

Bangladesh is in 'Great Game'

An interview with Bertil Lintner, author of *Great Game East*, taken by Muhammad Ali Bukhari

The largest arms smuggling attempt in the history of Bangladesh took place in Chittagong on the night of April 1, 2004. This massive arms haul's anecdotal feature was unveiled in a book by Swedish born veteran journalist and strategic consultant for four decades, Bertil Lintner, in India in 2012, (published by Harper Collins Publisher of New Delhi) from his own visit to ULFA's safe-haven in Dhaka in 1996. The book is titled *Great Game East: India, China and the struggle for Asia's most volatile frontier*.

In the *Great Game East*, Bertil Lintner -- acknowledged as one of the foremost experts on insurgencies in the region -- unveils the players and layers of complex political intrigues and spy networks that define the *Great Game East*.

Bertil Lintner mainly writes about organised crime, ethnic and political insurgencies, and regional security. Currently he is living in Chiang Mai, Thailand and was contacted last week to answer some questions relevant to the aforementioned book, with explicit emphasis on Bangladesh and that 10-truck arms and ammunition haul.

Q: The nineteenth century's 'great game' of Britain and Russia built up the rivalry between India and China in a newer form towards resistance in Tibet and the unrest in India's northeast, which drew Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) into militancy and arms race in the region. Is this what has been focused in your book: *Great Game East*?

A: Yes, there was a Great Game in the 19th century. Now, there is a similar 'great game' being played out in Northeastern India/Tibet/Bangladesh/northern Myanmar, which also involves rivalry between India and China. The 'old' Great Game was a competition for hegemony between colonial powers, mainly Britain (in India) and Russia. Now, it's between Asia's two Asian powers.

Q: What present and future trend do you envision about intelligence agencies of various countries, including the United States, at this strategically located crossroads of China and Southeast Asia, particularly the northeastern states of India, and the continuing armed strife for the complexity of the hostilities and political ambi-

tions that Asia's two giants harbour, especially when China is involved in upgrading ports in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Burma?

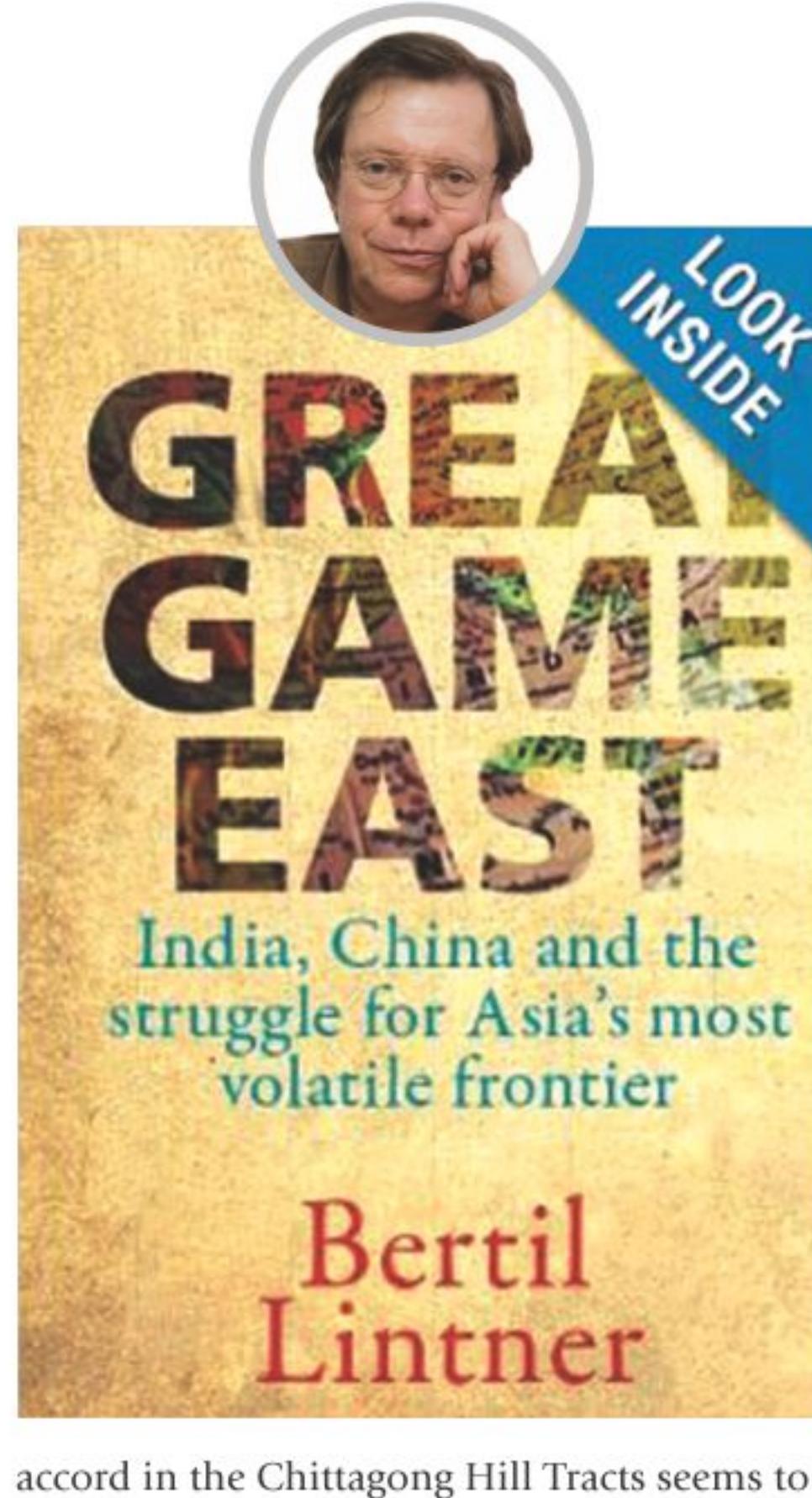
A: I have always maintained that America's main interests in the region are not democracy and human rights but governed by geopolitical and strategic concerns; that is Obama's 'Asian pivot' which is aimed at containing the spread of Chinese influence in Asia and the Pacific.

Q: As one of the foremost experts on insurgencies in the region you unveil the layers of complex political intrigues and spy networks that have been defined in your book. Do you think the top administration of government is involved, such as prime minister along with DGFI, in the matter of ULFA's refuge and arms smuggling in Bangladesh?

A: Is or was? It seems to vary according to which government is in power in Bangladesh. When the BNP is in power, ULFA and other groups seem to be able to stay in Bangladesh and work relatively freely in the country. But when the Awami League controls the government, ULFA and other groups from India's Northeast have a much tougher time. Just look at the arrest and expulsion of ULFA leaders from Bangladesh in late 2009, and what's happening now in Bangladesh, with Paresh Barua being sentenced to death in absentia. And, needless to say, contacts between ULFA and the DGFI are always close when the BNP has been in power.

Q: As supplemented from the *Sunday Times* of London of December 12, 1971, why did you opine that "RAW's first great success was the creation of Bangladesh?" In contrast you said: "When Bangladesh turned from friend to foe, RAW found a willing partner in tribal guerrillas fighting for autonomy for the Chittagong Hill Tracts," which in your words, by referring to the Peace Accord of December 2, 1997, may break up again in hostilities?

A: India's giving sanctuary to the Shanti Bahini should be seen as a 'tit-for-tat' for Dhaka's allowing ULFA and other groups from India's Northeast to stay in Bangladesh. But I think it's highly unlikely that hostilities would break out again. The 1997 peace



accord in the Chittagong Hill Tracts seems to be holding.

Q: In your observation, what has encouraged the top leaders of ULFA to take refuge in Bangladesh rather than Bhutan, Myanmar or China?

A: When the Indian army pushed ULFA out of Assam, they sought sanctuary in Bhutan and Bangladesh. That's 'normal' guerrilla practice. ULFA has had a presence in Myanmar since 1985, first with the undivided NSCN led by Isak Chishi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S.S. Khaplang and later, after the NSCN split in 1988, with S.S. Khaplang. That's still the case. ULFA feels safe there, beyond the reach of the Indian army, and the Myanmarese army doesn't really bother them on the Myanmarese side of the border. The Myanmarese army has other priorities, such as fighting the Kachin Independence Army and other ethnic resistance armies in Myanmar.

Q: According to your book, Paresh

Barua's involvement in supervising the 10 truckload of arms in Chittagong Karnaphuli Port on early hours of April 2, 2004 was not for the first time; in December 2011, he also supervised the delivery of a large consignment of Thailand-made automatic weapons that had been smuggled through China to north-western Myanmar. Do you know what could be the possible destination of those arms?

A: It is my understanding that the guns in 2004 were destined for ULFA, naturally, but also for some other ethnic rebel armies in India's Northeast such as the NSCN (IM) and some Bodoland Manipuri factions. The December 2011 shipment was for ULFA and its Manipuri allies PLA.

Q: What stance should Bangladesh take in relation to India when India's north-eastern territories are in deep trouble on issues of insurgencies and two major political parties of Bangladesh apparently differing over the country's creation in 1971?

A: It's not for me to say what Bangladesh should and should not do. That's entirely up to the Bangladeshi authorities. But if Bangladesh wants to maintain good relations with India, which I think it does, then, naturally, the two countries would have to cooperate in security matters.

Q: Do you think China's stand to defend its maritime in South China Sea will encourage other states in the region to align their policies with Beijing rather than remaining allies of the United States?

A: There is definitely a rivalry here. China, quite naturally, would want other, smaller countries in the region to be more closely allied with Beijing than with Washington. And vice versa, Washington would like the very same countries to be its allies against China.

Q: You said: "Obama's 'Asian pivot' is aimed at containing the spread of Chinese influence in Asia and the Pacific." Then you said: "Washington would like the very same countries to be its allies against China." How is that possible?

A: Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? The Asian pivot is aimed at containing China so obviously the US wants the countries in the region to be on its side rather than on China's.

Q: ULFA leader Paresh Barua spent most of his times in the past in Yunnan province in China, where all the 'black market' arms come from; do you think he currently lives there?

A: It is my understanding that Paresh Barua spends most of his time in China. In fact, I have been told by his associates that China is the only country where he feels really safe. And I think he'll remain there. I don't think he would dare to return to Bangladesh, even if a new government came to power there.

Q: In February, 2014 issue of the prestigious *Irrawaddy* magazine of Myanmar, you wrote an outstanding tribute feature on one of the heroes of Myanmar's democracy movement, Maung Thaw Ka (Nur Marmad), a well-known Muslim writer, who inspired Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on her first public speech at Yangon General Hospital on August 24, 1988. Why don't you put forward the plight of the oppressed Myanmarese Muslim Rohingya to her?

A: Last time, I met Aung San Suu Kyi was in Myanmar's new capital Naypyitaw in October 2012. One of the main topics I discussed with her was the ethnic issue. But I regret to say that she didn't seem to be eager to discuss Myanmar's ethnic problems, and that also includes the ongoing war in Kachin State.

Q: How do you perceive the freedom aspirations of the struggling masses from Manipur, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland and Northern Myanmar?

A: All Indian states enjoy a fairly large degree of autonomy, which is not the case in Myanmar. And it will be impossible to find a solution to Myanmar's ethnic problems without substantial amendments to the country's present constitution. But the problem is that the government, through its so-called 'Myanmar Peace Centre,' only wants to discuss a 'nationwide ceasefire agreement,' which is not going to solve anything. The problem is a political one and needs a political solution, not just some signatures on a largely meaningless piece of paper.

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Time for broader connectivity?

BOTTOM LINE
T is reported that Indian High Commissioner Pankaj Saran, after a meeting with Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed on January 30, reportedly said: "The concept of connectivity is now becoming broader. It is growing beyond the old fashioned concept of transit, which used to be

Tripura
In May last year, the Bangladesh government agreed to transport 10,000 tonnes of food grains for Tripura through its territory. It is reported that Bangladesh has agreed to allow 100026 MW electricity generated from 429 dams in north eastern states through Bangladesh to West Bengal and other places in India.

Overall, Bangladesh-India relations have resulted in positive outcomes in many sectors, such as education, culture, energy, infrastructure, border-haats, river dredging, transportation to each other's countries, 24-hr access of Bangladeshis to Angarpota and Dahagram enclave, and duty free access of Bangladeshi goods to Indian market.

However, the non-signing of Teesta water sharing agreement, non-ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement and continuing border abduction or killing of Bangladeshis have raised serious questions about India's ability to uphold the pledges made to Bangladesh.

Furthermore, there are some other issues, such as while Bangladesh people are able to watch many Indian cable TV stations, Bangladeshi cable TV stations cannot be watched in India for some unknown reasons, and it seems that mutual trust deficit still remains. There is more to be done by both governments in facilitating electronic communication from Bangladesh to India. The issue was reportedly raised recently by the Bangladeshi cable TV owners to the commerce minister, who assured them that he would take up the matter with India.

With regard to broader connectivity, I would suggest it can be better established if a sub-regional institution comprising Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and north eastern states of India could be set up to explore and exploit natural and human resources of the region to mutual benefit. Later, the sub-region may extend its links with Asean and China.

The idea of establishing an "economic

corridor" among Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) found a firm footing when the first official-level joint working group meeting in Kunming (Yunnan province), on December 19, 2013, agreed on cooperation in transportation infrastructure, investment, commerce and trade, cultural and people-to-people exchanges and other areas. The next meeting of officials will be held in Chittagong in June this year.

It seems that the range of choices available will depend on Bangladesh's ability to widen the base of its economy as well as on the policy makers' capacity to take advantage of its geographic location rather than be constrained by it.

Through the synthesis of challenges and opportunities Bangladesh has been a dynamic nation against all odds. The people are hard-working, resilient, imaginative, innovative and adaptable to new challenges.

My Indian interlocutors brought this home to me by asking whether India really needed Bangladesh as much as Bangladesh needed India. I don't have an easy answer to that question, but finding ways to address it should be a major preoccupation of the political leaders on both sides.

Finally, there is a saying that one can choose friends but not neighbours. Bangladesh and India are destined to live next to each other. Therefore, I firmly believe that there is no reason why Bangladesh-India relations should not be mutually supportive and friendly as both together should fight the common enemy -- humiliating poverty -- of the people of both countries.

Living with a bigger India, I am tempted to quote what former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once said, that living with the US "is like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered the beast is, one is affected by its every twitch and grunt."

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

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Prepares for a trip

6 Princled

11 Once more

12 Find charming

13 Summer of song

14 Pine product

15 Determination

17 Feeling down

18 Dove

22 Singer Guthrie

23 Stabbed, in a way

27 Tree parts

29 Slyly sarcastic

30 Frightens

32 Bleak

33 Against

35 Passing craze

38 School on the Thames

39 Visitor from space

41 Bangor's state

45 Jeweler's Unit

46 Ohio city

47 Contest form

48 Requires

DOWN

1 Small tablet

2 In the past

3 Soup buy

4 Indian reptile

5 Trap

6 Purple swallows

7 Poem of praise

8 Flag creator

9 Opera piece

10 Give for a while

16 Pen fill

18 Chums

19 Rock's Clapton

20 - meter

21 North American reptile

24 Smoke source

25 Fix copy

26 Sample recording

28 High highway speed

31 Ready to go

34 External City resident

35 Clock part

36 Actor Cumming

37 Grime

40 Corn serving

42 Anger

43 Silent approval

44 Print measures

CRYPTOQUOTE

WEWJPY NRMJMW UI TULCYJNBWMUL

TULNMNWN ML HPMVSMYL UL BLUWEYJ

GBL'N UHNYJCBWMUL, LUW UCYJWPJLMLZ

- YSFBJJS HPVFYJ-VDWWUL

1-8

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

Husbands are awkward things to deal with; even keeping them in hot water will not make them tender.

- Mary Buckley

A XYDLBAXR is LONGFELLOW
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

1-8

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