

RETHINKING THE ROOTS OF Dhaka's traffic congestion

ADNAN MORSHED

DHAKA'S road traffic has earned a dubious distinction. The New Republic, a prestigious American magazine, has recently dubbed Dhaka as the "traffic capital of the world."

My colleagues from different parts of the world, who have visited the capital city in recent times, talk about the city's paralyzing road traffic more than anything else. Many feel that the traffic gridlock here offers a vantage point to understand, broadly, the characteristic problems of urban governance in developing economies.

Most Dhakaites talk of traffic jam with both desperation and resignation. Some even post their turtle-paced mobility in real time on social media to express their helplessness. In the midst of widespread frustration, however, government agencies, experts, and amateurs alike present a variety of solutions, some of which are compelling. Meanwhile, more and more flyovers get built and elevated expressways are planned. Yet, traffic congestion continues to kill.

The biggest but often unstated obstacle to solving the traffic problem in Dhaka is the reckless belief that there is one grand technical solution out there. To propose a flyover or an elevated expressway or even mass transit as a cure-all solution to a vast urban pathology is to miss seeing its anthropological roots and, ultimately, its sustainable mitigation.

Consider this paradox. According to some sources, there are about 650 street intersections in Dhaka, but only 60 traffic lights. This is a gross asymmetry, and streets surely need more traffic lights. Yet, to believe that installing traffic lights would reduce street congestion dramatically is a false simplification of a complex urban



dysfunctionality. People will not follow traffic light unless they accept it as the basic need of a functioning street. Yes, dedicated bus lines are cool ideas, but the young bus driver who migrated to the metropolis a few years ago from the rural heartland has no incentive to follow, nor knowledge of, basic traffic laws.

Zebra crossings won't matter if people don't walk on them. So, the crucial question is: How do we inspire people to respect the basic rules of the street? Most major metropolises of the world—such as, New York, London, and Paris—faced this question one way or the other at various stages of their respective urban evolution. This is the lesson learned: Urban streets to function well would need certain city eti-

quettes to which all urbanites must subscribe as a basic social contract of workable urban living.

This is a huge challenge because we don't have a long urban history (only 7% urban population in 1971) and corresponding development of cosmopolitanism. Thus, in addition to providing technical solutions for the roads or developing sufficient street infrastructure, there needs to be a concerted social campaign to build a culture of abiding by urban laws. The reality is that this social transformation may need a generation or two before people would find value in the collective adherence to the rule of law.

Achieving that goal sooner would depend on how quickly we can revise an urban problem like street congestion

in human terms. Technology is easy to fix. Human conditions aren't. The sooner we realize that Dhaka's traffic congestion is not a problem of transportation engineering alone the better. This is also a problem of culture. It is much more than a result of broken bureaucracy, inadequate infrastructure, and ad-hoc planning.

The first step to minimize the traffic crisis would be to combine the social awareness of an urban order with context-specific technical solutions. Developing social awareness itself warrants reorienting some of the prevalent urban thinking that blatantly promotes private automobile-centric planning. That is, provide more roads to accommodate more private cars, while the utility of mass transit

remains an idealistic talking point. The share of private cars in Dhaka's daily commutes is a negligible 5-10 percent, but private cars occupy a staggeringly asymmetrical 70-80 percent of the road space.

The reason why public transportation isn't pursued with adequate urgency is the entrenched social glorification of private car ownership among the middle-class or aspiring middle-class. In a developing economy, the social value of car ownership can't be overestimated. Yes, the lack of security on the street and gender-unfriendliness makes cars an attractive refuge. Yet, let us not forget that cars are also the most recognizable icon of social mobility. It is the best way to flaunt your social status on the street. This deeply embedded middle-class sentiment still drives much of the country's transportation planning. There is very little evidence that the availability of public transportation would directly result in the reduction of private car ownership.

The effort to mitigate the traffic problem, thus, must address the anthropological roots of our middle-class values. There is a reason why nearly 8 million cars fill the roads of Delhi, and 1,200 more are added every day. Over 200 newly registered cars enter the city streets of Dhaka every day. Thus, more roads will not solve the problem because they are going to be filled with cars soon anyway. Our planning philosophy should focus on reducing the demand for cars rather than facilitating its unending supply. This is what sustainability gurus are advocating around the world these days.

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The writer is an associate professor of architecture and planning at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and the author of Impossible Heights (2015) and Oculus: A Decade of Insights into Bangladeshi Affairs (2012).

Nuke Deal and the emerging security paradigm for Middle East

Post World War II power balance between Zionist Israel and Arab-Persian Muslim countries, who considered Israel as a "pushed in state" in Middle East, is now being replaced in the post-Iran treaty era by an emerging strategic balance between Iran on one side, and Israel plus Gulf Arab countries on the other side.

MUHAMMAD RUHUL AMIN

US Secretary of State John Kerry announced at the trilateral meeting in Doha on August 3 that the US has agreed to speed up arms sales to Gulf countries over their concerns regarding the Iran nuclear treaty. Apprehensively, the attempt might install an innovative security structure for Middle East on the basis of the power balance among the regional giants. The much talked about 'power and influence' achieved by Iran out of the treaty needed to be balanced. The Iran-West rapport following the nuclear deal is likely to bring massive reorientation and redefinition of the state of security in the Middle East.

Historically speaking, the Iran-Israel rivalry and the Iran-West estrangement that grew out of Iran's Islamic Revolution in the 1970s have been considered as the major determining factors behind the political instability and insecurity of the Middle Eastern region. Under these circumstances, my argument for the balance of power through deterrence among the regional great powers, such as Iran, Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia has been developed in view of the ongoing political realities of the region.

Let's first take a brief look at the strategic theory. Optimists among the two extremes of deterrence theorists are of the opinion that peace and security can be maintained by the balance of power. The effectiveness of the balance of power has been glaring in the current history. For example, notwithstanding the failure of the UN, the then existing balance of power between the two super powers served as restraint and succeeded in stopping them from initiating dangerous wars. The resultant effects of this power balance

have been reflected at the individual, domestic, regional and global levels. Some people, families or groups have been subject to forced stability in a number of countries, despite achieving high power at their individual-state levels. Understandably, however, their insurmountable power structure was crushed at some critical juncture of their domestic political turmoil. This means that the inter-individual or inter-group struggle at individual-state levels intensified until their power had been balanced, contributing to a deterrent situation. Thus, the flaming fire of many drastic wars along the Afro-Asian Arab countries could have been extinguished with the emergence of the balance of power at different levels. Another important example of preventing hostility and war by deterrent strategy is the nuclear power balance between India and Pakistan.

The power imbalance in Middle East has been the result of the hegemonic strategy pursued by erstwhile super powers. Despite arms control and disarmament treaties, both superpowers have continuously enriched the stockpiles of nuclear technology and other weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). On the other hand, the provisions of the treaties have been imposed on others as the binding force, as if these could be used to block their inalienable universal rights to safeguard their own national interests. The creation of the IAEA can be cited as an example of such a measure, which obstructs other countries to build up their security shield. According to structuralist critics, the deviation of IAEA from keeping a provision of universal equal rights for all countries limits it from being justified as the valid, lawful and legal international organisation. Second, the study of Middle East politics of

the last 60 years reveals that the elevation of Israel's military strength and the weak, passive, and disorganised Arab resistance to it has been responsible for regional instability. Western powers, including the U.S., have rendered all-out cooperation to develop Israel's sophisticated weapons that include chemical, biological, and possibly, undeclared nuclear arsenals. Unfortunately, these world powers did not pay any heed to other ambitious and dissatisfied countries in the region. Such discriminatory Western policy in the Middle East region has created power imbalance causing regional instability.

That might make some countries feel vulnerable to the unjust treatment by such international treaties and obligations and compel them to install their own means of self-defense, which may not necessarily exclude the development of nuclear energy, nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Viewed from both a realistic and a structuralist perspective, Iran could be viewed as such a country. Being frustrated and dissatisfied with the double standard of the existing international system with regard to peaceful nuclear projects, Iran may rush to develop its nuclear weaponry for its self-defense. This has been the primary concern of the supporters of July's Iran-West nuke deal, including President Obama who poised to ask what would happen if there was no treaty such as this?

Looked upon the issue from a regional security point of view, in the post-nuke deal era, a new strategic structure seems to be in the offing. Post World War II power balance between Zionist Israel and Arab-Persian Muslim countries, who considered Israel as a "pushed in state" in Middle East, is now being replaced in the post-Iran treaty era by an emerging strategic balance between Iran on


one side, and Israel plus Gulf Arab countries on the other side. The nuke deal has been signed through overwhelming nays and objections from parties in both the Middle East and the West. The nuclear deal has tied the dissatisfied Gulf countries and Israel with a bond of strategic alliance. This emerging power balance of Middle East requires an emerging security paradigm so that a group of countries can deter a powerful Israel or a powerful Iran in order to prevent the escalation of war, and can contribute to regional peace and stability through deterrence.

Proliferation of arms sales to only Gulf countries may further destabilise the region. The best option would be to maintain a balance of power among the big powers, especially between Iran and Israel. Recognising the significance of deterrence, the Foreign Minister of Qatar Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Attiyah, while meeting with John Kerry in Doha, called for a ban on all nuclear weapons not only in Iran but "all the Middle East". The time has come to research and proceed towards a sustainable security paradigm for Middle East.

Renewed efforts are required for rebuilding the global image of the West so that new leaders may find the Western interests in the region in conformity and coexistence with theirs. The changed reality of regional politics demands international recognition for regional balance of power. It may replace regional enmity with regional rivalry and competition that might prevent any prospective war within the region, laying far-reaching consequences for the security of the Middle East.

The writer is a Professor of the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka and is currently Dean of the School of Business and Social Sciences, Sylhet International University. Email: mramin68@yahoo.com

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ACROSS

1 Casino request

6 Michelle Robinson's married name

11 Needs a massage

12 Eye part

13 Caning materials

14 Old market

15 Comic Bernie

16 Make mistakes

18 Engine part

19 Sense of self

20 Tennis need

21 Previously

22 Sense

24 Pub pints

25 Cloying

27 Move with effort

29 Ted of "Nightline"

32 Sandy color

33 Brewed beverage

34 Take to court

35 Pendulum path

36 Braying beast

37 History segment

38 Take it easy

40 Mortise's mate

42 Draw out

43 Wed in secret

44 Judge's wear

45 Did gallery work

DOWN

1 Damaged

2 Pleistocene period

3 Francis Ford Coppola film

4 Dr.'s field

5 Gist

6 Dizzying designs

7 Program error

8 Francis Ford Coppola film

9 Desert sight

10 Los-, New Mexico

17 Second tries on the set

23 Work unit

24 Swiss peak

26 Table protector

27 Rude person

28 Texas city

30 Asia's neighbor

31 Inclined

33 Price add-ons

39 Pro

41 "Evil Woman" band

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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