

## Stent suppliers' "strike"

### Implement DGDA move strictly

ON April 14 we heartily congratulated the move to fix the maximum retail price of stents for heart patients in need of angioplasty and stents. We pointed out that these patients prefer to go to India for their treatment, since the price there is fixed, while in Bangladesh, public and private hospitals charge any amount they please. We also pointed out allegations of unscrupulous profit mark-ups and doctors' commissions, all of which make the price of healthcare a burden on the patient.

A report published yesterday shows that the bold move by the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) to fix the MRP of stents has led to a protest "strike" by the suppliers. Patients are now discovering that the stent implant surgeries they were booked for cannot be performed due to shortage of supplies. It is horrifying to learn that patients are having to go back home with incomplete surgeries. Suppliers have reportedly declined to even supply stents for emergency purposes.

This is morally loathsome. This strike is absurd and nothing short of taking hostage of innocent lives. Cardiologists have pointed out that now patients have to pay between Tk. 80,000 and Tk. 1.5 lakh for a single drug-eluting stent. The price for stents is fixed at Rs. 30,000 in India. The DGDA's move to fix the retail price bodes well for our healthcare system.

We have heard that the strike was caused by a "misunderstanding", which has now been clarified. We have been assured that the supply delivery has resumed. However, the issue here is, for whatever reason, the suppliers put lives of patients at risk. This cannot be justified. We strongly urge that the authorities take action against this unscrupulous business practices which would rather put lives at risks than forego profit.

## Killed for pursuing studies!

### Reprehensible

MARUFA Akhter is alleged to have been tortured and murdered by her in-laws over her decision to pursue higher secondary education after she was married off to a much older man in Jhalakathi. That her mother and Marufa opposed the marriage is of no consequence, as we live in a patriarchal society where fathers generally have the final say. Her husband is an expatriate worker and her in-laws did not take kindly to her attending college at Nalchity Degree College. Her mother alleges Marufa was tortured to death and the police inquest report states the body bore marks of injuries. The irony is that Marufa was a high performer in her secondary school certificate exams and had the support of her expatriate husband who encouraged her to study further.

We wonder what sort of a society condemns girls to physical abuse over education. The dark ages are upon us where in-laws now apparently have no qualms about resorting to violence in order to keep in check women who wish to break out of their surroundings through education, so that they may one day become empowered which only better education can ensure. This latest incident also brings to the fore the dangers presented by the practice of child marriage where a minor girl has little say in who she marries and when. We hope the police will be proactive in getting to the bottom of this alleged murder. Marufa's death should serve as a wakeup call for law enforcement because incidents like this are on the upswing nationwide and taking no action only encourages more of the same.

# The growing strategic importance of Bangladesh to China



AVIA NAHREEN

THE visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh on October 14-15, 2016 had been dubbed as a 'historical state visit' poised to be a geopolitical game changer in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. At the sidelines of Xi's visit, Bangladeshi and Chinese firms signed USD 13.6 billion worth of deals in trade and investment in addition to the USD 20 billion in loan agreements signed by the two governments. The inevitable question is why the world's second largest economy comprising of 1.37 billion people and an economy 67 times bigger than Bangladesh is coying up to the world's 47th largest economy? What geopolitical importance does Bangladesh have to receive such enormous bilateral assistance from a nation aspiring to be the next world leader? Bangladesh's strategically important geographic location, physical and political proximity to India, availability of cheap labour, and proximity to the Bay of Bengal have considerable implications for Chinese regional geopolitics and geo-economics.

### Consolidating sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean

The Chinese economy is heavily dependent on energy resources transported via the secure sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean. Around 80 percent of China's energy import from the Middle East pass through the Strait of Malacca, which is a narrow stretch of water connecting the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. Malacca provides China the shortest maritime route to Europe, Africa and Middle East. China's ever increasing need for energy have increased the strategic importance of this maritime region and the importance of maintaining good relations with littoral states in and around the region. To consolidate influence in this critical trade route and at the same time shedding overdependence on it, China has been pledging investment to the littoral states around the Indian Ocean. It is due to this strategy, Bangladesh, owing to its geographic positioning in the Bay of Bengal, has been the recipient of investment pledges from China's deep pockets. Bangladesh is an important factor in the much touted 'string of pearls' theory, which explicates how

China intends to exert more influence around the Malacca Strait and Indian Ocean through investment in development and infrastructural projects around Indian Ocean rim states.

To cut down over-reliance on the Strait of Malacca, China is already building oil pipelines from the Burmese port Kyakpiu to Kunming. In this context, China is also keen on developing the Chittagong port in the hopes of building a parallel pipeline connecting Chittagong-Kyakpiu-Kunming. If India ever, with US support, blocks the Malacca chokepoint through the Indian base in the Andaman Sea, it can have dire repercussions for the Chinese manufacturing base. Hence, it is important for China to gain more influence in the Indian Ocean region

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through bankrolling infrastructural investment in the coastal nations.

### Conduit to South Asia

For long, China has invested much of its attention towards South East Asia but has now diverted towards South Asia, a region comprising of one-fourth of the world's population and housing the third largest economy by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), which represents a lucrative market for Chinese products. Since connectivity at the moment is not feasible via the contentious Arunachal Pradesh or through Afghanistan or Pakistan, one way for China to reach mainland India is through Bangladesh, given the friendly relation the two countries maintain. Also, to activate

the Bangladesh-China-India Myanmar (BCIM) sub-regional corridor, crucial for reaching South Asian markets, it is imperative to bring Bangladesh on board. China intends to draw in Bangladesh through massive infrastructural investment, an act touted by experts as China's 'checkbook diplomacy.'

### Checking India's regional dominance and market for arms sale

China has been quietly checkmating India's regional dominance in South Asia through its arms sale in countries bordering India. While Beijing today is the third largest arms provider in the world, between 2011 and 2015, 71 percent of Chinese arms exports were to Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh – states proximate to both India and China. Although Bangladesh's USD 195 billion GDP is a meagre 0.017 percent of China's USD 11 trillion GDP, between 2011 and 2015 Bangladesh was the second largest recipient of Chinese arms in the world with Beijing supplying over 80 percent of the country's arms imports over the past decade. When China sells heavy armaments like tanks and submarines to a country, the importing country becomes reliant on China for a long time for training, maintenance, and repair. This reliance inevitably results in certain degree of influence on the importing country. This makes it advantageous for China to be selling arms at low prices and on easy credit to countries bordering India as a way of checking India's geopolitical ambitions in the region. For China, growing ties with Bangladesh serves the dual purpose of revenue from sale of arms and checking Indian dominance in the region.

### Key player in the One Belt One Road interconnection

During the 1960s, China was hesitant in forging regional cooperation with its Asian neighbours which changed during the 1990s after the Asian Financial Crisis. Since President Xi Jinping has come to power, China has taken a leadership role in forging community based regional integration in Asia. The geographical focus of integration for China has earlier been confined only to East Asia which has now been expanded to encompass South and Central Asia. China is currently expanding on two fronts; westward towards Eurasia and southward towards the Indian Ocean. Counterbalancing USA's influence in Asia Pacific is also one of many reasons why China is so persistently pushing for mega projects such as the One Belt One Road (OBOR). Bangladesh is centrally situated along the BCIM Economic Corridor and

retains a strategic position along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with Chittagong port as a major maritime pivot through the Indian Ocean, a very important factor for realisation of both the Economic Belt and Maritime Road initiatives.

Xi's 'One Belt, One Road' is his most ambitious foreign and economic policy till date. To solidify his second term, rejuvenate a slowing China, and to assume political leverage over its neighbors, Xi has already begun to vigorously market this flagship project. OBOR will support China in becoming the new leader of free trade in Asia Pacific with the US abandoning the TPP. It would also geo-economically assist China in dealing with its excess capacity, upgrade its industry, and develop its less prosperous regions. To materialise all interconnections under OBOR, Xi Jinping now needs to woo former Indian allies in South Asia to commit to his projects.

### Relocating Sunset Industries

As labour costs rise in China, its declining sunset industries will be looking for places to relocate. China will continue to move away from labour intensive low-tech industries owing to its rising labour costs and cooling markets. It will gradually move towards high margin and high-end manufacturing like IT, aerospace, and telecommunication. Existing Chinese companies, producing low-end labour intensive products will be looking for places with cheap labour to relocate their plants. With almost a third of its population between the ages of 15-30, Bangladesh provides a huge young workforce at one of the cheapest rates in the world to the Chinese manufacturers of sunset industries wishing to carry forward with many of their labour intensive industries.

From the bigger scheme of regional power play to the unexplored potential in commerce and connectivity, Bangladesh is one of the most vital countries for China in expanding its sphere of influence in South and Southeast Asia. Hence, it is no surprise that the 2016 visit by President Xi Jinping, first in more than three decades, saw China-Bangladesh relations elevated to 'Strategic Partnership of Cooperation' from 'Comprehensive Partnership'. It is now for Bangladesh to gain leverage from China's checkbook diplomacy while maintaining the delicate balance of regional geopolitics.

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## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Planning for President Le Pen



MARK LEONARD

AFTER the United Kingdom's unexpected vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump's unexpected triumph in the US presidential election last year, you might imagine that Europe's chancelleries have developed detailed contingency plans for a victory by the far-right National Front's Marine Le Pen in France's presidential election. You'd be wrong.

The thought of President Le Pen is so terrifying, it seems, posing such a threat to the future of Europe, that it remains for many a possibility they dare not entertain, much less plan for. But that threat is precisely why Europe must address seriously the possibility of her winning, however unlikely it may seem.

There is no doubt that, as President of France, Le Pen could do serious damage to the European project. She has positioned herself as the antithesis of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and pledged to leave the EU's border-free Schengen Area and the eurozone. As for the EU itself, she promises to follow in the UK's footsteps, renegotiating the terms of her country's membership, and then calling a referendum on the agreement. If the EU rejects the reforms Le Pen demands, she will campaign for a French exit.

But there would be important differences between Brexit and Frexit. Whereas many UK Eurosceptics envision a global Britain trading with the world, Le Pen wants to introduce protectionist policies. In lieu of openness, Le Pen – who now casts herself as a Gaullist – wants to deepen "great power" relations with Russia and the United States, as she focuses on defending "traditional" Christian values and fighting terror in the context of a multipolar world order.

To support those objectives, Le Pen promises to increase French defence spending to 3 percent of GDP (the NATO target is 2 percent), while making it clear to voters that none of that spending would support stabilisation missions in Africa. In this sense, a Le Pen victory would amount to a rupture not just with the European mainstream, but also with France's strategic orientation over the last few decades.

To be sure, opinion polls still favor the independent centrist Emmanuel Macron in a second-round run-off. But many fear that Macron's supporters will not be as inspired as Le Pen's to turn out to vote.

In fact, in recent months, Le Pen's popular support has remained rather consistent, with her lead in opinion polls for the first round remaining stable, even as French politics is thrown into upheaval by scandal and mistrust. This perfect political storm has caused France's two-party system to fragment into a four-party arrangement and has all but knocked the favorites out of the running, while leaving Le Pen largely unscathed.

The reasons for Le Pen's rise have as much to do with her reinvention of the National Front as with the external political environment. She has managed to



French presidential election candidate for the far-right Front National (FN) party Marine Le Pen delivers a speech during a campaign meeting on April 19, 2017, southern France.

PHOTO: AFP

escape the extreme-right ghetto, with a grand strategy, shaped by her ally Florian Philippot, that aims to broaden the Front's appeal to key groups that previously avoided it, especially civil servants, women, and Catholics.

As Philippot has advanced this plan, claiming that the National Front is "neither left nor right," he has also been working to lay the groundwork for a Le Pen-led government. To this end, he is seeking to build a new political elite to serve in a National Front government and help overcome resistance to the party's agenda from France's "deep state." And he has been exploring what the president can and cannot do – including calling referenda – without permission from parliament.

Compared to Le Pen and her team, Europe's leaders seem woefully underprepared. Of course, with so many unknowns, there is a limit to the plans they can share publicly; indeed, at this stage, specific statements may even prove counterproductive. But that does not mean that EU leaders should simply warn that a Le Pen victory would spell the end of the EU and leave it at that.

Instead, EU leaders should be considering to what extent they would be able to work around a Le Pen presidency. Even if she wins, she will struggle to gain a parliamentary majority, meaning that she may well end up in what the French evocatively call cohabitation with a hostile parliament and prime minister. Would other EU leaders be able to form an informal coalition with those elements of the French government?

Europe's leaders must also begin thinking about how they should respond to Le Pen's request to renegotiate the terms of France's EU membership, and to what extent they should resist her efforts to remove France from the rest of Europe. Should the European Commission develop its own plans for a French exit from the eurozone and Schengen?

There may even be a case for Europe's leaders to facilitate France's withdrawal from the EU, lest Le Pen attempt to dismantle the EU from within, by building alliances with the likes of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. It is certainly a possibility that must be considered.

To say that these are difficult questions is an understatement. But that is precisely the point: bringing them out into the open demonstrates just how disruptive Le Pen's victory would be. Indeed, from the EU's perspective, a hostile president in France, the country of Jean Monnet, would be far more destructive than Brexit.

If we have learned one thing from the annus horribilis that was 2016, it should be that opinion polls are fallible. Rather than shut their eyes and hope that, this time, the pollsters are vindicated, the EU should prepare even for the worst-case scenario. Such plans may never have to be implemented, but Europe's leaders should make them now, rather than wishing later that they had.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Government surrenders

It is distressing and infuriating to watch our government surrender under duress and blackmail to a handful of private transport owners. In the recent past, bus owners have abused their monopoly power over Dhaka's transportation system twice. It's a shame.

A government of any other country would have arrested these transport owners who are holding thousands of civilians hostage at their mercy. We will stand by any stern measure taken by the government in interest of the people's welfare. Please nationalise the bus transport system in Dhaka city and end our suffering. Don't let the dragon get bigger by the day. Ziauddin Ahmed  
By email

### Workers dying from silicosis

Labourers who work in stone crushing in different parts of our country are dying due to silicosis caused by inhalation of crystalline silica dust. These workers, deprived of any alternate source of income to support their families, have no choice but to work in these hazardous environments. While a few of them may wear protective masks, a large number of people are nevertheless getting infected with this incurable disease. Particular cases have been seen in the Burimari land port area where labourers have been doing the work for years. Greater awareness measures must be carried out so that the labourers wear protective masks at all times while working. Other safety measures also need to be implemented. The responsibility to help and protect these people from the threat of silicosis lies with the government.

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