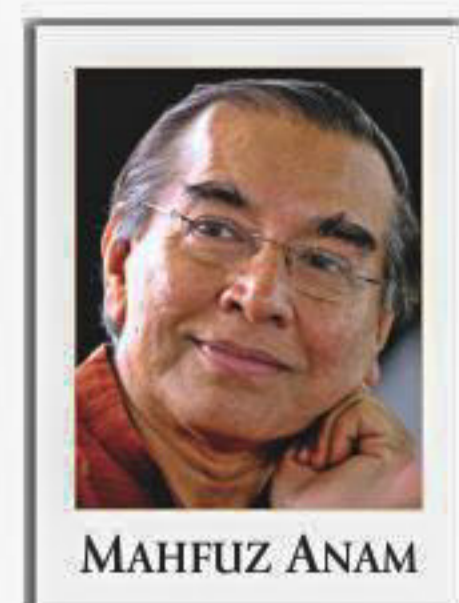


THE NEW POWER PLAY IN SOUTH ASIA

PM's crucial India visit

Will Trump's China policy have an impact on South Asia?



MAHFUZ ANAM

SHEIKH Hasina's upcoming visit to India during April 7-10 is turning out to be perhaps her most important bilateral visit to a country that surrounds Bangladesh from

Thankfully, that is now history. Not to be forgotten or its importance underrated is how Sheikh Hasina's government has changed the narrative from "India, the hegemonic oppressor" to "India, the development partner" ever since she came to power in 2009. I was a part of the entourage to the Indian capital in January 2010, when the Awami League chief risked her political future and took a leap of faith and signed a very comprehensive agreement with India in which, in one

China has been by far the biggest source of defence purchase for Bangladesh for many years, ever since the coming of military in power in 1975, reinforced in 2002 when former prime minister Khaleda Zia inked a comprehensive umbrella agreement during her visit to China. India of course has been watching with considerable unease as bilateral cooperation between Bangladesh and China soared. Indian discomfort experienced quantum leap when during

making China a major development and investment partner. So how should India view Bangladesh's rising closeness with China? With suspicion or with maturity? Should India insist on countering the imagined Chinese "influence" — imagined because China has in no way been able to influence our policy of friendship towards India — by forcing a "defence treaty" or "greater defence cooperation" on Bangladesh? Will such "enhanced



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three sides, making it the only neighbour in all but physical sense. It is now known that the Bangladeshi leader turned down the Indian request for a 25-year defence treaty. In its place there will likely be now a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on several related issues including purchase of equipment and weapons needed for UN peacekeeping, disaster response and management, land mine detector, spare parts for Russian Migs, etc. For all this India appears willing to extend USD 500 million in credit.

Indian leaders, policymakers and even the media agree that Sheikh Hasina's government has gone far beyond the extra mile possible to improve Bangladesh-India relations.

In *The Times of India*, Subir Bhaumik, a former BBC correspondent and a frequent commentator on India-Bangladesh relations, wrote, "Hasina has been steadfast in her support of Modi government's 'isolate Pakistan' drive, her government has cracked down hard on Northeastern rebels and Islamist militants, on fake currency rackets and Pakistani agents to address Indian security concerns. She has cleared transit for Indian goods to the Northeast through Bangladesh territory and addressed most of India's connectivity concerns seen as crucial to success of India's Look East policy. As Hasina prepares for her Delhi visit, Indian and Bangladeshi officials are trying to finalise a deal to allow Indian use of Chittagong and Mongla ports for accessing the Northeast."

What Bhaumik did not mention, and one that India truly needs to be grateful to Sheikh Hasina for, is her determined and successful effort to dismantle all the camps of the insurgents from the Northeast that Khaleda Zia's government had allowed in a mistaken policy to keep "pressure" on India. Over time these insurgents had become a genuine worry as their destructive power rose with sanctuary on Bangladesh's side of the border.



go, she responded to most of India's important demands without getting any of Bangladesh's demands met. Her faith has so far worked only partially in terms of duty free access of Bangladeshi goods in the Indian market, a major demand from our side. The story on energy cooperation is also good.

However, the biggest frustration remains in the crucial area of water sharing, especially of the Teesta. Bangladesh stands greatly disappointed on this score as no tangible progress has been made since it was aborted at the very last minute on the eve of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's last visit in September 2011. India's complex and controversial river-linking project hangs over Bangladesh's head as a possible doomsday scenario with unknown implications for our ecology. India appears not to sufficiently appreciate the fact that all of Bangladesh is a delta and we survive only if our rivers do.

All Sheikh Hasina's efforts appear to be now in jeopardy as India seems to be quite concerned about her China policy which resulted in the latter's increasing presence not only in Bangladesh's development projects but also in the sensitive area of military equipment purchase.



Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit Bangladesh-China cooperation was elevated from "comprehensive partnership cooperation" to "strategic partnership cooperation" and China offered USD 24 billion worth of economic and development aid with another USD 13 billion in private sector investment.

What perhaps set the alarm bells ringing loud in New Delhi was the procurement of two refurbished Chinese submarines which brought the Indian defence minister for his maiden visit and the push for a 25-year defence pact proposing enhanced cooperation between the two militaries and insisting on purchase of defence equipment from India.

In Bangladesh the usual pattern of politics was to have improved relations with China when Khaleda Zia came to power and a distinct cooling of it when Sheikh Hasina formed the government accompanied by a pronounced tilt towards India.

Since coming to power in 2009 Sheikh Hasina has changed all that. For the first time the present prime minister, to her considerable credit, was able to forge uniquely close relations with India while simultaneously



cooperation" give India any additional strategic benefit than it already enjoys? Bangladesh needs India as a close ally and friend. But it also needs China as a significant development partner. It is unrealistic on India's part to expect any government in Bangladesh not to try to reach out to China while pursuing a very close relationship with India.

Over the many decades that Sheikh Hasina has been in politics and the several years she has been in power she has been consistent in her policy of good relations with India. What is new is her success to reach out to China. Instead of looking at it with suspicion India should repose trust on Bangladesh as a reliable ally and see her policy towards China as contributing to regional stability and bringing two Asian giants closer.

If there is to be an Asian Century it will have to be built both by India and China and it has to benefit their smaller neighbours. Stability is key to Asia's future and that stability can only be guaranteed by India and China coming closer, which they are doing through a bilateral trade aiming to reach USD 100 billion in the near future and billions of dollars' worth of investment in each other's country. The idea of exclusive sphere of influence of

each of these Asian Giants with "No Entry" sign for the other is an outdated concept and one that is doomed to failure in this digital age.

A new element in our regional equation is the overt hostility of President Trump towards China and his declared policy of confronting the latter in the South China Sea. What effect Trump's policy is likely to have on Narendra Modi's resurgent Hindu nationalist government, especially on the hawks of the party? Will the US President's anti-China policy encourage India to push for an anti-Chinese policy on her neighbours? Will India see Trump as an opportunity to upstage China in South Asia, especially because China's support for Pakistan remains strong while India's relations with the latter has dipped to its lowest ebb?

The question for us is, how will Trump's anti-China policy affect India, and how will it play out in South Asia, especially on India's attitude towards Bangladesh?

Whatever it is, Bangladesh should never allow itself to be drawn into the India-China rivalry. We want India to be our "closest friend" but not our "only friend". Sheikh Hasina's commitment to good relations with India is beyond question. So why should her reaching out to China be seen with suspicion? She has also reached out to Russia and our ties with this re-emerging superpower, and a significant partner in our Liberation War, is far better than it has ever been since 1971.

As Sheikh Hasina's visit comes closer, India must seriously think how to forge a new, dynamic and win-win relationship with its emerging neighbour in the East.

The writer is Editor and Publisher of *The Daily Star*, Bangladesh. This is a part of a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.

"We learned nation-building the hard way"

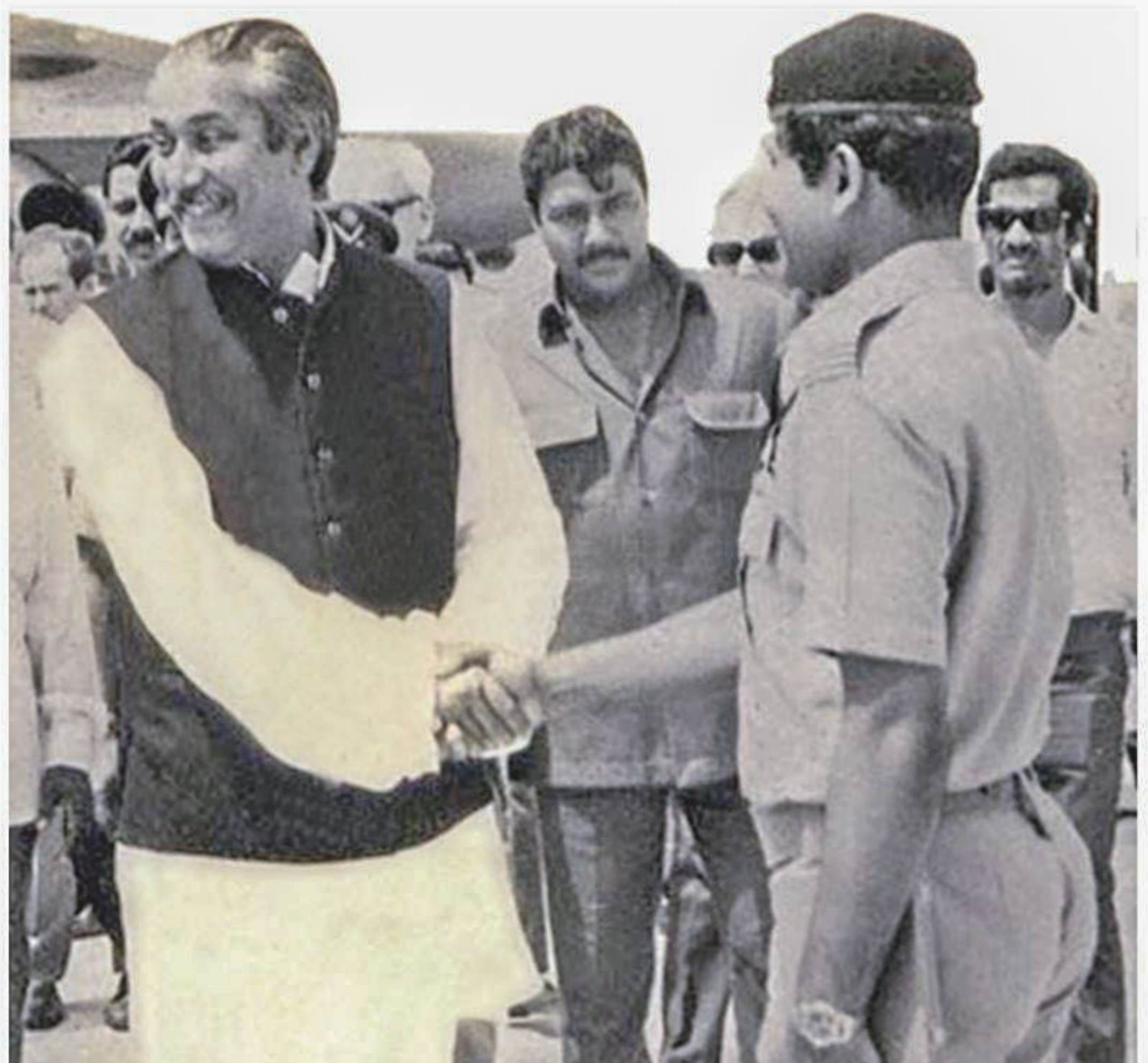
Group Captain (retd) Shamsul Alam Bir Uttam is a decorated Air Force freedom fighter who recently received the Swadhinata Padak 2017. Shamsul Alam Bir Uttam speaks to Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed about some key moments in his life leading up to Bangladesh's independence.

Which key event or moment inspired you to participate in the Liberation War of 1971?

I was very fortunate to have been selected under a competitive selection process to join the Pakistan Air Force Academy in Raisalpur in 1964. After being selected and having received my commission, I joined the privileged class of Pakistani society. Living in West Pakistan, I almost forgot the misery and sufferings of my motherland. Then came the election date of 1970. It rekindled our hope to come out of the shackles of the West Pakistani political and military establishments. As soon as the election results were declared in favour of the Awami League, all Bengali officers and men residing in West Pakistan felt the presence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in their hearts and minds. Being in military service, I was watching every move of the Pakistani military rulers, as I was posted in Rawalpindi since 1969. By February 1971, I was getting information through various inside contacts about the Pakistani army mobilising large numbers of extra troops to East Pakistan. Finally, the order came to our flying squadron in the Pakistan Air Force, Chaklala, to position six C130 Hercules transport aircrafts to carry troops to East Pakistan from Karachi. I was assigned to fly few such missions. I realised that while President Yahya Khan was pretending to have discussions and deliberations with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Pakistani government was playing a bluff and buying time to mobilise the troops and arms to crack down on East Pakistan. I flew my last mission on March 18, 1971. By then, the seeds had already been sown in my heart to join the Liberation War and they fully blossomed on March 26, 1971 while I was in Rawalpindi, West Pakistan. I started planning out my escape to join our freedom struggle.

How did you escape? How did your family react when you informed them about your participation?

Those of us who were posted in West Pakistan were already separated from our families. So I had taken the decision on my own to make an escape plan. I took a PIA flight from Karachi on March 3, 1971 to Dhaka and travelled as a civilian. But I could not fool the military intelligence team at Dhaka airport. I was arrested and put in the Prisoner of War camp. I had to endure all sorts of interrogation and torture until I finally got an opportunity to make the final escape in mid-August 1971 and make my journey to Kolkata. I reported to Tajuddin Ahmed, Nazrul Islam, MAG



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with Shamsul Alam Bir Uttam.

Osmani and AK Khandakar and explained my escape plan. During my final journey from Dhaka, I briefly stayed in Malibagh at our family house, and it was my brother Rezaul Karim (Mona) who organised a boat for my journey to Agartala. I received support from my *mama*, Mir Alauddin Ahmed, and my brother Mona, but both were quite uncertain about my future.

When you joined the war in 1971, you naturally had a dream about this country. Are we in the right path to achieve that dream? What is holding us back?

Without Bangabandhu, we would have never been able to achieve independence. The present generation cannot even fathom the political and economic plight of East Pakistan. I had the privilege of being brought up in Dhaka since

1950. Our school tuition fees were less than one rupee per month. More than half of my classmates could not pay the tuition fees regularly. Up until my SSC examination, I didn't even have proper shoes to wear to school. I used to see many students of Dhaka University polishing shoes in front of Gulistana Cinema Hall, just to earn some money to meet their educational expenses. If this was the condition of Dhaka's economic life, what would have been the plight of rural East Pakistan? Less than 10 percent of families had Rs 10,000 worth of cash savings, and these were mostly families who owned familial land. After independence, Henry Kissinger declared Bangladesh a bottomless basket. The burning question regarding whether in 46 years we have fulfilled our dreams, is one which will be continued to be asked till eternity.

Those of us who had experienced poverty stricken East Pakistan would certainly say that Bangladesh has come a long way and achieved many milestones.

In 1974, I had the privilege of flying Bangabandhu and his full cabinet in an AN-24 aircraft to New Delhi, on the invitation of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. During this trip, our Central Bank did not have any foreign exchanges to meet the daily allowance expenses of our VVIP air crew. Just imagine, we were given only Rs 300 per crew for a four-day stay. The per capita income of Bangladesh has now risen to over USD 1,450. Our foreign exchange reserve exceeds USD 31 billion. We have achieved self-sufficiency in food production for over 160 million people, and many such records have been broken in agricultural production, literacy, poverty alleviation, power generation, infrastructure, women's empowerment, infant mortality rates, life expectancy, healthcare and many other fields. Why should I not say that we are heading in the right path? But this generation shall achieve even more!

Looking back at your life, what do you think is your greatest achievement personally and professionally?

My greatest achievement, looking back at the last 46 years, is that I took part in the nation-building schemes since December 7, 1971. I was involved in the building of the Transport Flying Squadron, Flying Training Academy and Flying Instructor's School of Bangladesh Air Force, right from scratch. Today, BAF has all the modern military aircraft, radar, air defence system, and maintenance and logistics support system with adequately trained technical personnel. I take immense pride in the nation-building schemes of war-torn Bangladesh.

What advice, if any, do you have for our generation regarding what we can do for Bangladesh?

From 1947 to 1971 very few Bengalis had the opportunity to contribute to the nation-building process of Pakistan. The majority of our people were hungry, malnourished peasants and farmers. After 1971 we learned nation-building the hard way, that too by trial and error. After 46 years of independence, our beloved Bangladesh has strong economic footing for our next generation to take this country forward. We have also made a lot of mistakes along the way. This generation's task is to identify those mistakes, and assist Bangladesh in achieving the needs of the 21st century.

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