

Economic diplomacy in a multi-polar world

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ECONOMIC diplomacy through dialogue with neighbouring countries, and multi-polar coalitions that may come up in the near future, seem to be the need of the time for our survival and growth. Gone are the days of traditional diplomatic exchange of pleasantries, complimenting the host countries and assuring them of best cooperation, which means nothing and leads nowhere. With the development of digital technology, particularly the Internet, this time-consuming process has become redundant.

A change in the style, substance and form of our diplomacy is, therefore, necessary. A strategy in the present multi-polar world needs to be formulated afresh as the traditional concept of state power has now shifted its ground from military might to economic weight. This has happened due to the demise of the Soviet Union and the decline of the United States as the sole superpower.

It is good to see that our foreign office has initiated a new approach towards the unresolved issues with India. The foreign minister had demonstrated this in New Delhi last September. Seemingly, she played her cards well. The result was an instant and welcome change in the Indian

attitude in the economic sphere. Several measures of economic cooperation were mooted by India and given out in a joint communiqué issued at the end of her visit.

The seriousness of the Indian authorities for solving the disputed issues was reaffirmed when the Indian foreign secretary came to Bangladesh on a day-long visit recently to finalise the program of the impending 3-day state visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in the second week of January, which should help in confidence building not only in our relationship with India but with Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar as well.

In fact, in her visits to Nepal and Bhutan some time ago, the prime minister had unobtrusively set this new trend of diplomacy by way of informal talks at the highest level, which opened up avenues of bilateral cooperation for improved trade and commerce between Bangladesh and the two neighbours. It is again with her nod that a secretary level meeting was held in Dhaka to firm up an agenda for another meeting for decisions at a higher level later. These bilateral initiatives are well within the declared sphere of action by BIMSTEC, an economic coalition of Bangladesh, India, Singapore and Thailand.

The prime minister and her delegation

played an equally crucial role in the same vein in the recently concluded Climate Summit in Copenhagen -- in the open forum and in behind-the-scenes lobbying. Consequently, Bangladesh's viewpoints were given adequate attention, and the country has been identified as the one of worst effected, though the final outcome could not satisfy all aggrieved parties.

While trying to resolve the outstanding Indo-Bangladesh issues in this impending visit and in later negotiations, a "give-and-take" approach should be the best option for us, but on specific issues and with equal advantage. Both sides should strive to make the lives of their overwhelmingly poverty-stricken masses of people a little better. The first step towards this would be larger and improved trade and commerce between the two countries without hurting their respective national prides and psyches.

It is interesting to note here that the Indian foreign secretary took out some time from her very busy daylong program to have a meeting with the leader of the opposition. This underscores the importance India attaches to the role of the opposition in Indo-Bangladesh bilateral understanding or agreement to make them meaningful, enforceable and lasting within a timeframe.

Closer Indo-Bangladesh relations have become important not only for us but for India as well in view of the sea-change in world politics and economy. When George W. Bush first moved to the White House in 2001, he let it be known that he intended to run the administration as if it were a private business. He did so with gusto but, pitifully, it resembled a corrupt monopoly -- publicly owned but privately managed.

Bush threw overboard all norms of

administration and international law and practice. Fraud and deceit passed in his time for freedom and unprovoked aggression, and carnage for patriotism. Consequently, America depleted its political capital and moral authority to lead the world. Realists in America seem to be concerned about its staying power. Some see China as the new rival; others a possible Russia-China-India coalition as a threat. Still others fear that a united Europe may eventually challenge America's primacy.

In the post cold war period, societies are now more focused on their own welfare rather than glory. In modern democracy, the use of force is avoided because it jeopardises economic objectives. In the last year of his two-term presidency, George Bush had met his nemesis. America's economy took a nose-dive as it never had before.

Trade balance in America had dropped heavily and bankruptcy became rampant. Thousands of workers were rendered jobless after the unprecedented financial meltdown. On the other hand, a strong Russia with growing economic and political power has been emerging on the scene.

Having paid off all its debt to the World Bank and the IMF, and now considered a "reliable partner," Russia has begun to increase its defense outlay. It has a multi-party democracy now, where periodic elections are held on universal adult suffrage. A number of parties, including the old Communist Party, are funded by the state for elections, like France, and not by corporate interests as in America. Russia is also the second largest world producer of oil, and is now widening its relations with Western Europe.

Then comes China and, to a lesser



Money is the measure of might.

extent India, as the growing economic power. China's GDP has been growing more than ten percent annually over a decade, and Chinese consumer goods are now flooding the world markets.

India, too, is leaping forward as a strong economic and military power. Its export of skilled workers is growing unabated as much as its software development and outsourcing jobs. It is now trying to repair the ruptured relation with China.

Such is the multipolar world scenario in the context of which we have to formulate our foreign policy objectives and strategy for the next decade or so. Instead of frittering away our scanty resources on traditional diplomatic gimmicks, we

should concentrate on economic activities alone. Even a political subject is to be viewed from an economic angle. This should be issue based and target-oriented, and not indulgence in generalities.

How best we can do this, and to what extent, will depend upon foresight, intellectual resources, realistic planning and efficient working of the foreign office guided by the deliberations of the Parliament. In doing so, the foreign office may also seek the views of the specialists, academics, politicians, industrialists, professionals, media and NGOs.

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Cadet Colleges: more value for money?

The net output from the cadet colleges, even taking into consideration the quality, has arguably not been commensurate with the huge investment. While counting costs, we should not only include the recurring expenditure but must also count the fixed assets we have invested in, including land and infrastructure.

MD. TOUHID HOSSAIN

WITH keen interest I went through the two pieces on the usefulness (or otherwise) of cadet colleges in the point-counterpoint page of *The Daily Star* of December 15 and 24, 2009 respectively. Being a product of a cadet college, I have often done some soul searching on two things. First, what exactly was the intent of having such a totally different and apparently costly system of secondary education for a chosen few; and then, whether we have done our part in paying back the nation for the resources it had invested in us. I was never really sure about the answers.

As a twelve year old boy, when I entered Rajshahi Cadet College (RCC) in 1967, I took it as a prelude to a military career, which I then coveted. Ideas, however, went through many transformations subsequently. I lost my enthusiasm to join the military. I also saw very few of the first batch of our college taking

that line. In my batch, the 4th from RCC, there are many more doctors than military officers, serving or retired.

The dilemma regarding the purpose of the cadet colleges, I think, is now largely resolved. Many of the cadet college graduates (though not all) are now expected to join the military. A random sampling of the graduates of some recent batches of RCC found that between 10 and 15 from each batch of 50 joined the military. Cadet colleges are also expected to provide good and subsidised education to the offspring of military officers.

Unlike in the past, a large number of the cadets now come from military families. As for the other graduates' services to the country, I would largely agree with Ekram Kabir. It would surely be unjust to go by absolute numbers vis-à-vis the "dirt poor institutions," as mentioned by Mr. Mushfiqur Rahman. Cadet college graduates that we see in high positions today are essentially



Move towards better capacity utilisation.

products of four older cadet colleges (the other eight are relatively new and their graduates are yet to rise to that level). Together, the four produce a mere 200 graduates a year, and if we compare the number with hundreds of thousand who passed with them all over the country, their relative number in leadership positions is surely remarkable.

On the question of cost benefit analy-

sis (return on investment), however, Mr. Mushfiqur Rahman has a point. The net output from the cadet colleges, even taking into consideration the quality, has arguably not been commensurate with the huge investment. While counting costs, we should not only include the recurring expenditure but must also count the fixed assets we have invested in, including land and infrastructure.

Rajshahi (then Ayub) Cadet College was built for 300 cadets on 145 acres of arable land in 1966, when the population of Bangladesh was around 65 million. To me, even at that time it was a luxury. Today, when the population has seen a 150% increase and the average size of farm holding in the country is barely an acre, it is clearly wasteful. At the dawn of independence we had four cadet colleges, now we have twelve. One can foresee more cadet colleges coming up in the decades ahead for myriad reasons. The question is, shall we continue to devote more and more disproportionately large resources for such a small number of beneficiaries?

This need not necessarily be so. Since independence, all educational institutions in the country from primary schools to universities have, with much more limited physical assets, increased the number of students manifold. There is no reason why the cadet colleges cannot do something similar. At least in the four "original" cadet colleges, the number of cadets can easily be increased to 600 each from the present 300. This would neither cause any crowding nor necessarily compromise the quality. This can be done with minimal increase in infrastructure on the same tract of land.

The 50 cadets who now enter in a batch are divided into two sections of 25 each. If we have 100 instead, they could easily fit into three sections of 33/34 each in the same classrooms (in fact ours was an

unusually large batch of 65 and we sat 33 and 32 in two classrooms perfectly at ease). Classroom facilities would, thus, hardly need any expansion. Likewise, instead of having three houses each accommodating 100 only, with a little more investment there could be four houses of 150 each, and so on. The expansion will need some increase in teaching staff (albeit less than proportionate). However, it would not require any increase in administrative and support staff (of which there is plenty), thereby reducing relative overhead costs.

If this could be done, the opportunity of cadet college education could be extended to double the number of students with a little increase in investment. This will eliminate the need for acquisition of more arable land for building more cadet colleges. It would drastically bring down fixed asset per capita and also lower the recurring expenditure for each cadet. Besides, the highest fee payable by cadets with well-to-do parents is still short of the average expenditure per head. This can surely be rationalised, with those who have the ability paying the real cost while meritorious cadets from low-income families could continue to receive subsidies as they do now. That, I believe, is more value for money.

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Dhaka traffic: The common sense approach

Instead of paying consultants for recommending expensive constructions, let's listen to experts with local knowledge. Big cities in our neighbouring countries, sharing similar socio-economic conditions, have succeeded in using these approaches. Why can't we?

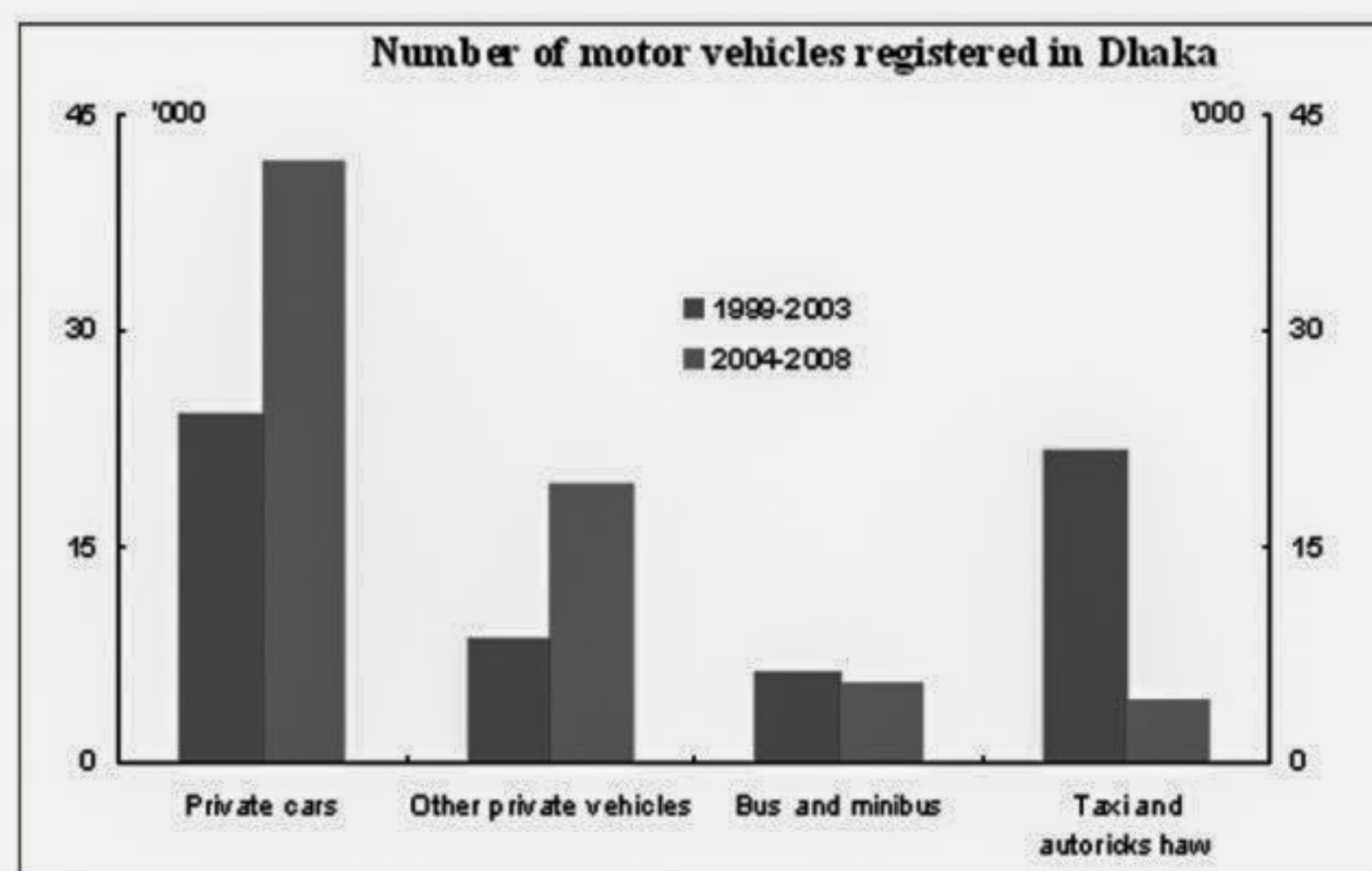
RUMI AHMED and JYOTI RAHMAN

ROAMING the city's streets in the back seat of one's own chauffeured automobile has been a passion of Dhaka's moneyed classes from the colonial days. Historians argue whether the first motor vehicle in the city was owned by the Nawab family or the British sahibs. But owning a car has been a substantial status symbol in our society for a century now, with memories of dust storms on the city's dirt roads created by those early vehicles passed down through generations.

Throughout the transition to the new nationhood, the club of motor-car owners in Dhaka was very exclusive. Even in the 1970s, a 1955 Volkswagen, 1961 Hillman, or 1958 Datsun was the ultimate symbol of social rank. In the more recent decades, thanks to garments

magnates, government officials and professionals who seem to spend well beyond their formal income, UN peace mission veterans, and remittance from the expatriates, the exclusiveness of the auto owners' club has been diluted. But Dhaka's bourgeoisie still dream of riding in the back seat of that chauffeured car, creating a dust storm. And in this they are supported by a rather curious corporate culture in Dhaka, whereby the further up an executive is in the hierarchy the more cars he gets for personal use.

In 2008 alone, about 14,000 cars and another 5,000 personal passenger vehicles (jeeps and SUVs) were registered in Dhaka. The number of privately owned and operated motor vehicles registered in the five years to 2008 was double that of the previous five year period. Over the same period, the number of buses and minibuses registered fell slightly, and the



Source: CEIC Asia database.

registration of taxis and auto-rickshaws collapsed.

As a result, Dhaka now seems to be buried under a menacing heap of automobiles. Dhaka roads are not roads anymore, they are parking lots. People spend more time during the day sitting in their automobiles than anywhere else.

This is not sustainable. Somehow, the reliance on private automobile needs to be reduced. The corporate culture of

rewarding people with cars, and the social culture of cars being status symbols, need to be discouraged.

How can this happen when Dhaka does not have a decent public transport system?

Discussions on public transport systems tend to be dominated by subway systems, electric commuter rails, and expressways. But there are great dangers in the whole traffic management agenda

being dominated by these mega projects. Irrespective of their affiliation, politicians like these projects as visible signs of "development," while bureaucrats and consultants like the gravy trains that accompany them. And while the public is fed the dreams of these grand projects, hard questions are either unasked or unanswered. For example, in an energy-starved nation, where will the electricity come from to run these trains? A recent study found that only 8% of the city's residents will use a fully functional mega expensive subway system.

This is not to say infrastructure development has no role. Of course it does. Trains may well be part of a long-term strategy, but let's not pin everything on massive transport infrastructure projects. Instead, let's focus on "here and now" solutions, such as encouraging big buses and walking. School buses can transport school children and teachers. The government can hire buses for public servants. Business houses can transport everyone from the CEO to the peon in buses. Instead of spending crores and worsening traffic jam by trying to build flyovers, let's make the footpaths functional so that people can walk to work. Let's discourage peak hour driving by

charging for peak hour road use, banning passenger vehicles in certain areas for certain times and charging heavily for parking on the city corporation's roadside spaces. Let's assign bus lanes and make bicycle lanes on the major roads. And let's enforce the traffic rules.

These won't cost much money at all, and unlike many other necessary reforms they are not politically difficult to achieve. All that is needed is an innovative approach to the issue, and a willingness to experiment. This government was elected with a mandate for change. It is uniquely placed in our history in terms of strength and political capital. Can this government resist the temptation of mega money of mega projects, and focus on these real solutions?

We need massive funds to build power plants. Instead of waiting for donors' funds, let's use our common sense to fix the traffic problem. Instead of paying consultants for recommending expensive constructions, let's listen to experts with local knowledge. Big cities in our neighbouring countries, sharing similar socio-economic conditions, have succeeded in using these approaches. Why can't we?

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