

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE first ever two-day meeting under the Joint Declaration of the Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue commenced in Washington on September 19 to bolster bilateral and regional cooperation between the two countries.

Foreign Secretary Mijarul Quayes led the 10-member Bangladesh delegation at the discussion with his counter-part the US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Wendy R Sherman.

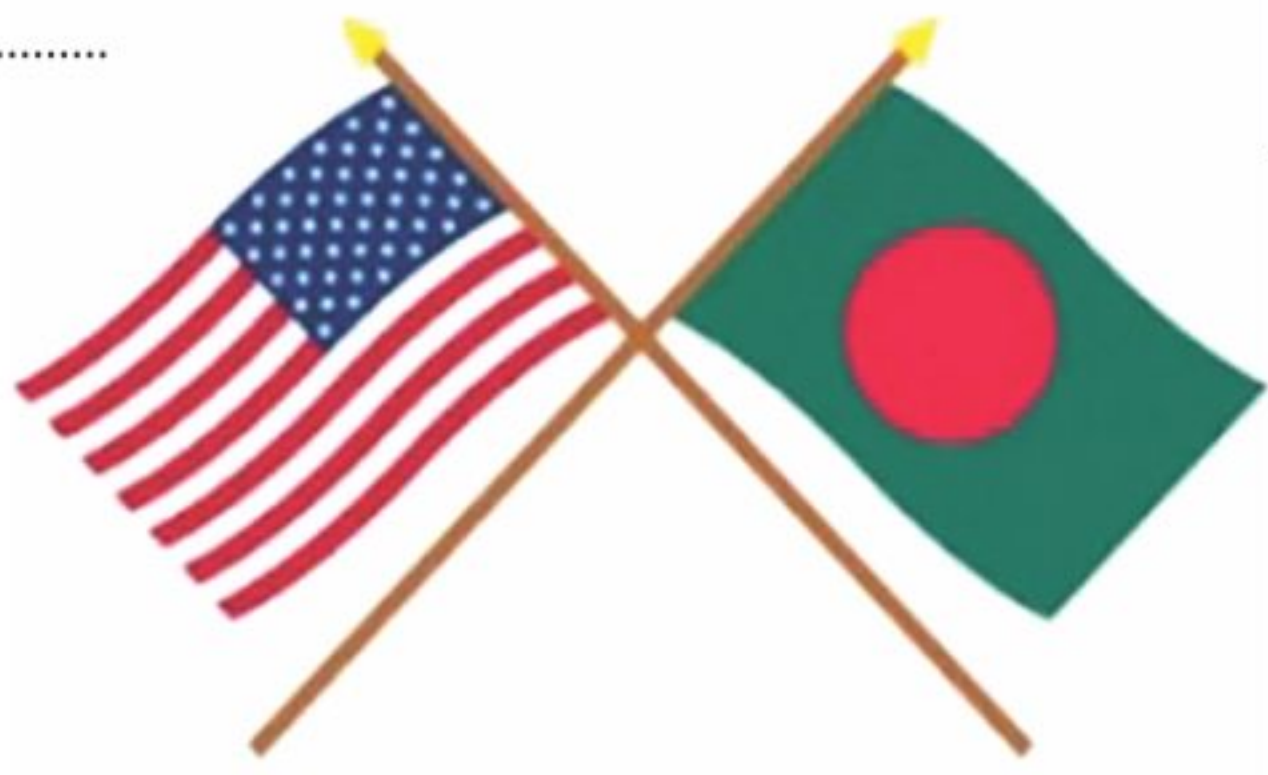
Representatives from ministries of commerce, energy, home, Economic Relations Division, Board of Investment, Armed Forces Division and Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) were included in the Bangladesh delegation.

The composition of Bangladesh delegation indicated that besides security, enhanced US investment, the duty-free and quota-free export facility for apparels and inclusion of Bangladesh in the Millennium Challenge Account of the US would be underscored by Bangladesh.

For the US, the priority was security including counter-terrorism, speedy investigation for the death of the labour leader Aminul Islam and the future of Grameen Bank.

It was reported that the delegations held productive discussions on a wide range of bilateral and regional issues including development, civil society and governance; trade and investment; security and countering violent extremism; counter-narcotics, military-to-military engagement, UN peacekeeping efforts and humanitarian assistance, science and technology; women's empowerment and gender equality.

On the sidelines of the dialogue, the Bangladesh business delegation held talks with the US buyers and importers. It may be noted that Bangladesh's export earning to the US during 2010-11 stood \$ 4.59 billion, constituting 25% of total exports and the balance of trade is heavily in favour of Bangladesh. It is reported that granting of duty-free goods is a matter of legislation by the Congress and the executive branch cannot do it.



Bangladesh-US partnership dialogue

According to the US, the signing of Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement (Ticfa) with Bangladesh is necessary for attracting US trade and investments. However, it is reported Bangladesh has reservations on the labour-issue and since the US would not soften its stance on the labour issue, Ticfa cannot yet be signed.

A media note issued by the US Department of State on September 21 said: "Bangladesh's status as a moderate Muslim democracy and its flourishing civil society organisations are the foundations of our bilateral partnership....At the dialogue, we also discussed the importance of appointing a respected leader to serve as the new managing director of Grameen Bank."

At the meeting, the United States encouraged Bangladesh to continue to play an active role in regional integration, including efforts such as the New Silk Road, the Indo-Pacific Corridor and Indian Ocean organisations.

Bangladesh is an integral part of the New Silk Road envisioned by the US that will connect Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and China. The pivotal reasoning behind the New Silk Road is that economic incentives will reinforce political integration and long-term stabilisation.

The meeting in Washington has taken place in the backdrop of a Joint Declaration on "Bangladesh-US

Partnership Dialogue" which was signed in Dhaka, on May 5, 2012 by Bangladesh foreign minister and the US Secretary of State, to which the prime minister of Bangladesh witnessed the signing.

The "Umbrella Declaration" aims to establish regular dialogues on bilateral cooperation on issues ranging from combating terrorism, transnational crimes to food security, education, climate change and child and maternal health. It also sets a forum of consultations between the two countries. Annual consultation is envisaged at the level of Foreign Secretary/Under Secretary and periodic consultations at the level of Foreign Ministers of two countries.

Political observers say Bangladesh has become hugely important for the US because of its geographical location. Bangladesh shares borders with India and reformist and resource-rich Myanmar. It is also a near neighbour to China and stands as a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia.

Bangladesh's direct access to open sea -- Indian Ocean -- is strategically important for the US since under a new U.S strategy, the Pentagon plans to shift its focus and resources away from Europe to Asia-Pacific. The US author Robert D. Kaplan in his book "Monsoon" (2011) states that it is in the Indian Ocean that the interests and influence of India, China and the United States are beginning to overlap and intersect. It is here, Kaplan says, that the 21st century's "global power

dynamics will be revealed."

Bangladesh attracts not only as a large consumer market but also is suitable for US investment since 60% Bangladesh's economy is connected globally and the country has been included as "Next - 11" potential major economies. The continuation of the same rating (Ba3) by the Moody's rating agency shows optimism about the country's macroeconomic stability and growth prospects, said Bangladesh Bank Governor Atiur Rahman.

The relationship between Bangladesh and the US has evolved from one of aid dependence to that of trade dependence.

Bangladesh needs to develop with the US a truly modern partnership, one that is practical, open and engaged to meet the global and regional challenges. The strength of the relationship relies on the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.

The visit of Foreign Secretary to Washington under the "Partnership Dialogue" will broaden and deepen bilateral relations with the US, an important development partner.

While cooperating with the US, analysts maintain Bangladesh has to be mindful to the concerns of China and may balance its interests between the US and China and should not be perceived to be within the camp of the US against China or vice versa. Asean has played a model role in balancing their benefits between the US and China. While Asean is tied with China through Free Trade Agreement, they also seek security assurances from the US.

Strategic or Partnership Dialogue is based on long-term shared strategic vision, based on convergence of strategic interests, mutual trust, confidence in each other and respect for each other's strategic sensitivities. The US concluded Strategic Dialogue Agreement with India and China.

The next meeting at the Foreign Secretary level would be held in Dhaka in September 2013, officials concerned said.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

India's treacherous northeast

BERTIL LINTNER

INDIA'S northeast finds itself connected to neighbors and the wider world in a way that worries policymakers in Delhi.

Recent violent clashes between Muslims and tribal Bodo people in the northeastern state of Assam forced 400,000 to flee their homes, bringing the region and its wider ramifications under scrutiny. Pakistan, China, Burma, Bangladesh and Christian and Islamic communities around the world have stakes in the region's conflicts.

For decades, this corner of India has been troubled by communal strife, ethnic insurgencies and illegal immigration. The Bodo-Muslim conflict was followed by attacks elsewhere in India. As far south as Bangalore, people who looked as if they might come from the northeast were under threat. More than 30,000 northerners, many of Mongol stock, boarded trains in a startling exodus. Rumors flew about foreign interference, with fingers pointed at Islamic extremists in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

India's eight northeastern states connect with the rest of the country via a narrow stretch of land, 20 to 40 kilometers wide, known as the Siliguri corridor or, more colloquially, "the Chicken's Neck." This territorial peculiarity is an outcome of the partition of British India in 1947. Muslim-majority areas of East Bengal were made part of independent Pakistan, leaving the Brahmaputra plain and surrounding hills virtually isolated from what many northerners still call "mainland India."

East Pakistan broke away to become Bangladesh in 1971. Poverty, underdevelopment and scarcity of land for the 160 million of

day life in tribal hills.

India's arch-enemy Pakistan provided sanctuaries, military training, and weapons for Naga and Mizo rebels. Indian troops marched into Dhaka in December 1971 and found rebel leaders from both groups. Relations between India and newly independent Bangladesh soured. Before long, the rebels returned to hideouts in Chittagong Hill tracts, safe houses in Dhaka and the northern city of Sylhet. The Nagas and Mizos enjoyed a close relationship until the latter signed a peace accord with the Indian government in 1986.

Earlier, in 1985, Paresh Barua, commander-in-chief of ULFA, led his fighters from a Naga rebel camp across the border in northwestern Burma. The alliance with tribal guerrillas didn't last, reflecting traditional animosity between highlanders and plainspeople.

ULFA searched for new comrades-in-arms to establish bases outside India and soon found an ally in Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence, ISI. In March 1992, Barua and several of his lieutenants had just come from Singapore where he had bought sophisticated communications equipment. He made no secret of the fact that Pakistan supported ULFA and encouraged the group to step up activities in Assam. At that time, the 8th Mountain Division of the Indian Army had been withdrawn from the northeast and sent to Kashmir. If serious trouble were to erupt once again in Assam, ISI evidently hoped that the division and possibly other units would be pulled from Kashmir.

I had met Barua in a Naga rebel camp in Burma and later in Thailand, and our third meeting took place in Dhaka in April 1996. He was escorted by two Bangladeshi intelligence officers who were not pleased to see a foreign journalist in what was supposed to be a top-secret safe house. UFLA was a nationalist movement born out of opposition to illegal immigration from Bangladesh, yet ironically had found new sanctuaries in that country, becoming a pawn in the hands of foreign intelligence agencies. ULFA militants traveled around the region to Thailand, the Philippines and China on Bangladeshi passports using Muslim names.

Connections between Burma and India's northeastern militants are equally startling. ULFA was forced out of Bangladesh in late 2009, less than a year after the Awami League considered friendlier towards New Delhi than its predecessor, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party had come to power in Dhaka. ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa and almost the entire leadership were apprehended and bundled off to India, where they're now in talks with authorities.

Barua and his hardline followers regrouped at a new camp near Taka village west of the Chindwin River in Burma's northern Sagaing region. Their camp, shared with Naga and Manipuri militants, is near Burmese army outposts. In September 2011, it was reported that the Burmese army had attacked the Taka camp, partly destroying it. Local sources assert that the operation never took place. It's no coincidence that news about the alleged attack came a few weeks before Burmese President Thein Sein arrived on a state visit to India.

Unlike Pakistan and Bangladesh, Burma has no interest in fomenting unrest in India's northeast. It's not in Burma's interest to use military resources, engaged in counterinsurgency operations elsewhere in the country, to fight India's rebels. Instead local sources suggest that the Burmese military prefers a buffer of instability between Burma and India. That way, Burma can avoid policing an extremely remote part of the country to keep the Indians at arm's length.

China's role is more convoluted. Until the late 1970s, China gave massive support to India's northeastern insurgents. Still, Barua is reported to spend more time in China than at the Taka camp. Weapons acquired on the Southeast Asian black market are also reported to have transited through China on their way to Taka as late as in December 2011. China may not be interested in reigniting any large-scale insurgency in India's northeast, but contributes to fanning flames in an area where it has substantial territorial claims. Official maps show most of the state of Arunachal Pradesh as Chinese territory.

Northeast India is one of Asia's most volatile regions. With several foreign countries engaged in the conflicts, there may be more trouble ahead.

The writer is a Swedish Journalist



Villagers fleeing from Assam's Kokorjhar district.

Bangladesh a country roughly the size of Greece or the US state of North Carolina have prompted millions to cross the border into Assam and the fertile Brahmaputra Valley. The struggle is over land and livelihood, but the Bangladeshis are Muslims, giving the conflict a religious dimension and attracting attention of nearby Islamic powers.

In the late 1970s, Assamese nationalists and local tribals launched an attack against the influx of Bangladeshis. In rural areas of Assam, an armed movement known as the United Liberation Front of Asom, or ULFA, had emerged as early as 1979, spreading throughout the state and demanding expulsion of foreign migrants and independence for Assam.

In a carnage that lasted no more than six hours on February 18, 1983, more than 2,000 people were killed near the village of Nellie. Most victims were Bangladeshi migrants.

The ULFA insurgency followed rebellions in other parts of the northeast populated by Tibeto-Burman peoples. The Nagas had fought for separation from India since the mid-1950s, with material support from Pakistan and China and encouragement from Christian groups. The Mizos fought since the late 1960s, and in the Imphal valley of Manipur, left-wing militants had launched a violent campaign to turn their state into an independent republic.

The Kashmir conflict in India's northwest may attract more attention from the outside world, but the conflict in the northeast is no less vicious, possibly claiming more lives and causing more mayhem. Assam's commercial center, Guwahati, earned dubious distinction as one of the most bombed cities in the country. Bloody clashes between guerillas and the Indian army were part of every-

US should aim to calm the conflict it helped create

FRANK CHING

DURING anti-Japanese protests in Beijing last week, a group of about 50 demonstrators surrounded the car of the American ambassador, Gary Locke, chanted slogans about disputed islands, and prevented the vehicle from entering the embassy compound until Chinese security personnel intervened.

The incident showed that, in the mind of the Chinese public, the United States was very much on Japan's side despite Washington's repeated assertions that it does not take any position on the "ultimate sovereignty of the Senkakus," or Diaoyutai Islands.

But while the United States says that it is neutral in the dispute, it has also said that the islands are covered by the US-Japan security treaty of 1960 and thus under American military protection.

The American defence secretary, Leon Panetta, who visited Japan and China last week, urged both countries to exercise "calm and restraint," saying "it is extremely important that diplomatic means on both sides be used."

Chinese officials, meanwhile, urged Washington to honour its promise of not taking sides. From China's standpoint, the US is in Japan's corner and thus cannot be an impartial mediator.

Indeed, China traces the problem to actions taken by the United States. A Chinese Foreign Ministry statement issued Sept. 10 pointed out that, while the San Francisco peace treaty placed the Ryukyu Islands under the trusteeship of the United States in 1951, two years later the United States "arbitrarily expanded its jurisdiction to include the Diaoyu Island and its affiliated islands."

Twenty years later, when the United States agreed to return Okinawa to Japan, the Diaoyutais were included in the reversion.

Relations between China and Japan are at their lowest point since 1972, when they were first established.

Certainly, a great deal has changed. China has replaced Japan as the world's second-largest economy and is expected to overtake the United States to become number one in the not too distant future.

China's new-found confidence is reflected in utterances in the official media. On Sunday, the People's Daily newspaper called on Japan to "repent" and said that "Japan's two-decade economic downturn has rapidly changed the power balance between China and Japan."

"China is no longer a weak opponent," the Global Times declared, "regardless of the role of the US in the matter. Strategic confrontation is not a choice for Japan." Indeed, in a commentary before Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Beijing earlier this month, the state agency Xinhua warned the US not to try to contain China and said: "To be frank, US power is declining and it hasn't enough economic strength or resources to dominate the Asia-Pacific region."

As for the American policy of "returning" to Asia, a People's Daily commentary declared: "The current Asia is completely different from the Asia in the Cold War period. China's comprehensive national strength has obviously grown and its international status has greatly risen."

And Xinhua bluntly called on the US to "take concrete steps to prove that it is returning to Asia as a peacemaker instead of a troublemaker."

Ever since Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, the US has tried, without success, to convince Beijing that its alliance with Japan does not constitute a threat to China.

The Chinese evidently see the current crisis as an opportunity to drive a wedge between the two allies. They are advising Japan to play an independent role and act as a bridge between the US and China.

At the same time, they are telling the US that it stands to benefit from cooperating with China while warning the US that Japan is steadily moving to the right and may one day constitute a threat to the world.

The current crisis presents the United States with a dilemma. Japan is its chief ally in Asia and any sign that Washington is reneging on its treaty commitments will cast doubt on the value of its treaties with other countries.

On the other hand, China is clearly the power to deal with in the future and the US doesn't want to jeopardise that relationship.

But China is right that the current deadlock is partly a result of American policies during the Cold War. The question is what can the US do today?

The answer seems to be: precious little. Still, it must use whatever influence it has to see to it that the crisis remains no more than a war of words. The United States needs to be seen as doing something to resolve a problem that it helped to create.

The writer is a Journalist and Writer.

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