

# Do we really need a defence deal with India?



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**M**ILITARY pacts or defence deals are always struck by two states or more, out of a common threat perception. In the fifties, during the Cold War, Pakistan

joined CENTO and SEATO, an essentially western alliance with the US, Britain, France, New Zealand, and some Asian countries like Thailand, Philippines, Iran and Turkey, to contain the growing communist influence of China and the Soviet Union. The WARSAW Military pact by Soviet Russia, with its satellite states comprising erstwhile East European states, came into being to contain western military alliance represented by NATO. Recently, the US signed a military pact with India, providing for refuelling and repairing facilities of American military aircraft and war ships in Indian military bases to contain growing Chinese influences in the strategic Indian Ocean. In 1971, India signed a 25 years treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation agreement with the Soviet Union to contain perceived SINO-American intervention in favour of Pakistan. The same treaty was later adopted to ensure Indo-Bangladesh cooperation. The Saudi-led Islamic military alliance by 39 Islamic states was forged in 2015 to fight terrorism, especially the Islamic State (IS).

As of now, Bangladesh has little threat perception from any quarter. We have no enemy, real or assumed. Thus, I would argue that there is no need for a military deal with any country. The cornerstone of Bangladesh's foreign policy, as enunciated by the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is friendship with all and malice to none. We are a non-aligned nation. As a small nation, we are wary of military alliances conceived by big powers to spread their sphere of influence.

The people of the country wish to be left alone from big power rivalries, and thus have strategic partnerships with China, Russia, India, and even Myanmar. Newspaper discussions by the civil society, particularly by former senior Bangladeshi diplomats, have questioned

the necessity of a comprehensive defence deal with India for military cooperation, sales and supply of military hardware and coordinated operation against mutually perceived threats. They point out that as of now there is enough military cooperation with India by way of exchange of high level military contacts, joint military training and exercises, and so a formal military alliance will be superfluous and irrelevant.

According to Indian press reports, India was provoked to push for such an agreement because of the increasing military cooperation between Bangladesh and China, manifested by 80 percent of imports of Chinese hardware by Bangladesh over the past decade. They pointed out that the Indian move was

rattled by Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Bangladesh in October 2016 when China pledged nearly USD 24 billion assistance in trade and investment, buttressed by a promise to elevate the relationship between the two countries to a strategic partnership in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. China's presence in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, and Bangladesh joining China's One Belt One Road initiative is also a matter of deep concern to India. These alarm bells prompted Indian Defence Minister Monohar Parikkar and Indian Foreign Secretary Subramanian Jaisankar to rush to Dhaka to clinch a defence agreement with Dhaka.

The proposed deal, by all intent and purpose, is an Indian initiative and

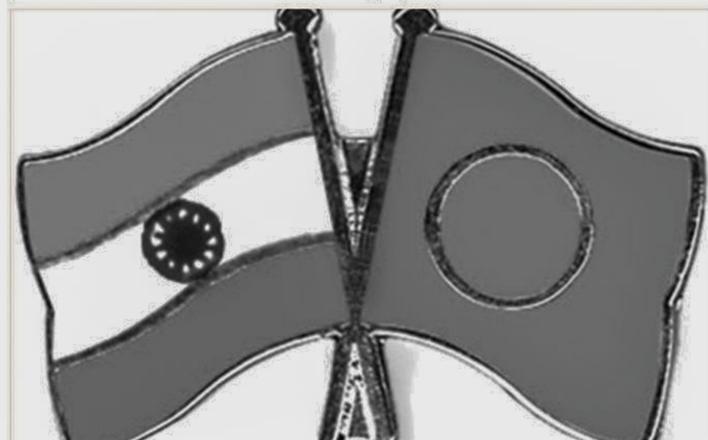
on security and connectivity. It has been denying space in the country for Indian insurgents from its troubled north eastern states, allowed the transit and transportation of Indian goods and passengers through road, railway, and river ports, and connected the Chittagong and Mongla ports to India's north eastern states. Bangladesh has given India everything it asked for in a platter. We offered our neighbour the use of the river port in Ashuganj to transport heavy duty equipment for the Palatona power company in Tripura, and also arranged transport of 10,000 tonnes of rice to Tripura through our territories. Yet, a deal on water sharing of the Teesta River has floundered.

Like the English poet Wordsworth said about the bounty of nature, "We receive but what we give". In the same refrain of introspection, India may ask itself, "We receive from Bangladesh but what do we give them?" In that vein, wouldn't it be too much for India to expect Bangladesh to sign this defence deal?

The strength of the government rests on popular support and not on external help. To its credit, the present Bangladesh government is successfully walking a quadruple equidistant tightrope, effectively managing foreign policy with America, Russia, China and India without tilting to one side or the other. The defence deal will seriously compromise our independent stance.

If the current public discourse on the subject in Bangladesh is any indication, this is an extremely unpopular measure which has the potential of a deep political fallout and backlash with damaging consequences. The government, responsible for our booming economy and significant trade surplus, is firmly in the driver's seat and can steer clear any outside pressure which is detrimental to its national interest. We hope that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will resist such an asymmetric and outlandish deal that will add nothing to our pace of development. Bangladesh is committed to strengthening stability and peace in the region. India and China are both very powerful and influential powers in Asia. We cannot be a part of a process that furthers India-China's armed rivalry.

The writer is a former diplomat.



precipitated by the supply of two Chinese submarines to Bangladesh, indicating 'deepening of Chinese footprints in India's backyard complicating India's security paradigm'. They further said the sale rankled concerned circles who questioned the need for Bangladesh to purchase two Chinese submarines considered it offensive.

Indian analysts have also interpreted the sale as a "Chinese strategy to encircle India". Prabal Ghosh of the Observer Research Foundation, explained to the Outlook, "The sale's strategic importance cannot be understated in any way". He advocates steps "to prevent Bangladesh from playing the China card".

They also pointed out that India was

agenda to counter the growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean region. There is no reason for Bangladesh to become a part of the India-China rivalry by opting for the deal which will extensively limit and circumscribe our independent military options and choices. The proposed deal is fraught with deep uncertainties, risking our country being unwittingly sucked into India's potential conflicts. India is sufficiently strong to confront its adversaries without dragging Bangladesh. Besides, India is the largest importer of arms in the world, as the quality of Indian defence products is not beyond question.

Bangladesh, in recent times, has addressed a wide range of India's concerns

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Trump the ideologue?



MARK LEONARD

**H**ISTORIAN may come to see the American actor Alec Baldwin as US President Donald Trump's most useful ally. Baldwin's frequent and widely viewed impersonations of Trump on the

comedy show "Saturday Night Live" turn Trumpism into a farce, blinding the president's political opponents to the seriousness of his ideology.

Of course, politicians are parodied all the time. But with Trump, there is already a tendency not to take his politics seriously. The form of those politics — unhinged tweet-storms, bald-faced lies, racist and misogynistic pronouncements, and blatant nepotism — is so bizarre and repugnant to the bureaucratic class that it can overshadow the substance.

Even those who seem to take Trump seriously are failing to get to the root of Trumpism. Democrats are so infuriated by his misogyny and xenophobia that they fail to understand how he connects with many of their former supporters. As for establishment Republicans, they are so keen to have a "Republican" in office implementing traditional conservative policies — such as deregulation and tax cuts — that they overlook the elements of his agenda that upend their orthodoxies.

Part of the problem may be that Trump has come out on both sides of most major debates, championing a brand of politics that privileges intensity over consistency. This may cause Trump-watchers to dismiss attempts to establish an ideological foundation for Trumpism — such as Julius Krein's new journal American Affairs — as hopelessly oxymoronic. But the fact that Trump is no ideologue does not mean he cannot be a conduit for a new ideology.

The British political establishment learned this lesson the hard way. For years, conservatives and liberals alike underestimated Thatcherism. They failed to see that behind Margaret Thatcher's blonde hair and shrill voice was a revolutionary politics that reflected and accelerated fundamental social and economic changes.

Thatcher, like Trump, was no philosopher. But she didn't have to be. She merely had to attract people capable of refining the ideology and policy

programme that would eventually bear her name. And that is precisely what she did.

Apart from those ideologues, the first to grasp the significance of Thatcher's political project were on the far left: the magazine Marxism Today coined the term "Thatcherism" in 1979. These left-wing figures saw what those in the mainstream didn't: Thatcher's fundamental challenge to the economic and social structures that had been widely accepted since World War II.

An editor of that magazine, Martin Jacques, who did as much as anyone at the time to provide a theoretical understanding of Thatcherism, recently explained to me why its significance was so often overlooked. "Political analysis at that time was very psephological and institutional," he said. With its focus on "the performance of political parties," he explained, it missed "the deeper changes across society."

There are powerful parallels between the late 1970s and the present. Just as Thatcher recognised growing dissatisfaction with the old order and gave voice to ideas that had been languishing on the margins, Trump has acknowledged and, to some extent, vindicated the anguish and anger of a large segment of the working class who are fed up with long-established systems. Also like Thatcher, Trump has

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attracted ideologues ready and willing to define Trumpism for him. Front and centre is Stephen Bannon, the former executive chairman of Breitbart News, the ultra-nationalist home of the racist alt-right, who now serves as Trump's chief strategist. Speaking at the Conservative Political

Action Conference, Bannon defined Trumpism in terms of national security and sovereignty, economic nationalism, and the "deconstruction of the administrative state." As he put it, "[W]e're a nation with an economy. Not an economy just in some global marketplace with open borders."

This reflects a fundamental conflict between Thatcherism and Trumpism: the latter aims to sweep away the neoliberal

Minister Tony Blair was the first leader to recognise Thatcherism for what it was: a new ideology that upended long-held rules and assumptions. But, Jacques asserts, Blair merely adjusted to the new ideology, rather than attempting to change it.

None of this bodes well for Trump's opponents, who are still a long way from recognising the ideological implications of his presidency. Indeed, they remain so



White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon and White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus at the Conservative Political Action Conference in National Harbour, Maryland, on February 23, 2017.

consensus of unregulated markets, privatisation, free trade, and immigration that comprised the former. But, even if the ideas are different, the tactics are the same.

To consolidate support, Thatcher would go head-to-head with carefully selected enemies — from British miners to Argentina's president, General Leopoldo Galtieri, to the bureaucrats in Brussels. Similarly, as the Hudson Institute's Craig Kennedy recently told me, "Bannon wants to radicalise the anti-Trump liberals into fighting for causes which alienate them from mainstream America." Every time Trump's opponents march for women, Muslims, or sexual minorities, they fortify Trump's core support base.

Jacques argues that the British Labour Party's failure fully to come to terms with Thatcherism is the main reason it spent almost two decades in the political wilderness. He believes that Prime

distracted by Trump's apparent lack of leadership skill and even mental capacity — which, to be sure, cannot compare to that displayed by Thatcher — that they have yet to grasp the depth of the divisions and neuroses that Trump has exposed.

It might be cathartic to call Trump an idiot, to laugh at his misspelled tweets and taped-up tie, but the implications of his presidency are serious. If Trump's progressive opponents fail to engage seriously with the forces that Trump's victory reflected and reinforced — in particular, the backlash against neoliberalism — not even impeachment will be enough to put the Trumpian genie back in its bottle.

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## ACC wants to curb corruption

### Tracking down graft in SoBs

**T**HE chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) organised a seminar titled "Concerted Efforts Against Corruption" last week and the head of ACC went on record to state that the former chairman of Basic Bank will be pursued to the full extent of the law for his alleged involvement in the Tk. 4,500-crore loan scam. This comes in the backdrop of what the finance minister has stated regarding the dismal performance of the ACC to tackle the rampant corruption that seems to have engulfed the State owned banks (SoBs). Indeed, we have witnessed the constant bailing out of these SoBs over the last few fiscals at considerable expense to the national exchequer!

We are encouraged by these statements coming from top policymakers about tackling graft which unfortunately is reaching astronomical proportions in the government banks. While we welcome this new message coming out of ACC's top brass, we would like to ask precisely what has happened to the investigations into the Hall-Mark (Tk. 1,700-crore), Destiny Group (Tk. 4,119-crore) and other scams that happened earlier during 2012-2013? Not only does graft and lack of action to tackle it undermine both the government's image in the public eye but is a huge wastage of revenue as these banks require bailing out every year.

It is not only the media that has been highlighting runaway corruption in certain public institutions. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reports have been trashed and the corruption watchdog body has been castigated repeatedly for highlighting these discrepancies in the state-owned banking sector. It is our sincere hope, and the public's hope that the political will to go tough on these financial scams in SoBs will remain and not falter because bringing back confidence will require sticking to a zero-tolerance policy on graft.

## International Women of Courage Award

### We need more girls like Sharmin

**S**HARMIN was 15 when she, like thousands of other girls her age in rural Bangladesh was married off by her parents. She was to marry a man who was old enough to be her father but she took a stand and refused. She is one of twelve women who are recipients of this year's International Women of Courage Award. This award has been given to 100 women in 60 countries since it was launched in 2007.

We join in the applause Sharmin has received internationally for showing strength of character and raising her head high in refusing to marry before reaching adulthood, and in that, has demonstrated that girls her age do have a voice in deciding their fate when it comes to combating child marriage.

It is voices like Sharmin's that are needed to fight the scourge of child marriage in Bangladesh. We have laws to combat child marriage but sadly most are not implemented. That Sharmin dreams of growing up to be a lawyer to champion the right of other girls and fight this taboo of a tradition of early and forced marriage gives us hope. Yes, she may be a lone voice in our landscape, but today Sharmin is a role model for other underage girls in our country; yes, there is hope and not all is lost, if she could do it others can too. We wish Sharmin the best for the future and hope that she will indeed grow up to fulfil her dream of becoming a lawyer and an advocate for girls' rights in our society.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Preventing hospital fires

Most of the hospitals and clinics in our cities are multistoried and lack proper fire escapes. Neither do they have emergency exits in case of other emergencies such as earthquakes.

Doorways and passages in hospitals and clinics should be reasonably wide for quick movement of all, particularly patients in wheelchairs, stretchers, etc. as many of the patients may be in the ICU or are unable to move or walk without some form of assistance. Locations of elevators, stairs, ramps, etc. should also be marked clearly so that they are easily visible on each and every floor.

Most fires that break out seems to have the same source — electrical short circuits or negligence in the use of electrical equipments.

Electric lines/connections should be checked periodically to check for faults.

Fire fighting equipment should be installed in prominent places and everyone should be made aware of where they are. Emergency numbers too, of fire-fighters, etc. should be placed where everyone can access them, in case of emergencies.

If fire fighting drills are held periodically, chances of minimising casualties can be ensured should a real fire break out. The government should work with both print and electronic media so that awareness among people and hospitals is generated.

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