

# Padma River: Why two bridges 50 km apart?

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THE Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs headed by Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith, decided in principle at a meeting on October 27 to build the 2nd bridge over the Padma River at Paturia-Goalondo under Public Private Partnership (PPP). Construction of this 6.10 km bridge with a railway track will cost about \$2 billion.

The 1st bridge at Mawa- Jajira point has been struck by corruption allegations from the World Bank. This has halted progress and made its future uncertain.

Construction of the 10 km bridge, costing \$2.97 billion, was to be financed by the World Bank (\$1.2 billion), ADB (\$615 million), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (\$400 million) and IDB (\$140 million). Now the government appears to be ready to call for tender of another bridge on the Padma River, but without any financial pledges from any of those or other agencies. My question is; when the 220 km long Jamuna River has only one bridge at Sirajganj, then why does the 104 km long Padma River need two costly bridges within 50 km distance?

JICA made a pre-feasibility study in 2004 for construction of the Padma Bridge at four possible sites: (1) Paturia-Goalondo, (2) Dohar-Char Vadrasan, (3) Mawa- Jajira and (4) Chandpur-Vedarganj. The study rejected the Chandpur-Vedarganj site because of its distant location. JICA said that both the Paturia- Goalondo and Mawa- Jajira sites were economically viable. The then BNP government endorsed the JICA study and declared that the Padma Bridge shall be constructed at Mawa- Jajira point.

After that declaration by the government,

people on the Paturia- Goalondo route started agitating and demanded that the bridge be built at their point. In response, the BNP government declared that it would construct another bridge at their point. But JICA recommendation was definitely not for two bridges; it was for one bridge only at any one of those sites. JICA, surprisingly, did not evaluate the Dohar-Char Vadrasan site for a compromise.

The JICA study has several flaws, but is the only documented study that can be referred to. The recommended Mawa- Jajira point for the bridge was on a very unstable site. The southern bank of that site in Shibchar, Madaripur, and Jajira, Sharariatpur lies on the old bed of the Ganga River, and is very vulnerable to erosion. This old course of the Ganga River can be seen in Rennell's Map of 1779. We said that the JICA recommended 6.2 km bridge with 6 km bank protection on the southern bank would not be enough for stability, and that the bridge needed to be longer with bank protection of about 20 km length.

Starting with the JICA estimated cost of \$1,074 million, the cost in 2007 rose to \$1,473 million, \$1,800 million in 2009, and \$2,600 million in 2010. Bridge Secretary Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan said that the



Location of the Padma Bridge sites at Dohar & Mawa

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cost was increasing because the bridge length had increased to 10 km (The Daily Star, October 20). Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith said that construction of the bridge would start by March 2012 with estimated cost of \$2,900 million. But now its progress is stalled indefinitely because of corruption

charges by the World Bank.

Against the backdrop of corruption charges related to the 1st bridge, the decision to go for the 2nd bridge at Paturia- Goalondo site appears to be a political move of the AL government. A PPP driven project in Bangladesh always had been a place for cost manipulation and corruption. I see no hope from this move and no bridge in the near future in the prevailing situation. Why did the government not opt for a compromise solution and select the Dohar- Char Vadrasan site for the bridge? This place, having hard soil at Dhulsara, Harirampur on its northern bank, and bank protection works at Hajiganj, Char Vadrasan on southern bank, makes a very stable site for the bridge. This site is only 25 km from either Paturia- Goalondo or Mawa- Jajira sites. A recent study made by CEGIS for construction of the Bangabandhu International Airport found that the southern bank of Mawa- Jajira point (Char Janajat, Shibchar) was unstable (The Daily Star,

November 5). Their recommendation for an alternate stable site at Char Bilaspur, Dohar is near to our proposed Dohar- Char Vadrasan site.

The people of Pabna travel 80 km up to cross the Jamuna Bridge to go to Dhaka.

Why can't the people from southern districts or southwestern districts travel only 25 km extra to reach the Padma Bridge at a compromise location? The Jamuna Bridge had to be connected with two approach roads, from Hatikumru to the west and from Elenga to the east. Then why can't the approach roads be built from Hemayetpur from north and Talma from the south? Why can't a new railway line be built, connecting Singla, Bhatiapara and Pukhuria, to run over this bridge to Jurain in Dhaka, which will be a revolutionary change in railway communication with southwestern Bangladesh? If one goes through the JICA study, one can find enough reason to justify this location (Site 2) in terms of cost, stability and benefit.

I recommend that the government and other stakeholders consider the Dohar- Char Vadrasan site only (Site 2) for construction of the Padma Bridge. According to the JICA report, this site has the narrowest river width (4.4 km) compared to the other 2 sites over the Padma River. The length of the bridge here shall not be more than 5.5 km. This site, with 50 km approach road, has the lowest cost estimate of \$966 million only (Paturia \$260 Million, Mawa \$1,074 Million). With a railway track added, it should be within \$1,200 million. My major points are, (1) the Dohar- Char Vadrasan site is more stable, (2) it can benefit the people of both the south and the southwestern regions, and (3) it can save money that would be needed to construct an extra burdensome bridge on the Padma River.

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## Can Asia step up to 21st century leadership?

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IF one had any doubts about the world being in the midst of a huge power shift, recent events should have dispelled those. From Europeans appealing to China to save the euro to President Barack Obama arriving in Bali to lobby for Asian support, the transformation is evident. Less clear is who will lead the world in the 21st century and how. There is plenty of talk about the 21st century being an Asian century, featuring China, Japan and India. These countries certainly seek an enhanced role in world affairs, including a greater share of decision-making authority in the governance of global bodies. But are they doing enough to deserve it?

The intervention in Libya, led by Britain and France, and carried out by Nato, says it all. There is no Nato in Asia, and there's unlikely to be one. Imagining a scenario in which China, India and Japan come together to lead a coalition of the willing to force a brutally repressive regime out of power, or undertake any major peace and security operation in their neighbourhood, is implausible.

China and Japan are the world's second and third largest economies. India is sixth in purchasing-power parity terms. China's defence spending has experienced double-digit annual growth during the past two decades. India was the world's largest buyer of conventional weapons in 2010. A study by the US Congressional Research Service lists Saudi Arabia, India and China as the three biggest arms buyers from 2003 to 2010. India bought nearly \$17 billion worth of conventional arms, compared to \$13.2 billion for China and some \$29 billion for Saudi Arabia.

Chinese, Indian and Japanese foreign policy ideas have evolved. India has abandoned non-alignment. China has moved well past Maoist socialist internationalism. Japan pursues the idea of a "normal state" that can say yes to using force in multilateral operations.

But unfortunately, these shifts have not led to greater leadership in global governance. National power ambitions and regional rivalries have restricted their contributions to global governance.

President Hu Jintao has defined the objective of China's foreign policy as to "jointly construct a harmonious world." Chinese leaders and academics invoke the cultural idea of "all under heaven," or Tianxia. The concept stresses harmony -- as opposed to "sameness" -- thus signalling that China can be politically non-democratic, but still pursue friendship with other nations.

China has increased its participation in multilateralism and global governance, but not offered leadership. This is sometimes explained as a lingering legacy of Deng Xiaoping's caution about Chinese leadership on behalf of the developing world. More tell-

ing is China's desire not to sacrifice its sovereignty and independence for the sake of multilateralism and global governance, along with limited integration between domestic and international considerations in decision-making about issues of global governance. Chen Dongxiao of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies calls China a "part-time leader" in selected areas of global affairs.

Japan's policy conception of a "normal state," initially presented as a way of reclaiming Japan's right to use force, but only in support of UN-sanctioned operations, may sound conducive to greater global leadership. But it also reflects strategic motivations: to hedge against any drawdown of US forces in the region, to counter the rise of China and the growing threat

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from North Korea, and to increase Japan's participation in collective military operations in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf regions.

Beset by chronic uncertainty in domestic leadership and a declining economy, Japan has not been a proactive global leader when it comes to crisis management. Its response to the 2008 global financial crisis was a far cry from that to the 1997 crisis, when it took centre-stage and proposed the creation of a regional monetary fund, a limited version of which materialised eventually within the Chiang Mai Initiative.

In 2005, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asserted that "the 21st century will be an Indian century." Singh expressed hope that "the world will once again look at us with regard and respect, not just for the economic progress we make but for the democratic values we cherish and uphold and the principles of pluralism and inclusiveness we have come to represent which is India's heritage as a centuries old culture and civilisation." In this ambition, India was praised by US presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the latter describing India as "a leader in Asia and around the world" and as "a rising power and a responsible global power."

Yet, the Indian foreign-policy worldview has shifted in the direction of greater realpolitik. Some Indian analysts such as C. Raja Mohan have pointed out that India might be reverting from Gandhi and Nehru to George Curzon, the British governor-general of India in the early 20th century. Curzonian geopolitics assumed Indian centrality in the Asian heartland, and envisaged a proactive and expansive Indian diplomatic and military role

in stabilising Asia as a whole.

Indian power projection in both western and eastern Indian Ocean waters is growing, thereby pursuing a Mahanian approach for dominance of the maritime sphere -- named after US Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan -- rather than a Nehruvian approach. It is partly driven by a desire, encouraged by the US and Southeast Asian countries, to assume the role of a regional balancer vis-à-vis China. Like Japan, India has sought a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, a dream likely destined to remain unfulfilled for some time. India has engaged in the G-20 forum, but has not presented obvious Indian ideas or imprints to inspire reform and restructuring of the global multilateral order.

Asia's role in global governance cannot be delinked from the question: Who leads Asia? After World War II, India was seen as an Asian leader by many of its neighbours and was more than willing to lead, but unable to do so due to a lack of resources. Japan's case was exactly the opposite; it had the resources from the mid-1960s onwards, but not the legitimacy -- thanks to memories of imperialism for which it was deemed insufficiently apologetic by its neighbours. China has had neither the resources nor the legitimacy, since the communist takeover, nor the political will, at the onset of the reform era to be Asia's leader.

In Asia today, although Japan, China and India now have the resources, they still suffer from a deficit of regional legitimacy. This might be partly a legacy of the past -- Japanese wartime role, Chinese subversion and Indian diplomatic highhandedness. But their mutual rivalry also prevents the Asian powers from assuming regional leadership singly or collectively.

Hence, regional leadership rests with a group of the region's weaker states: Asean. While Asean is a useful and influential voice in regional affairs, its ability to manage Asia -- home to three of the world's four largest economies; four, excluding Russia, of the eight nuclear weapon states; and the fastest growing military forces -- is by no means assured.

Greater engagement with regional forums is useful for the Asian powers to prepare for a more robust role in global governance. So many of the global problems -- climate change, energy, pandemics, illegal migration and more -- have Asian roots. By jointly managing them at the regional level, Asian powers can limit their rivalries, secure neighbours' support, and gain expertise that could facilitate a substantive contribution to global governance from a position of leadership and strength.

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## Google puts spies out of work



**B**OND? YOU'RE SACKED. The spying industry worldwide has been hit by a massive crisis: Google.

Entire divisions of secret service operatives have been made redundant by the

super slick search engine, I heard from reader Aber L, who works in security.

"Intelligence departments with massive budgets can now be replaced by any random kid with a talent for Googling," said Aber.

He forwarded me an astonishing speech given this month by former UK spy boss Sir David Pepper.

Because of Google, spies are struggling to make sure they don't produce intelligence which is "not secret at all," Pepper admitted.

Typical agent mission before:

"Get a fake passport, don a disguise, fly to Iran, hack into aircraft or satellite network, and get aerial pictures of nuclear facilities."

Typical agent mission now:

"Click Google Maps. Type Iran. Zoom. Print. Go for early lunch."

Google has "raised the bar" for spies, another UK spy chief, Sir David Omand, recently told the UK Daily Telegraph. (How come both spy chiefs are called Sir David? Is it in the job description? "Applicants must be called Sir David." If I change my name to Sir David, can I be the UK spy chief?)

Google is amazing. Last week, on a speaking trip, I found myself hopelessly lost in an unfamiliar city. I called up Google Maps on my phone, but without much confidence.

But as soon as I typed in the name of the hotel I was looking for, Google detected where I was and drew a map from my square of pavement to the hotel door. Then it drew me as a blob (hey, Google, I'm not that fat) floating on the map. As I walked, the blob moved along the map on the tiny screen in my hand.

Then, 11 minutes later, the route turned left into what looked like a dead end. What to do? I heard Alec Guinness's voice say: "Feel the force, Luke." I replied: "My name's not Luke." But I got the message and complied. Your humble narrator walked straight towards the end of the cul-de-sac. Lo and behold, a tiny lane became visible to one side: Google had led me to a neat shortcut to my hotel.

I was raving about this to a techie friend named Des, who showed me four examples of screw-ups by Google's impressive computer brain.

1) Someone used Google Translate to translate "Lady Gaga" from Malay to English.

The Google computer said: "Britney Spears."

2) Someone searched for "French military victories."

The computer responded: "Do you mean 'French military defeats'?"

3) Someone searched for the phrase "she invented."

The computer responded: "Do you mean 'he invented'?"

4) Someone searched for "anagram." The computer responded: "Did you mean 'nag a ram'?"

But are these really screw-ups? Maybe not. I think the Google computer is just toying with us. I don't mind, as long as it remembers to call me Sir David from now on.

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