

# Security dimensions of Bay of Bengal and Sino-Bangla cooperation

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BAKLADESH and China are both maritime countries from ancient days. They both enjoyed best maritime relations. It was during the Ming dynasty about 600 years ago, when Emperor Yong Le reigned, that the most famous voyager and navigator of that time Admiral Zheng He, the envoy of peace, sailed the Indian and Pacific Oceans and created the Chinese maritime Silk Road. Between 1405 and 1433, Admiral Zheng He's fleet of more than 100 ships on seven transoceanic expeditions visited 30 Asian and African countries. His fleet visited the port city of Chittagong twice. Sultan Giasuddin Azam Shah, the Sultan of Bengal, received the Admiral from China in his capital at Sonargaon. The Sultan also reciprocated by sending valuable gifts to the Ming King, including one long necked giraffe, which is, according to Chinese tradition, a symbol of divine fortune. Since ancient times it has been only China, though mighty both on land and sea, which never colonised any country, never occupied others' land, showed utmost respect for countries' sovereignty and believed in non- interference in others' internal affairs.

Bangladesh and China started diplomatic relations in 1975. It was Ziaur Rahman who looked to the East and initiated it. Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai were alive at that time. Our diplomatic relations have remained excellent and have stood the test of time. It is a role model of bilateral relationship between two countries with different political ideologies and social and cultural systems. Bilateral relations encompassed all sectors of our national lives and international aspects. China supported us in developing our economy, building our economic infrastructures, developing our trade and commerce, agriculture, industries and also defence. The geo-strategic, geo-political, and geo-economic position of Bangladesh has made it a pivot of the regional strategy, nay a significant place in world strategy. Bangladesh is a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. It stands between two Asian giants, India with its regional ambitions and peaceful and friendly China, the world's second largest economy.

The geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh is

enhanced by its location along the Bay of Bengal, which is a linking factor among the countries situated along it. The trade link along the Bay of Bengal stretches from China in the east to West Asia and Africa in the west. The Bay of Bengal stretches to all the sea lanes of the region, connecting the important Malacca Straits and Taiwan Straits, and extends to South China Sea, East China Sea and the Pacific.

One of the stakeholders in the Bay of Bengal is India, which considers it a strategic maritime space for its political and diplomatic initiative towards Asean. The US has appeared as a major

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stakeholder, and considers that the pivot of its world strategy is the Asia-Pacific region. It has decided to place 60% of its naval strength in the Pacific.

China is a soft power and believes in peaceful coexistence. It believes in peace and pursues peace, and its phenomenal rise in recent decades has been achieved through peace. It is deeply concerned about its maritime security and has accordingly prioritised its naval build up.

In China-Bangladesh relations defence is the key link. In 2002 a defence cooperation agreement was signed when Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visited China. It is an umbrella agreement covering wide-ranging defence cooperation in military hardware supply, transfer of technology, joint venture defence projects, military training, joint operations, development of logistic lines, anti terrorism, disaster management and other possible areas. We need to modernise and strengthen our armed forces, and make it up to date so that it can be the bulwark of our national sovereignty and independence. We seek under the said defence agreement China's support and cooperation to secure our maritime sovereignty, including security of exclu-

sive economic zone (EEZ) and extended continental shelf, and protect our sea resources including valuable hydrocarbons under the sea bed. To this end in view, we seek China's support to build a 3 dimensional navy with fleets of combat surface ships, cluster of under-water submarines and navy's own integrated air support wing.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited China in 2010, which was reciprocated by Vice President Xi Jinping in the same year. Xi is now the supreme leader of China. In their bilateral talks defence remained high in the agenda. During the visit of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia to China last October, CPC Secretary General Xi Jinping assured China's full cooperation.

Bangladesh seeks connectivity with China. We need our sea connectivity to develop and strengthen by building a deep-sea port off Chittagong with China's assistance. We seek direct connectivity by road and rail from Chittagong to Kunming to connect the two cities and the two countries via Myanmar. This will mark the reincarnation of the ancient southern Silk Road, opening up cooperation in trade and commerce, economy, industry and also national security.

I was invited to China by PLA in 1996 when I was the Chief of Army Staff. During that visit I had the privilege to meet with His Excellency Jiang Zemin, the President of China. President Jiang told me: "China has changed a lot. It is not the same China which you saw when you lived here in the '70s and '80s. It is a modern China, developed China and it is a new generation, a new leadership." He also said: "The world is changing. I heard Dhaka skyline has also changed. But in all these changes one thing has not changed, and it will never change, and that is our relationship with Bangladesh, our policy for Bangladesh." He said: "I assure you General, China will ever remain a friend. In times of need it will be always beside you. The relationship between China and Bangladesh is of friendship, friendship and friendship and nothing but friendship." His words still ring in my ear. I treasure them. I believe this epitomises our common national ethos, it epitomises our two countries' true relationship. It epitomises the spirit of our true friendship in the 21st century and beyond.

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# Easter Island collapsed, and so could we

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THE spectacular statues of Easter Island, a sparsely populated Pacific isle which is seemingly so desolate that there are not even any large trees on it, have been a mystery for centuries. How could an island of a few thousand people produce hundreds of such statues, the largest of which are 33 feet tall and weigh 82 tons? This question inspired Erich Von Daniken, a best-selling author of the 1970s, to speculate that the statues were erected by aliens from outer space.

The real story of the statues and the people who carved them are the subject of the first chapter of Jared Diamond's book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose To Fail Or Survive* (published by Penguin in 2006). Diamond is professor of Geography at the University of California at Los Angeles and author of several award-winning books on the impact



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of the physical world on human history. His Easter Island history turns out to have profound environmental lessons for us even today.

Diamond points out that archaeologists have proved that Easter Island was once very different from today; before being colonised by people, it was covered with forest typical of other sub-tropical Pacific islands. Once settled by explorers who arrived by canoe from other islands, it seemed to present itself as a hospitable place, and the human population expanded rapidly. Incidentally, this solves the mystery of the statues; a population several times bigger could more reasonably be expected to erect such monuments. However, unknown to the new settlers, the soil of Easter Island was much less fertile than that of other islands that they had lived on. This infertility manifested itself in slower tree growth. Thus, when the Easter Islanders cut down trees for firewood, houses and deep-sea canoes, they did this at a rate which may have been sustainable on other islands that their ancestors had lived on; but on Easter Island it brought disaster.

As the population grew, people cut down more trees for firewood and canoes. Canoes were necessary as dolphin-hunting provided a large portion of the animal protein in the diet (along with wild birds and other small animals from the forest). But once the forest cover was removed, the exposed land eroded quickly in the rain and wind. Crop yields decreased, and the islanders' solution was apparently to cut down more trees to plant more crops and build more canoes for dolphin-hunting. As a result, within a few centuries the island was completely deforested. Without trees, there were no more wild birds or animals to hunt, except rats. With no more wood available for canoes, dolphin meat was also no longer available. The islanders descended into famine, war and cannibalism (unfortunately, human meat was one of few remaining sources of animal protein). Two-thirds of the population perished in this terrible manner.

Diamond describes other societies that collapsed primarily due to environmental difficulties, including several more Pacific islands, the Norse colony in Greenland, the native Anasazi culture of the southwestern US, the central American Maya civilisation and modern Rwanda. He also presents the case of Japan, which came close to such a fate but managed to avoid it thanks to intelligent decisions and good leadership.

There is a lesson for us here: in these times of global warming, it may be comforting to believe that our leaders can be trusted to sort everything out, and that humanity would never allow itself to be destroyed. But such a faith would be unfounded; many previous societies have thought this way, and failed. Long-term survival requires a real understanding of the limitations of our environment and a strong political will to live within those limits.

Like the first settlers of Easter Island, we find ourselves in a new, unknown environment; namely an industrialised 21st century world with greenhouse gas levels higher than they have ever been in human history. We no longer need to colonise a new island to experience unfamiliar environmental conditions; our carbon dioxide emissions are altering the climate of our whole planet, which will bring unpredictable new risks for everyone. The lesson of Easter Island should make us think on the failure of our own leaders to come to an agreement to prevent catastrophic climate change even after 20 years of fruitless negotiations.

The writer is a graduate of Harvard and LSE. His other climate change articles are at [goodbyebangladesh.blogspot.com](http://goodbyebangladesh.blogspot.com)

# Egypt's unfinished revolution

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EGYPT, the centre of the Arab world, is today a deeply divided nation. The revolution, which began in January 2011 and toppled strongman Hosni Mubarak, has not come full round.

President Muhammad Morsi, who skillfully handled the Israeli-Hamas conflict last month, seems to have run out of ideas. Tahrir Square has again erupted into violent demonstrations. Violent clashes between Muslim Brotherhood activists and liberal secularists have been reported from all major cities.

The current crisis started mainly due to the absence of a constitution. Let us examine the sequence of events, which led to this turmoil.

After Mubarak's ouster, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) led by Field Marshal Mohammed Tantawi took charge of the country in February 2011. SCAF dissolved the parliament and amended the constitution of 1971 and promulgated a 63-paragraph Interim Constitution. The Interim Charter was designed to hold the parliamentary and presidential elections and to set up a constituent committee.

Parliamentary elections were completed in January 2012 with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) winning a majority. Later, Muhammad Morsi of FJP came out on top after two rounds of presidential elections and was sworn in on June 30.

According to the Interim Constitution, a 100-member committee drawn from the new parliament was to draft the new constitution. After the committee was formed, the SCAF dissolved the new parliament because the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) found the election law unconstitutional. That was the first setback for the new president, as he lost support of the parliament.

The second shock came when, just before Morsi was sworn-in, the SCAF issued a decree assuming full legislative powers until fresh elections were held. This sought to rob the new president of all powers. Morsi moved swiftly and, on August 12, revoked the SCAF decree and also proceeded to dismiss several high ranking generals, including Muhammad Tantawi. That ended the duality in power and ambitions of the military generals. Morsi also tried to reinstate the parliament, but had to back down following stiff resistance from the judiciary.

Since there was no constitution, no parliament, and powers of the president were not defined, the stage was set for a three-way power struggle

between the presidency, the military, and the Mubarak-era judiciary.

However, the drafting of the constitution started with the committee being grossly dominated by FJP members. The draft was supposed to be completed by September 2012, but has been delayed.

To make matters worse, on November 22, in an utterly ill-advised move, Morsi issued a controversial decree assuming wide legislative powers until the constitution was promulgated and a new parliament installed. He dismissed the attorney general and appointed a new one. The attorney general's post is a constitutional one and he cannot be dismissed by anyone.

These moves triggered public outrage and people descended on to Tahrir Square. Morsi was described

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as a new "Pharaoh" -- a "despot" worse than Mubarak -- and his ouster was demanded.

Meanwhile, the drafting Committee hurriedly came out with the new constitution on November 30, which the opposition rejected saying it was based on "Sharia" and did not reflect the aspirations of all Egyptians.

Political elite under an opposition umbrella group known as the National Salvation Front (NSF) also came out to oppose Morsi's unconstitutional move. The NSF has personalities like Nobel laureate Mohammed Al Baradei and Amr Moussa, former secretary general of Arab League. On December 2, the judiciary went on strike and declared that it would not oversee the referendum.

The anti-Morsi demonstrations at Tahrir Square drew Muslim Brotherhood activists onto the streets also. They have been demonstrating in favour of the president and campaigning for a "yes" vote on the constitution. Clashes erupted in Cairo between the supporters of FJP and opposition elements. FJP offices in different cities were attacked and set on fire. Even the Presidential Palace in Cairo came under attack. Several people were killed.

On December 8, in the face of violent opposition, Morsi annulled the decree. He however set December 15 and 22 as the dates for staggered referendum on the draft constitution. But that did little to appease the emboldened demonstrators. They wanted the referendum put off and the constitution redrafted.

Morsi then ordered the armed forces to ensure security during the referendum. A spokesman of the armed forces on December 8 called on "all parties to reach a consensus that unites all segments of the nation .... polarisation would only lead the country down a dark tunnel that will have a disastrous results." This revealed how important the military is for Morsi and for Egypt.

The first phase of referendum on December 15 (10 provinces) passed off with 56 % approving the constitution. The second voting on December 22 (17 provinces) yielded 68 % approval. Thus, the constitution is now legally adopted, though it is not a consensus charter. Morsi can now hold fresh elections for a new parliament.

Surprisingly, Vice President Mohammad Mekki resigned from Morsi's team on December 22, stating that his position was not compatible with his judicial background. There are theories that remnants of the Mubarak era have infiltrated the government and are conspiring to topple Morsi and steal the revolution.

It is clear that Morsi, the first freely elected Egyptian president, is fighting to save his presidency. He has probably survived the current crisis, but it has not blown away completely. The NSF and other opposition outfits will continue to agitate. One must not, however, underestimate the ability of the Muslim Brotherhood to survive in extremely oppressive political situations.

Egypt's road to democracy seems strewn with deep potholes. The nation is clearly divided between the Islamists and the liberal secularists, vying for political supremacy. Unless Morsi succeeds in unifying the nation and reviving the stagnant economy he will face stiff hurdles in the coming days.

The armed forces are the backbone of the Egyptian nation. As of now the armed forces, the final arbiter of power in Egypt, have kept a distance from the troubles afflicting Morsi. It may not be too long before they may be tempted to step in. That will be a shame for the Egyptian revolution and its march towards democracy.

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