneva on August 24 and 25, 1971, categorically stated that China wanted non-intervention. He said that "China had advised for a political settlement. China is ready to give aid for rehabilitation of E. Pak economy. The Chinese Press did not publicise the Indo-Soviet Treaty. China intends to strengthen relations with Afghanistan, Ceylon, Nepal, and Bosnia. China would like to see Pakistan active in the politics of Indo-China." Ambassador Kaiser was not sure about the nature of Chinese help in case of a war between India and Pakistan. "Private sources indicated that arms shipment to Pakistan since March 25, 1971, was almost nil..." The strategic thinking of China was that the National Liberation War in Bengal would go in favour of the people of Bangladesh.

Modern China has come a long way in the post Sino-American rapprochement till today. When one reads about certain strains in relationship between China and the Western world, particularly the United States of America, I for one instinctively go back to Edgar Snow and his compendium of knowledge bequeathed to us to understand China and the Chinese people. Certain misconceptions about China are very often linked to the misgivings of the Second World War Allies against the heresy of Tito. Who had believed at that time that Tito's communism would not only be an independent brand of socialism but it would be the first

communist heterodoxy which broke away from the monolith of Stalinism? China's strategic march as a great power cannot be kept in hold. One wouldn't be surprised to see both China and India in a strategic race, not for world domination but for economic excellence for their peoples.

### Year of the Pig

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For me as an Asian it would make sense to believe that Sino-American misgiving is only a temporary phenomenon and it should be so. The strategic interest of China may not get in the way of American interest in the region. A resurgent China with 13% GDP growth would ensure a big market for the Western goods. A modus vivendi is an essential precondition for this to happen. The fact that China can always make historic compromise speaks for its own wisdom. Remember the China-Vietnam conflict in 1980? Bangladesh as a member of the Security Council closely cooperated with China in tabling that famous resolution leading to the ceasefire that still holds! The Chinese hand was the last to go up in support of the resolution to the relief of the packed chamber of the Security Council and that is vintage Chinese diplomacy.

China has shown its responsibility to the international community by acceding to the NPT. Their underground nuclear test of October 7, 1994, was solely for the purpose of self-defence. China maintains that the nuclear weapon states should agree to the complete

destruction of all nuclear weapons at an early date. China has conducted, as records show, the least number of nuclear tests. They are actively participating in the negotiations on a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in Geneva and they would like to have the Treaty by end of 1996. They are also eager to conclude a treaty on the non-first use of nuclear weapons against each other. They would also like to see an early agreement on non-use or threat of use of nuclear weapon states and nuclear free zones. It was heartening to learn about President Clinton's most recent declaration against all nuclear tests. The Nevada Desert with several hundred underground tests would stand as a sentry of peace to the historic statement of President Clinton.

President Clinton was statesmanlike on May 26, 1994 when he announced his decision to extend China's MFN status for 1994-95 and to delink future annual MFN review from other issues. It was statesmanlike because it immediately created conditions for further developing and strengthening of trade and economic cooperation between China and the United States. Sino-American relations is important not only for those two countries but for Asia and the world at large.

In my brief meeting with Edgar Snow on Lac Leman he bemoaned his inability to sometimes understand the American mind. As a great admirer of the oldest democracy of the world, America, and its democratic traditions and moral values, I am almost tempted to ask my American friends to have another look at Edgar Snow. We need both China and America and the world needs a harmonious relations between these two great countries.

lization which has grown through the test and trial of fire and the new vigorous American democracy.

### United Nations and China

At the 26th session of the UNGA in 1971 overwhelming majority of the member states restored the legitimate rights of People's Republic of China in the United Nations. With this the question of China's representation in the United Nations has been justly and completely settled politically, legally, and otherwise. Any effort now to change the situation would be contrary to the resolution 2758 and detrimental to the cause of international peace and security.

### China and Bangladesh

This year will mark the 20th anniversary of the formal Bangladesh-China diplomatic relationship. The visit of Vice Foreign Minister Yang Jiaxuan to Dhaka from 14 to 16 will be a significant event in further consolidating our relationship.

Prosperity and decline of China have come in waves — it has seen its great moments, the Ming, Ting dynasties, with intervals of decline into oblivion and suffering. Perhaps the 18th and 19th centuries were the worst in her otherwise glorious history. A brutally colonial Europe went through China, bit by bit, forcing humiliation after humiliation, till a time came when almost 50 per cent of her population were either sick or debilitated. The Opium Wars were the blackest period of her history. By embracing Communism, Mao and Chow leadership wanted to infuse new ideas. Hundred flowers might not have bloomed but the ignominy of the colonial repression was a thing of the past.

By hosting the 4th World Conference on Women, from Sept 14 to 15, 1995 in Beijing the New China makes yet another stride to a future befitting the Year of the Pig.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to Italy and first Bangladesh Representative to the European Office of the United Nations in Geneva.

## Sands of Time are Running out for Gambian Beaches

by Rosemary Long Banjul



THE Gambia, among the tiniest countries in Africa, gets smaller every day. Even the bones of its ancestors are literally being swallowed up by the sea.

A desperate attempt has begun to shore up the vital stretch of coastline that runs from one side of The Gambia's only stretch of dual carriageway to its island capital of Banjul.

The focal point, 500 metres long, is centred on the Muslim graveyard which for years has been crumbling into the sea — sending the remains of loved ones, in some cases, tumbling into the teeming Atlantic waves.

Local people, exhorted by the Imams, gathered an impressive D250,000 towards a reclamation effort for which the total cost will be D2.5 million. On the launch day prayers were said at the beautiful but bleached site, and sea eagles, terns and gulls cried out like the souls of the dead.

Massive boulders in steel boxes will be lowered along the graveside coastline. But that leaves another 30 kilometres of The Gambia's coastline still at risk making it — as one observer said — a case of sticking a finger in a dyke while floods pour through on either side.

A United Nations Environmental Programme report considers The Gambia one of the world's 10 most vulnerable countries for a rise in sea levels.

A scientific analysis of the situation shows that this could mean anything from a three per cent loss of land (if sea level rises 50 cm) to a loss of seven per cent of land

(with a sea level rise of 150 cm) over the next 15 years.

Swamp rice cultivation areas, herbaceous steppes and grass savanna would suffer most — with up to 60 per cent land losses. There would also be a dramatic decrease in swamp cultivation, increased saltwater intrusion, a "drowning" of mangrove forests and extra sedimentation on the river bed.

Environmentalist Geir Tyldum anticipates that Banjul — already two metres below sea level — could be largely under water by the year 2000. Salt water intrusion could affect crops and cattle. Supplies of fresh drinking water in heavily-populated areas could be at risk.

The Gambia barely covers 10,000 square kilometres of land and the population in the coastal urban areas is soaring.

Population expert Mary Fowles Yamuah reveals that Kombo St Mary, the division which includes much of the residential, tourist, business and commerce areas had fewer than 4,000 people in 1973. By 1993 the figure was more than 228,000. Nearby Western Division has increased its population by more than 70 per cent in 10 years.

The ground under their feet is in danger of being eaten away. The Palm Grove Hotel had its bar washed away a few years ago. Radio Syd, one of the country's two commercial radio stations, and a local Boy Scouts office have both suffered damage. Beaches along the prime tourists area of Bakau grow narrower every year. Where

there were wide stretches of sand are now craggy outcroppings.

A fisheries project in Bakau now includes a solid concrete slab wall to stop a neighbouring mission house and clinic from tumbling down on top of the fishery's new freezing and processing plants. Local women complain of water flooding the smoking houses where fish is cured for sale.

Further south is the top tourist beach flanking the main hotels and sweeping spectacularly down to nearby fishing villages. There, too, the sand is being swallowed.

The predator is not just the ever-hungry Atlantic Ocean. Sand-mining has been adding to the despoliation of the shoreline.

A beach which once sloped almost imperceptibly towards the water from the largest hotels and valuable Bijilo Forest park, now slopes sharply — with new drops at every spring tide.

The mining was moved from the prime hotel areas down to the picturesque area between Bijilo and Brufut villages, where dark grey mud has replaced large tracts of golden sand.

The previous government of Sir Dawda Jawara endlessly promised to "look at" the situation, and for a while, limited the number of truckloads to 50 per day.

Now some 200 truckloads are said to be taken daily, with drivers thundering through peaceful village and bush areas at the dead of night in order to avoid paying the council tax on their mining, which applies only during working hours. GEMINI

## Choking the Polythene: Who Got Choked?

by Zayed Mohammad



A year after the Government's indefinite ban on polythene shopping bag manufacture considering the harmful effects of polythene on the environment, it is a bolt from the blue to see the decision reversed. The ban that was to take effect from 18 January, 1994 also prohibited the setting up of such manufacturing industry except in the export processing zones. The prohibition also detailed that after the commencement of the ban the manufactured polythene bags would be used as nursery pots. Delivering a severe blow to the anti-pollution activists the Hon'ble Prime Minister on 13 January, 1994 assured the polythene bag manufacturers that the stipulated time for enforcement of the ban would be extended. Accordingly the Cabinet drove the final nail into the coffin on 24 January, 1994 when it postponed the implementation of the ban on production and marketing of polythene shopping bags without specifying any future date for the prohibition.

### Present State of Polythene Production

This U-turn of a democratic government from a people oriented endeavour was executed regardless of the level of pollution emanating from the indiscriminate dumping of polythene shopping bags. Available data from a report on the hazards of polythene shopping bag published by the Environment and Social Development Organization (ESDO) draws a sad state arising out of ever increasing production and use of polythene shopping bags, considering the fact that polythene bags are in circulation for a short period of time in Bangladesh. Starting with only two polythene bag manufacturing outfits in Dhaka in 1983 the number has soared to 171 at the time of the above mentioned study. Moreover the number of illegal manufacturing operations is well over two hundred.

### What Happens to These Bags?

The product of these legal and illegal manufacturers amount to nearly four and half million polythene bags ending up dumped in Dhaka city everyday. Out of this polythene garbage 80% block sewerage system resulting in obnoxious disruption of healthy

civic life as only 20% of such garbage can be collected from the city dust-bins. This collected garbage is dumped in places through uncontrolled tipping by the Municipal authorities resulting in even more environmental degradation.

### Why is Polythene Considered Environmentally Hazardous?

Polythene is made from liquid ethylene at a comparatively lower pressure in presence of benzoyl peroxide and a suitable organic solvent such as benzene, liquid butane or liquid propane. Usually polythene is manufactured by gas-phase polymerisation. Excessive use of a derivative from the above mentioned formulating process ends up in raising levels of toxicity culminating in extensive pollution through indiscriminate dumping everywhere.

### Are Polybag Consumers Economically Benefited?

Polythene also has a dis-favourable reaction in the economy. One aspect of the adverse effect is that polythene bags have become an essential consumer favoured product over a very short spell of time, for the price of course, if a seller of goods is wrapping anything in a paper packet the buyer insists upon a poly bag to go with it. In one form it creates a drain in the consumers ex-

penses and in the other the consumer is robbed of his money when the price of the polythene bag is included with the price of a product. Formerly, prior to the introduction of polythene bags goods were accepted in paper packages or cloth and jute bags. Comprehensive utilization of poly bags is also responsible for the drastic decrease in domestic jute bag sales. Jute which was once the biggest contributor to the national economy is presently in a miserable state of existence.

### Is the Present Decision Consistent or Respectful of Our Legal Framework and Policies?

These aspects of polythene use was taken into account in the formulation of the Environment Policy 1992 when it called for ensuring hygienically and environmentally sound methods for production, preservation, processing and distribution of food (3.9.1 of the Environment Policy). As polythene is mainly used for packaging food stuffs in this country the environment policy enunciation is very much relevant for the purposes of regulation of this substance. While addressing the institutional arrangement for the implementation of this policy, the Ministry of Environment and

Forest (MoEF) is assigned as the coordinating body. The environment policy also envisages a National Environment Committee with the head of the Government as the chairperson to give overall direction for implementation of the policy.

The reversal of the decision on ban is a compromise which amounts to a breach of inter generational trust. Surprisingly, the postponement of the prohibition came direct from the head of government and not from the MoEF, which had imposed the ban in the first place. Over-riding decisions not only hamper institutional developments but also undermine the delegation of power to such institutions hence discourage pragmatic steps taken in the interest of the public rather than in the interest of a limited few.

### Is the City Corporation Adequately Equipped for Effective Disposal of Polythene?

It is estimated that 20% of the polythene bags dumped in Dhaka city alone are being collected by the Dhaka City Corporation as the City Corporation is entrusted with the statutory duty of removal, collection and disposal of refuse or garbage. Unfortunately, the Corporation itself is in a mess with its 'refuse' property. Apparently the Corporation has not yet attained sophistication in the proper disposal of such 'refuse'.

### The Way Out

It is widely accepted that a permissive approach may not always be appropriate, and may indeed be dangerous or irresponsible if applied to substances that remain persistent in the environment. Ideally, there should be an immediate phasing out programme leading to a total ban on the use of polythene bags. It is definitely irresponsible of the decision makers to permit production and wide distribution of such substances which persist in the environment to degrade ecosystems and human health for generations. Decisions made today will affect the future generations. Thus, we have to consider them when such decisions are being made.

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## ID Card for Voters

### One Step Forward in Genuinely Acceptable Election Process

by Helal Kabir Chowdhury

THE voters' identity card issue had been on the card for some time and now it is ostensibly taking a matured shape. Public opinion has been reflected in a recent survey notwithstanding its viability and utility in the context of present day political requirement of the nation.

Tenders in this regard have been floated and it is genuinely expected that a new phenomenon in voting procedure is going to usher into the benefit of all political considerations. Some prudent questions have aroused inquisitive minds about this ID card. Is this project going to cover the entire voting populace or when the project is going to be completed? We do neither know nor can fathom when the election is going to be held and whether the project will cover the entire electorate before the next general election. If this is to be done on the basis of a representative sample, then I dare say, please abandon it.

The idea of ID card is nonetheless spectacularly novel to curb rigging which is all pervading in the election

process and this may be emulated by other under-developed democracies. Government's effort in this regard should have started much earlier to make it a substantively effective proposition. Some weeks ago a press report indicated that identity cards would be prepared for divisional headquarters, only to be completed by the end of December, quoting a source of the Election Commission. But this is not likely to be acceptable to all and sundry.

As there was a significant amount of fuss over voters' registration process from various quarters at the time of the enumeration, it is rightly felt that the government should seek the opposition contention on the ID card issue well ahead in time. Or the opposition political quarters should, without brooking any delay, offer constructive suggestions in this respect. Otherwise hassle at the outset or in the middle of the project may only jeopardise its implementation.

It is obviously in the mind of the government to give the ID card an effect in the next

general elections. The whole process is a huge money-consuming exercise involving some hundreds of crores of taka and the Election Commission may engage more manpower than anticipated to expedite the implementation. The red tape so apprehended should earnestly be avoided to ensure timely production. As already suggested, sincere thought is required to be given to encompass the views of the opposition parties for which the government should not show any reluctance or adamancy. Ignoring this may hamper the venture for which this has been meant.

Does this project require any constitutional back-up? If so, this should be settled before the launching of the programme. But will the opposition accept any constitutional clearance passed by the ruling party in the Parliament devoid of their presence. Any legal blockade has to be surmounted immediately taking into cognizance the opposition. The fruitful endeavour should not be hindered by the obstinacy of either side.

If we go to the booth equipped with ID cards in the next election, then rigging, subtle or otherwise, will be found to be immensely curtailed and the nation one step forward in a genuinely acceptable election process.