

Balancing strategic friendship

SHAMSER M. CHOWDHURY BB

THE two-day official visit of India's Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar to Bangladesh has drawn understandable attention in the media and of political analysts alike for more reasons than one. First, this was the first ever visit by an Indian Defence Minister to Bangladesh. Second, the visit has created the potential for a quantum upgrading of defence cooperation between the two South Asian neighbours whose relations have a historic dimension of its own. Last, but not least, the visit took place shortly after the procurement of two submarines for the Bangladesh Navy from China in mid-November and the high profile visit of China's President Xi Jinping to Dhaka in October.

Whether the timing of Mr. Parrikar's Dhaka visit had anything to do with the submarine procurement or President Jinping's visit earlier is a matter of conjecture; it could very well be a coincidence. However, since Bangladesh took delivery of Chinese submarines on November 14, some analysts in India have expressed concerns over a deepening of China's footprint in India's immediate neighbourhood. Retired Indian Navy Admiral Arun Prakash believes this transfer "is a step further in China's strategy of encircling India with its client states." He goes on to say, "Submarines are offensive weapons of sea denial and their only use would be to pose a threat for India

and to complicate the latter's maritime security paradigm." However, Bharat Karnad, a research professor at the India-based think tank Centre for Policy Research, disagrees. "It is just a good economic deal that Dhaka could not pass up," believes Professor Karnad. Given the prevailing nature of Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations, the retired Admiral's view appears far stretched while that of Professor Karnad seems like a more accurate reflection of the state of play.

Objectively speaking, Bangladesh's acquisition of two refurbished Ming-class submarines need not be viewed through this narrow geopolitical prism. It should instead be seen in the broader context of the country's force modernisation, which has important positive security implications for the Bay of Bengal rather than being a potential threat to regional stability.

At the same time that Bangladesh is augmenting its naval capabilities, it is increasing its contributions to maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and beyond. Since 2010, it has deployed two ships to the UN Maritime Task Force of Lebanon. Moreover, having long been a recipient of disaster relief operations, Bangladesh now seeks to become a provider. In the past three years, the Bangladesh Navy has delivered relief to Sri Lanka after deadly landslides in May, to Maldives after a water crisis in 2014, and to the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. Besides, Bangladesh Navy and Air Force were used for providing much



needed airlifted relief and medical supplies to Sri Lanka and Maldives after the 2004 tsunami. By upgrading its capabilities, Bangladesh also seeks to enhance its relevance and role in advancing international maritime institutions like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). These are all positive developments.

Unlike conventional defence cooperation arrangements that Bangladesh has built over the years with other countries, the one with India is fundamentally different. It

has its roots in the very birth of the nation when the Indian military fought shoulder to shoulder with Bangladeshi freedom fighters against a common enemy, shed blood and sacrificed lives. More than 1,600 members of the Indian Armed Forces were martyred during the final stages of our glorious Liberation War. The Bangladesh Prime Minister will formally honour these martyrs during her upcoming official visit to India. Mr. Parrikar made a poignant reference to that part of our shared

history in his remarks at the official banquet hosted in his honour. He also underlined that his visit would contribute to further the growing defence ties between the two countries. In his interactions with Bangladesh defence and security-related officials at different levels, details of such cooperation were spelt out.

As it is, exchange of visits at the highest levels of the Armed Forces of the two countries has helped strengthen ties and remove doubts.

An Indian Naval training ship has visited Chittagong recently. The sixth edition of the Bangladesh-India joint military exercise "Sampriti" has just concluded in Tangail. This is an annual exercise with the focus on counter-terrorism and boosting interoperability between the two armies. "Regular naval and air force exercises will also be on the agenda now," said a source. India, on its part, has actively worked towards bolstering ties with Bangladesh in recent years, with one of the main objectives being the need for the two to 'resolutely' tackle terrorism together. India has also been holding direct army-to-army staff talks with Bangladesh since 2009. The importance of the talks can be gauged from the fact that India has similar staff talks with just a handful of countries, which include the US, UK, France, Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

It is in this larger context that the Indian Defence Minister's visit needs to be viewed. Its significance lies in the fact that it has created the potential for enhanced military and security cooperation between Bangladesh and India and broadening them without negatively impacting Bangladesh's ongoing defence links with others, especially China. It is therefore credit to Bangladesh that it can balance the interests of India and China and take decisions that are ultimately in the interest of Bangladesh.

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An Unwanted People



THE MIDDLE PATH
ADNAN R AMIN

THE International Community seems to be unable, if not unwilling, to adequately respond to the recent escalation in Rohingya persecution. Long before this crackdown, apartheid conditions prevailed for the Muslim minority. Life as a Rohingya was characterised by denial of citizenship, disqualification from government and civil service jobs, incarceration, forced labour, property confiscations, restrictions on travel, and restrictions on number of children. Though not sensational, their oppression was systemic and systematic long before the British left.

Then the 2015 'boat people' crisis broke into the headlines – spurred on by mass deaths in mid-sea. It was an unparalleled, manmade human tragedy, alongside the Syrian refugee crisis. The actual sight of stranded, emaciated people in flimsy boats attracted much more attention than did the slow-burn, normalised oppression. Now, a full-blown genocide hounds the Rohingya and the world seems reluctant to go beyond talk and half-measures.

True and untrue stories of unimaginable brutality against the Rohingya are surfacing almost every day. Compared to some of the systematic genocide stories, accounts of being evicted and dispossessed seem quite tame. Just the other day, a photo surfaced of an Aylan Kurdi-esque toddler – allegedly shot dead by Myanmar border forces – lying face first on a muddy riverbank. Days later, a video emerged of another Rohingya child being tortured with an electric taser. Authenticity of both pieces of evidence has been challenged in various media circles.

But these stories pale when we hear about Noor Ayesha's escape (*The Guardian*, 08/12/16). Having reached Bangladesh territory with her daughter, Noor narrates how five of her children were lined up and then burnt alive, while two other daughters were killed only after they were raped. Soldiers then killed her husband, raped her but 'fortunately' failed to find her youngest

hiding nearby.

In Bangladesh, there is ample public sympathy for the Rohingya situation, especially from those who view their plight as persecution of coreligionists or Muslims. And as is often the case these days, fake news stories, macabre stories and horrific photos (whether of Rohingyas or not) are being circulated to exaggerate what has already been called a 'genocide'. The opposite sentiment is quite common too: one that holds that Rohingyas are not this country's problem and it shouldn't be made to shoulder the burden.

Incidentally, that's exactly what Buddhist extremists say in Myanmar.

Like many academics and activists, Prof. Penny Green holds the Myanmar political leadership responsible. She argues that Aung San Suu Kyi's unprecedented moral and political capital places on her the onus of using such capital for the Greater Good. This 'Greater Good' cannot exclude the Rohingya minority, just because they are of a different ethnicity and worship a different God.

Green writes, "In a genocide silence is complicity, and so it is with Aung San Suu Kyi

It is the hardest to look at the children. Sunburnt, pot-bellied with worms and hair ravaged by Kwashiorkor, they seem unaffected apart from the starvation. Meal times they pass playing with some prized possession—perhaps a polythene bag tied to a string to make a kite of sorts.



Girl at Kutupalong Refugee Camp. PHOTO: ADNAN R AMIN

and Burma's desperate Rohingya community."

Far from accepting partial onus, Suu Kyi recently giggled while telling supporters how to deal with the 'fabrication' of ethnic cleansing in the Rakhine State. She assured the audience that if the people of Myanmar refused to believe the propaganda, nothing else could cause serious problems. Her response is available on YouTube.

And the petite Nobel laureate is right. On the international stage, stories about Muslim persecution, at the hands of Buddhist extremists, fit no known narrative. Besides, there are so many Muslims dying of infighting, civil war and terrorism that this case doesn't feel special. Minority oppression and ethnic cleansing do stir up some discussion but the outrage always stops short of decisive action. On the global chessboard, a Rohingya genocide is like a localised anomaly that doesn't help the geopolitical ambitions of the world's superpowers.

With the proverbial West struggling with alt-right manoeuvring and disintegrating of economic blocs, there are few accounts to challenge Myanmar's official story. Though

Suu Kyi says they haven't 'tried to hide anything' there, the Rakhine State is heavily guarded and off-limits for the UN or Human Rights Watch. Hopes were raised when Suu Kyi invited fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kofi Annan to visit Rohingya ghettos but Mr. Annan could find no evidence of oppression. Any further international fact-finding missions seem unlikely. Perhaps, Mr. Annan could have looked harder.

Not two hour's drive from our prized, longest white sand beach are vast, sprawling ghettos. A steady stream of surreptitious pilgrims disappear into the narrow alleyways of Ukhiya bazar. If not for IOM's blue bags, it would be difficult to tell the refugees apart. They all look so similar: brown, emaciated and visibly terror-stricken.

The men are thin and timid, their eyes glazed from the sight of relentless, impersonal violence. The older women in their black burqas look like an endless procession of fairytale-spouting grandmothers. It is the hardest to look at the children. Sunburnt, pot-bellied with worms and hair ravaged by Kwashiorkor, they seem

unaffected apart from the starvation. Meal times they pass playing with some prized possession—perhaps a polythene bag tied to a string to make a kite of sorts.

A Bengali local quips that these godforsaken infiltrators are good at only one thing: churning out needless babies. He would've been happy to learn of the two-child policy imposed upon the Rohingya Muslims. Except the odd anonymous benefactors, locals view them as intruders, outsiders, degenerates, freeloaders, job stealers, criminal elements and unwanted people in general. They say the Rohingyas' presence bolsters the dreaded methamphetamine (Yaba) trade and human trafficking.

Yet, for the Rohingya, this is the Promised Land.

Not only are the Rohingyas an unwanted population wherever they go – their stories are lacklustre. Their stories are stories of perennial victims. Four sources of information – the official story, international investigative journalism, social media propaganda and refugee anecdotes – combine to form mainstream views. And the first three are clearly devoid of Rohingya perspectives. It is their story, but told by others.

All of this puts Bangladesh at a unique position of power. This country has been bearing the brunt of the massive displacement of population from Myanmar for decades. In addition to guarding borders and managing public opinion, it continues to support dwellers of the registered refugee camps. As such it can, and should, serve as a critical corridor for the flow of international aid.

Bangladesh is also at a position to act as a gateway for news and updates about the true extent of the military crackdown. Many of the refugees are carrying around photos and videos of burning houses and military operations, should someone – anyone – ask to see them. It is in Bangladesh's interest to see international pressure build on the Myanmar regime, so that the refugee situation can once again be brought under control. Such action could also theoretically thwart the possibility of the full-blown insurgency along our southern coastline.

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QUOTABLE Quote

PERICLES
GREEK STATESMAN, ORATOR AND GENERAL.

Freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Semicircular letters
- Netlike fabric
- Veranda
- Church feature
- Eye-popping prints
- "-- Rae"
- Wineglass
- Shade tree
- Just
- Suez Canal outlet
- Glimpse
- Rid (of)
- Become ready for picking
- Olympic racers
- Custodian's tool
- Slow mover
- Gift-wrapping need
- Lincoln nickname
- Laptop's kin
- Student of Socrates
- Kentucky hero
- Arrangement
- Central
- Speech copy
- Started a hole

DOWN

- Ness nemesis
- Make possible
- Before dawn
- Locale
- Chess piece
- "Xanadu" band
- Emphasis
- Ophelia's love
- Company symbols
- Hindu hero
- One with instant siblings
- Nights before
- Bear lair
- Kitchen herb
- Deep groove
- Rent from a renter
- Dream up
- Moses of the NBA
- Started the bidding
- Piper of rhyme
- Lights-out tune
- Steak choice
- Somewhat
- Groom's wear
- Make a choice

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	T	I	R	S	W	H	I	M	S
H	I	R	E	S	E	A	S	E	L
A	D	O	P	T	A	D	O	R	E
W	I	N	E	E	K	B	E	E	
L	E	E	W	A	Y	M	A	L	T
D	R	E	W	A	Y	M	A	L	T
R	E	S	E	T					
A	N	D	R	O	M	E	D	A	
B	R	A	Y	R	A	D	I	S	H
O	A	T	T	E	N	S	P	A	
A	R	I	S	E	D	E	M	I	T
R	A	V	E	N	S	T	A	R	E
S	T	E	E	D	A	L	E	S	

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott