

# An accountable government can realise the SDGs

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THE Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 are reported to be receiving serious attention from the government and civil society in Bangladesh. Bangladesh did very well on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Therefore, the international community's expectations from it on SDGs are very high.

The SDGs include the predictable and critical goals like ending poverty and hunger, ensuring healthy lives, quality education, gender equality, advanced water and sanitation management, affordable energy, sustainable economic growth and full employment. But what is new and more challenging is Goal 16, which seeks to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."

It is not difficult to understand why experts called Goal 16 the over-arching goal that links all SDGs. Achieving its objectives would necessitate fundamental changes in governance-culture and the mind-set of all concerned.

The targets for Goal 16 include: reduction of all forms of violence and related death rates, abuse of children, sexual violence against women, illegal arms and financial flows, and corruption and bribery. They also include promotion of rule of law, accountable and transparent institutions and responsive, inclusive and participatory decision making.

The latter objectives have been specified as Target 16.10 which seeks to: "Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national and international agreements."

Why is public access to information, or RTI in short, included as a SDG? The simple answer is: it seeks to promote an open and accountable government, without which attaining the other SDGs would be difficult, if not impossible.

Fortunately, in Bangladesh we have had a RTI Act in place since 2009. But, how has our experience with it been? Does it give us reasons to be hopeful? We need to ask what challenges we face and what to do to overcome them.

To begin with, there must be a clear understanding of the objectives of RTI law. There is a misconception among many that the law simply seeks to facilitate people's access to information that they may need



from the government from time to time. It must, therefore, be made clear to all concerned that RTI or Freedom of Information laws all over the world are adopted to enable citizens to oversee the work of their governments and not simply to obtain information for personal needs.

Everyone engaged in promoting, implementing and adjudicating the application of the law must realise this fully. This includes citizens' groups, government bodies and, more importantly, the Information Commission (IC).

Citizen's groups engaged in awareness-building should focus on the usefulness of the law to promote peoples' participation in monitoring the work of public bodies to make them law-abiding and transparent. By doing so, they contribute to good governance, which is essential for sustainable development.

The government, on its part, should convince public officials that it attaches great importance to fully respecting the RTI Act; and that its proper implementation will contribute to good governance, improved government-citizen relationship and, thereby, help

implementation of the SDGs.

The role of the IC is, however, most pertinent. For, it is the key mover of the law. For starters, the IC is best placed to remove all procedural hurdles that keep many potential RTI applicants away from making use of the law or to drop out after initial attempts. Secondly, it can make public officials more respectful to the law by imposing sanctions, whenever appropriate, for their reluctance or deliberate failure to abide by it. Thirdly, it can promote greater use of the law by adopting objective-test as basis for interpretation of critical provisions of the law. Fourthly, by its actions and utterances, it can convince citizens that it seeks to promote the application of the law and not restrict it. Fifthly, through appropriate measures it can enhance its reputation as a neutral and independent arbiter of the law. Sixthly, its complaint hearing procedures could be more friendly and less intimidating for ordinary applicants/complainants. And lastly, it can make its hearings open to the public, particularly to the media, and publicise its role as the foremost purveyor of transparency in the country.

A quick glance at the record of the Information Commission shows that in 2015-16 it received 975 complaints, of which 789 (81 percent) were resolved through hearing of one or both sides and 186 (19 percent) discharged without a hearing. The latter included those discharged due to procedural mistakes, including use of wrong forms or addressing the wrong person. The latter caused many to lose interest.

Data shows that among 1400 complaints decided in the last five years, in some 570 (60 percent) cases the Designated Officers (DOs) agreed to provide information only at the urging of the IC. It indicates continuing unpreparedness of a large number of public officials to respect the law.

A particularly worrying trend is that the complaint hearings of the IC appear to be primarily focused on ensuring that the information-seeker receive a response, with or without the relevant information, rather than on transparency and accountability objectives of the law. In many cases, the IC directs the DOs to provide a response, even if to say there is no information to disclose, with no attention to their glaring failure to respond to

an application in the first place. This is no way to advance the goal: accountability of the law.

However, some improvements have been observed in recent years. These include increase in number of RTI applicants from middle and educated classes. The numbers of transparency and accountability-related applications have thereby increased. Such improvements, and the continuing positive outcome of RTI interventions by ordinary citizens relating to Government's safety-net programmes, give reason for hope. In fact, there seems to be a positive systemic change in the distribution of safety-net benefits in areas where people have used RTI to obtain them.

There has also been an increase in the number of sanctions against defaulting officials. Out of some 15 penalties imposed on DOs in the last seven years, 10 were imposed in the last two years. Unlike in earlier periods, compensations were also awarded to some aggrieved applicants/complainants. These will help to drive the message home to recalcitrant public officials that the law is meant to be respected.

The High Court (HC) too has made some positive contributions. In a recent writ petition, the HC ruled against a decision of the IC by declaring that information provided by political parties to the Election Commission, as a legal requirement, are public information and cannot be denied to the public. There are two other positive verdicts from the HC, and a few awaiting hearing.

But perhaps the most heartening development is the response given by the Office of the Prime Minister to a RTI application seeking information on the number of persons accompanying the PM to the United Nations General Assembly session in the last five years, their names and responsibilities and who bore their expenses. The Office provided most of the information sought and the rest are subject to a complaint hearing before the IC in the coming days. This is likely to change public attitude towards the law and will hopefully serve as an example to other public officials, whatever their level of office, to take RTI applications seriously.

It augurs well for the SDGs and for the onward journey of RTI in the country.

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## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# China's road to peace on the Korean Peninsula



MINGHAO ZHAO

A new crisis is brewing on the Korean Peninsula. In mid-February, North Korea conducted an intermediate-range ballistic missile test. On March 1, the United States and South Korea began a joint military exercise that is unprecedented in scale and intensity.

These military drills will run until the end of April, and will include a significant number of ground, air, and naval forces from both countries, including strategic assets such as B-52 bombers and the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson. And, despite objections from Russia and China, the US is accelerating its deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea.

On the same day that the US and South Korea began their military drills, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inspected the headquarters of Large Combined Unit 966 of the Korean People's Army. Five days later, the North launched four ballistic missiles, one of which reportedly landed within 200 miles of Japan's coastline. The tests have led most experts to believe that North Korea has significantly expanded its nuclear and ballistic-missile capabilities, and that by 2020 it may be able to affix miniaturised nuclear warheads onto long-range missiles capable of

reaching the continental US.

Talks in New York between a North Korean delegation and former senior US officials had originally been planned for early March. But the meeting was cancelled in late February, when the US State Department refused to issue visas for North Korean diplomats, perpetuating a lack of communication that has only compounded the risks of the current standoff.

US President Donald Trump has apparently decided to increase the pressure on North Korea, rather than make good on his campaign rhetoric and speak directly with Kim. Trump's National Security Council is reportedly conducting an in-depth review of US policy toward North Korea, and considering a number of policy options, ranging from pre-emptive strikes on North Korean nuclear facilities to "soft" regime change through the imposition of harsher sanctions.

Even if Trump were willing to hold one-on-one talks with North Korea, his administration clearly is not ready to do so, because it lacks both a coherent policy and a credible policymaking operation. The Trump White House remains mired in dysfunction, as evidenced not only by Michael Flynn's sudden ouster as national security adviser, but also by the scarcity of senior appointments to oversee Asia-Pacific affairs at the Departments of State and Defence.

Despite this executive-branch policy vacuum, the US government

views North Korea's recent missile tests as a major threat. Many congressmen and senior military officials are now calling for a tougher response, which could include restoring the Kim regime to a list of state sponsors of terrorism, and using US Special Forces to launch surgical



South Korean anti-war activists hold placards during a rally against the visit of the US Defense Secretary James Mattis in Seoul on February 2, 2017 as they denounce the planned deployment of THAAD.

PHOTO: AFP

strikes. But such actions would only exacerbate the regime's sense of insecurity.

The US and South Korean intelligence communities believe that North Korea has 10-16 nuclear weapons and more than 1,000 ballistic missiles, making it practically

impossible to disable the North Korean threat militarily without inflicting serious damage on the US and its allies. And now that South Korean President Park Geun-hye has been impeached and formally removed from office, South Korea's government, with a campaign for a

new president in the offing, will be in no position to pursue new policy options - hardline or otherwise - for a number of months. Meanwhile, China's role on the Korean Peninsula is becoming more complicated. On the one hand, China has voiced opposition to

North Korea's missile tests, and suspended coal imports from the North under a United Nations Security Council resolution. In response, North Korean state media went so far as to criticise China implicitly for "dancing to the tune of the US."

But China also regards the new THAAD system in South Korea as a serious strategic threat. Chinese leaders worry that THAAD's X-band radar will negate China's second-strike nuclear capacity, and that the system could be integrated with US and Japanese facilities to create a web covering all of Northeast Asia. Indeed, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is already pushing ahead with THAAD deployment in Japan.

In November 2016, South Korea and Japan signed a pact to share military intelligence. But as the two US allies, who were once bitter enemies, improve their bilateral security relationship, China and Russia both fear that a close US-Japan-South Korea alliance could emerge as the equivalent of a mini-NATO to their east.

The re-emergence of Cold War-like security blocs in Northeast Asia would only exacerbate regional hostilities. To avoid that outcome, China is calling on all parties to stop and think. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently put it, the US and North Korea are like "two accelerating trains coming toward each other, with neither side willing to give way."

Wang has met with North Korean

Vice Foreign Minister Ri Kil-song in Beijing, and he will meet with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on March 18, in an effort to coordinate a first meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Trump. Needless to say, resolving the North Korean nuclear issue will be a priority at that summit.

China, for its part, has proposed a two-prong approach. First, North Korea stops its nuclear and missile tests, while the US and South Korea halt their joint large-scale military exercises. Second, all parties involved return to the negotiating table, with the parallel goals of denuclearising the Korean Peninsula and concluding a peace accord to replace the 60-year-old Korean War Armistice Agreement. Parties should, in the meantime, take note of former South Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan's proposal that the THAAD system be removed after North Korea abandons its nuclear programme.

Strategic mistrust across Northeast Asia will only worsen the US and China's already testy relationship. The nightmare scenario of a violent conflict on the Korean Peninsula demands that cooler heads prevail.

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## QUOTABLE Quote

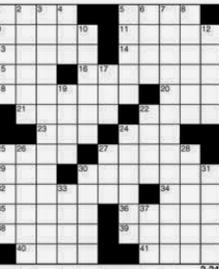


BRUCE LEE  
HONG KONG AND AMERICAN MARTIAL ARTIST, ACTOR, PHILOSOPHER, FILMMAKER

I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| <b>ACROSS</b>        | 30 Complete and balanced    | 6 Singer Jackson     |
| 1 New York area      | 32 Getting extra value from | 7 Entertains         |
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| 9 Biting             | 35 Mischievous              | 10 Spotted           |
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## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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## BEETLE BAILEY



## BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES



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