

Does Russia fit into Bangladesh's geopolitical matrix?

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PRAGMATICALLY, we are done with "friendship-to-all-malice-to-none" period. Now, it is the geopolitical compulsion that leads to the reckoning of how to employ geo-strategic advantages to build a sustainable security design for the future ahead. The question forges to the front when we face a dilemma in making decisions on any of the offers made by the big powers to contribute for our sake. Again very recently, it has become an issue when an agreement with Gazprom, the state-owned energy-exploration company of Russia for cooperation and assistance in the area of gas exploration in Bangladesh has been ratified by the two countries. However, the question of a steady Bangladesh-Russia relations was brought into the spotlight when the present government reached a five-year nuclear deal with Russia seeking assistance in the field of the peaceful use of nuclear energy, particularly building a 1,000-megawatt nuclear power plant to help supply of the increasing energy demands of Bangladesh. The plant was projected to cost up to \$2 billion to be able to generate electricity by 2014. Under the agreement, Russia would assist to design, construct and operate nuclear power plants and to train Bangladeshi engineers and officials.

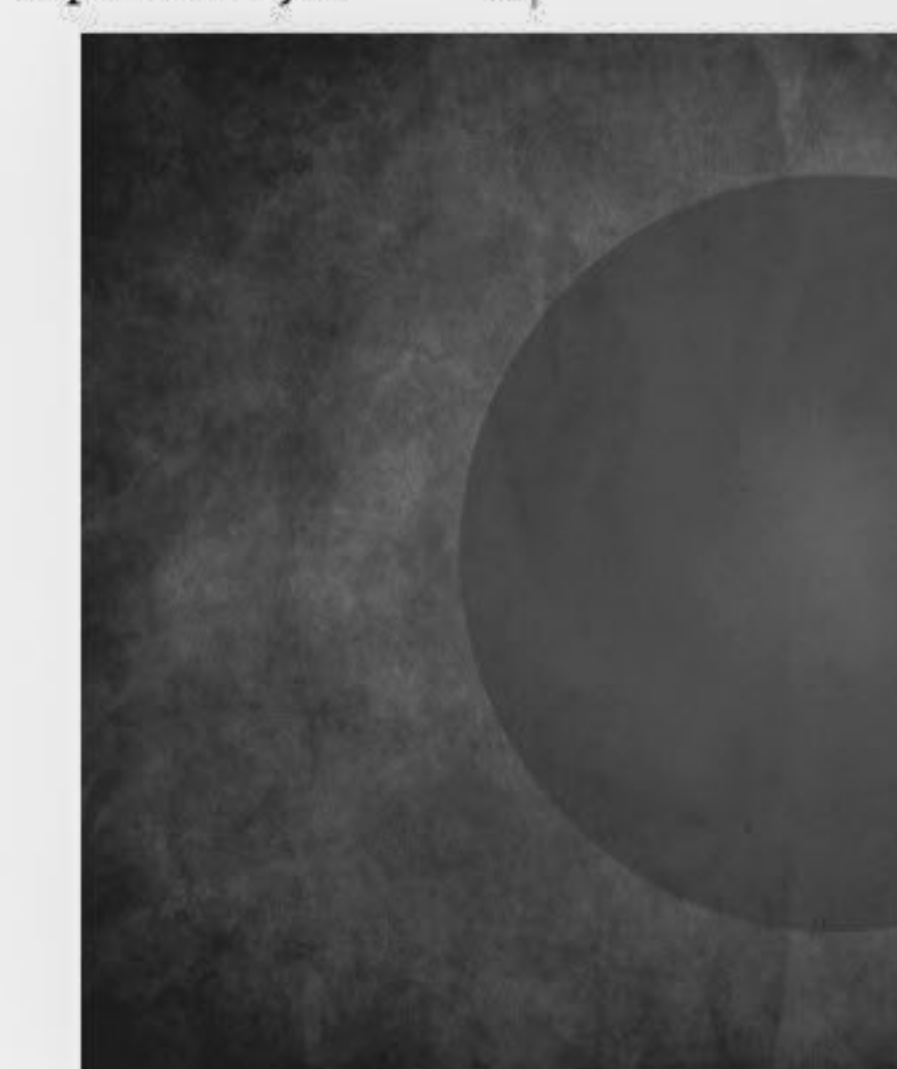
Bangladesh, since its independence in 1971, has been facing the absence of a concrete foreign policy direction with regard to its relations with big powers. Volatile nature of the policy and frequent shifts in strategic preferences have made the country less appealing to geopolitically significant actors and hence less recipient of benefits from the regional and international ambience. Bangladesh situated in a geopolitically significant setting within the 'geo-strategic frontier' of India and in a close propinquity with China. This setting made the country increasingly important for the big power contest particularly amongst China, America and Russia.

Russia, after an initial backlash of post-cold war stagnancy, has appeared to retrieve its strategic position as a big Eurasian power again. With a growing economic capabilities and strong leadership under Putin administration, Russia has been able to show a resurgence to encounter Western influence in all strategic regions including South Asia. Into the bargain, Bangladesh will obviously be considered as a strategic

footprint for Russia in the South Asian regional calculation.

Historically, Soviet assistance to Bangladesh has proved to be catalyst in the development of the country as an independent entity. In the war of independence of Bangladesh in 1971, Soviet Union played a very significant role. It was one of the first countries to recognize Bangladesh and contributed substantially in post war reconstruction of Bangladesh. Strategically, Soviet Union's engagement in 1971 was a strategic compulsion for the country driven by enlightened national interest. Moscow wanted regional stability and preeminence of India, its trusted ally while containing the ascendancy of US-China-Pakistan alliance. Soviet Union recognized the newly independent nation, continued friendly relations and provided with aid and development assistance till the collapse of Mujib

Regime in 1975. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has failed to improve its relations with the post-Soviet Russia and bilateral relations have been in a very ordinary level since 1990s.



Russia requires a strategic foothold in South Asia. The foreign policy of Russia is directed to the recovery of its traditional strategic outstretches in South Asia. The country intends to include more countries under its strategic bandwagon. After India, Bangladesh stands the second best option for the Russian Federation. Similarly, Bangladesh is yearning for a strategic partnership with a big power to enhance security and bargaining capability for the attainment of its regional and international foreign

policy goals. Given the US selective and temporary nature of friendship, Russia stands to be a better option in the geopolitical calculation of Bangladesh. Another important aspect is the energy sector which happens to be the main source of Russia's foreign exchange earnings. Only in 2007, the country had US\$ 220 billion revenue from the energy export. On the other hand, Bangladesh energy requirements have been far greater than the energy supplied. The country needs both oil and gas import to support its growing consumer and industrial demand. Bangladesh can import energy particularly oil and gas from the Russian Federation in near future. Importantly, Russia possesses sophisticated nuclear enrichment technology and is willing to assist Bangladesh. Russia has experienced a robust economic growth for the past several years, an average of 6.8 percent per year

running a budget surplus that has exceeded 7 percent of GDP. The country has a possession of \$497 billion gold and foreign exchange reserves (the largest in its history). Bangladesh can obtain more trade opportunity, preferential arrangements, direct investment, and so on. There is potential for further expansion of exports of tea, jute, jute manufactures, footwear, pharmaceuticals, and melamine in the Russian market. Similarly, Bangladesh can export its abundant human capital to meet Russia's need of skilled manpower and labor force because of its declining population, 0.5% per year.

A tripartite arms race in South Asia -- China vs India and India vs Pakistan -- makes the South Asian

region a significant arms market for Russia. China and India are the most important customers of Moscow's armaments industry, purchasing approximately 70% or \$3 billion annually. On the other side, Bangladesh needs to improve its power through building a strong military capability to protect its national interest and security in the asymmetric power balance in South Asia. Unsettled territorial and border disputes with India and Myanmar have given Bangladesh an imperative to develop the quality of its armed and border security forces with modern weaponry and effective training. Bangladesh can import sophisticated military hardware from Russia at a concessional rate. Bangladesh can seek Russian assistance in handling the threat of terrorism in the country, given the US unpredictable anti-terrorist campaign (War on Terror) -- sometimes cooperative, sometimes suppressive.

Russia's pining for a gateway to the Indian Ocean that connects the oil-rich Persian Gulf with growing energy markets in East Asia can be helpful in protecting Bangladesh maritime interest which has sidelined by the illegitimate claims by India and Myanmar on the territorial water and exclusive economic zone of Bangladesh.

The strategic partnership of Bangladesh with Russia would increase both of its geo-strategic and geo-economic appeal of Bangladesh. Adopting a policy of bilateralism, Bangladesh can make an opportunity to work collectively with the Russia-India and Russia-China joint pool to uphold its national interest in the extremely volatile region of South Asia in the post 9/11 era. This would make India more congenial to resolve bilateral outstanding issues such as reasonable solution to maritime demarcation, equitable water sharing and reducing trade deficit.

However, Bangladesh has to manage its partnership with Russia within an acceptable bound of its other partners so that it does not jeopardize bilateral relations with India, China and the United States in a massive scale. In parallel, we have to develop very healthy relationship with India, China and the European Union to protect our politico-economic interest worldwide.

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France, Britain to deploy helicopters in Libya



FRANCE and Britain are deploying attack helicopters to strike Moamer Kadhafi's forces, top French ministers said Monday (May 23, 2011) in a shift in tactics two months into NATO's air war in Libya.

NATO says it has seriously degraded Kadhafi's military machine with a relentless onslaught from combat jets, but it has yet to deliver the death blow to the regime, which still stands in Tripoli while rebels control the east.

The helicopters, a weapon that has yet to be used by NATO in Libya, will help the Western alliance strike regime military assets hidden in urban areas while avoiding civilian casualties, the French ministers said.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, on the sidelines of meetings of European Union foreign and defence ministers in Brussels, said Paris was deploying Tigre and Gazelle class helicopters aboard an aircraft carrier.

Juppe said the French helicopters would enable NATO "to better adapt our ground strike capacity with more precise means of (carrying out) strikes."

France and Britain, who along with the United States launched the first salvos against the Libyan regime on March 19, have repeatedly advocated an intensification of the campaign.

French Defence Minister Gerard Longuet said separately that London would deploy helicopters aboard its HMS Ocean aircraft carrier as soon as possible. "The sooner the better is what the British think," he said, adding that he discussed this with Gerald Howarth, the British minister for international security strategy who attended the Brussels talks...

Howarth cancelled a press briefing in Brussels and a British government spokeswoman refused to confirm whether London was deploying helicopters.

She said London "routinely" reviews its military assets "in order to adhere" to the UN Security Council resolution that authorised the use of force to protect civilians from attacks...

"Our strategy consists of increasing the military pressure over the next few weeks while at the same time moving forward on the path towards a political solution," Juppe said.

In Paris, the military said the BPC Tonnerre aircraft carrier set off from the French Mediterranean port of Toulon on May 17. The BPC can carry 16 Tigre or larger 12-tonne NH-90 helicopters, 750 troops and scores of armoured vehicles for launching amphibious attacks...

NATO has mobilised around 200 airplanes, ranging from surveillance aircraft to mid-air refuellers and combat jets, as part of its missions in Libya, which include enforcing an arms embargo and a no-fly zone as well as ground strikes.

The aircraft have conducted almost 7,900 sorties, including more than 3,000 sorties aimed at identifying or striking targets, since NATO took over from a coalition led by the United States, France and Britain on March 31.

Source: defencetalk.com

25 YEARS AFTER CHERNOBYL

The nuclear debate at a dead end

SEBASTIEN MIRAGLIA

THE 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster and current concerns about the consequences of the nuclear accident in Fukushima act as a cruel reminder that nuclear energy like any other industrial activity presents an irreducible risk for the environment and human health. Yet, the full impact of nuclear accidents on the environment and public health remains unknown. Despite crucial differences in terms of accident causes, radioactivity releases and local demographics, Japan's emergency evacuation plans in Fukushima are virtually identical to the contingency plans set by Ukrainian authorities in 1986. Beyond the technical and scientific challenges faced by public health surveys, this situation is favoured by two decades of debate about the pros and cons of nuclear energy, where both sides have been presenting misleading data to support their respective agendas.

Since the mid-1980s public health surveys have attempted to determine the growth of cancer and newborn malformations in Europe after the Chernobyl disaster. But the lack of comparable studies before the accident makes it impossible to measure with certainty the actual number of victims

and isolate the effects of the fallout from other environmental factors. Moreover, because of the sheer size of the European population and low levels of radioactive contamination, the rate of excess deaths may be too small to be statistically detectable, even if the ultimate number of premature deaths is large.

In the absence of reliable methods to quantify the impact of the Chernobyl disaster on public health, supporters and opponents of nuclear energy have proposed different investigation methods adapted to their respective beliefs and political agendas. In its assessment of the catastrophe, the Soviet Union considered that only deaths caused by acute radiation poisoning within the first three months following the accident can be linked to the explosion of the reactor. Today, Ukraine, Russia and Belarus are still providing assessments of the catastrophe largely based on figures from the Soviet era, and limit their communication about non-lethal diseases caused by radiation exposure to a strict minimum. While the figures presented by local authorities and nuclear supporters tend to underestimate the number of casualties from the Chernobyl disaster, the figures presented by anti-nuclear organisations are equally

misleading. In some instances, ecologist organisations have been accused of keeping record of all casualties among emergency workers and rescuers on the accident site, even including every individual dying of natural causes unrelated to



radiation. Among neighbouring populations, premature deaths were also systematically attributed to Chernobyl, regardless of other environmental factors, such as smoking, alcoholism, or professional diseases among miners and industrial workers. As a result of these specific sur-

veys, both supporters and opponents of nuclear energy have presented rather absurd assessments of the Chernobyl disaster. During the 1990s, supporters of nuclear energy claimed that only 31 deaths could be directly attributed to the

Chernobyl disaster including two helicopter pilots who died in a crash on their way to the rescue operation. In a recent report, a scientific committee of the United Nations could only identify 64 deaths related to the nuclear accident, but acknowledged the possibility of 4,000 extra deaths due to

the long-term effects of radiation poisoning. In contrast, Greenpeace believes that more than 200,000 people died directly from various causes related to the Chernobyl accident. Other ecologist organisations claim a staggering one million victims, including a questionable 170,000 deaths in North America.

25 years after the Chernobyl disaster, the potential consequences of the nuclear accident in Fukushima are subject to similar disagreements. Among anti-nuclear groups, the recent nuclear accident in Japan is already referred to as a "nuclear apocalypse" and workers are identified as "nuclear kamikazes". On the other hand, supporters of nuclear energy argue that there has not been a single casualty related to the Fukushima accident so far, and claim that the event produced only one tenth of the radioactivity released in Chernobyl. Moreover, the nuclear industry stresses that rescuers always worked below the maximum radiation exposure allowed for emergency workers by international regulations.

For a quarter of a century, this battle of numbers and figures has contributed to the spread confusion about the environmental and public health risks posed by

nuclear energy. Such a confusion is not only a major obstacle to a better debate about the pros and cons of nuclear energy, but it has also contributed to prevent the development of better contingency plans after Chernobyl. In contrast, a wider consensus about the potential effects of nuclear accidents is required in spite of the scientific limitations and uncertainties of current models. At stake is the financial compensation of previous victims, the construction of new power plants in more suitable locations and the management of future crisis situations.

In this context, there are still important lessons to be learned from Japan. In a country plagued with systemic risks such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis, the occurrence of natural disasters and industrial accidents is considered as unavoidable. From this perspective, a key objective is to learn from previous disasters and develop accurate environmental damage models, in order to prepare local populations and improve contingency plans. Unless such an approach is adopted by the current nuclear debate, the management of nuclear risks by public authorities is unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future.'

By arrangement with IDSA, New Delhi.