

Bangladesh losing its geo-economic importance to Myanmar

M SHAHIDUL ISLAM

THE Rohingya refugee crisis has exposed Bangladesh's diplomatic weaknesses. No permanent member of the United Nations Security Council has strongly backed Dhaka to solve the refugee problem. China rendered its support to Myanmar at the UN so that the country does not face any immediate threat such as sanction. The United States' intention to solve the Rohingya refugee problem is at best half-hearted, as has been reflected by the fact that the issue was not even mentioned in President Donald Trump's speech at the UN General Assembly.

India, though it does not have a strong voice at the UN, rather backed Naypyidaw condemning the terrorism in Arakan, ignoring the flight of thousands of Rohingyas. Japan, another important Asian power, also supported Myanmar.

Why are so many influential regional powers backing Myanmar despite the fact that the country has grossly violated human rights in Rakhine State? What are their stakes in Myanmar? What makes Naypyidaw so influential compared to Dhaka?

Can economic factors explain this phenomenon? The Bangladesh economy, which is now about USD 221 billion, is at least three times bigger than Myanmar's. Bangladesh is also in a better position when it comes to trade relations with almost all the major regional and global powers, including China and India. What then makes Myanmar so important to the regional powers?

Bangladesh's trade and other economic advantages are apparently not enough to compete with Myanmar when it comes to the latter's geography. There is no denying that Myanmar is better

placed than Bangladesh in terms of geographic location as it lies at the intersection of Southeast Asia and South Asia. Bangladesh's geography, however, is no less important either, at least as far as India and other smaller nations of South Asia are concerned. Given the size of its domestic market and its location, it is equally attractive to China.

However, the key difference between Naypyidaw and Dhaka is that the former has been successful in utilising its geography creating a competitive space for China and India, among others. Both Beijing and New Delhi are developing ports, including a deep-sea port, and Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Rakhine. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has not utilised its geography strategically. In recent years, not only Myanmar, even the small island-country, Sri Lanka has developed sophisticated maritime infrastructures including a deep-sea port.

Pakistan has built one of Asia's largest deep-sea ports in Gwadar, and it is currently developing a multi-billion-dollar SEZ with the help of China. India has at least 10 major sea ports and is currently building one in Kerala. Bangladesh is the only country in this part of the world that has failed to modernise its maritime infrastructure utilising the country's thousand-year-old port city Chittagong, located at the heart of Bay of Bengal.

Beijing's interest to develop a deep-sea port in Chittagong was successfully thwarted by some influential regional powers citing security concerns. They reasoned that China's "string of pearls" strategy, which is associated with a series of ports and other maritime infrastructure build-up in the Indian Ocean, is a security threat. There were, however, proposals from the



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PHOTO: STAR

UAE and the Netherlands—both with experiences in port development—to build maritime infrastructure in Chittagong. But successive governments in Bangladesh have failed to capitalise on those opportunities leaving Chittagong impoverished, ultimately jeopardising the country's core interest.

The cost of not having a deep-sea port is enormous. The existing infrastructure of Chittagong port had reached its limit long ago. The cost of cargo handling is much higher in the Chittagong port as mother vessels cannot dock at the port. A deep-sea port would not only help Bangladesh economy, it is also bound to reshape

the economic geography of the region. Such an infrastructure is often followed by development of SEZs drawing large investment. However, surrendering to regional powers, the current government has adopted the second-best solution of developing limited-scale ports in Payra and Matarbari.

Not only in terms of maritime infrastructure, in the past few years one has observed the centre's neglect of Chittagong. The city is in decline. Chittagong is lagging behind Dhaka. Per capita capital expenditure in Chittagong, critical for its long-term development, for instance, is barely USD 3 compared to Dhaka's USD 11. Had the centre been serious in

developing its port city, Bangladesh's position in regional geo-politics would have been very different from what it is today.

What's ahead for Bangladesh?

In the post-American South Asia, China and India have emerged as both economic partners and geo-political competitors. Rakhine, which is barely 150 km from the southern part of Bangladesh, is fast becoming an economic and geo-strategic hotspot of the Bay of Bengal. This offers both challenges and opportunities for Bangladesh.

If Bangladesh intends to be an influential economic and geo-political player in the Bay of Bengal,

there is no alternative but to develop maritime infrastructure in Chittagong. The settlement of maritime boundaries with India and Myanmar is a big advantage in this regard. It is now high time for Bangladesh to develop a blue economy capitalising on the opportunities arising from China's Maritime Silk Road and Japan's Big-B (The Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt) projects.

There should also be efforts to negotiate with New Delhi and Naypyidaw to link Chittagong with Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project to assess ASEAN markets taking advantage of geographic proximity and economic complementarities. India is getting similar benefits connecting Northeast with its core utilising Bangladesh's geography.

There should be diplomatic efforts to resolve security issues involving Rakhine and Southern Bangladesh looking beyond the issue of the refugee crisis. China, in particular, intends to see a stable Rakhine given its huge investment in Myanmar's warm water. There are incentives for other powers to destabilise the region to arrest China's interest in the Bay of Bengal.

Finally, there is a need for national consensus, in particular political consensus among major parties, on the country's core national interests. Otherwise, all these opportunities will remain elusive. Unless Dhaka wakes up, Rakhine will forge ahead, becoming the most important geo-economic hotspot, leaving Chittagong improvised, and making Bangladesh subservient to regional powers.

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Thinking about October 1989 in East Germany and North Korea



ROBERT J FOUSER

East German regime.

Leipzig, where the pro-democracy demonstrations began, hosts the annual "Lichtfest" (Light Festival) to commemorate the candlelight vigils to protest police violence against pro-democracy demonstrators.

October 3, German Unity Day, is a national holiday to commemorate reunification in 1990.

Apart from the busy October commemorations, cities in Eastern Germany have markers and museums to tell the story of the democracy movement and the history behind it.

In Dresden and Leipzig, markers note where demonstrators gathered in the fall of 1989 and both cities have exhibitions in former offices and prisons of the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi).

Leipzig has a museum on post-war German history that deals with the division, the development of both German states, and the collapse of East Germany.

A museum in Dresden shows an extensive collection of material objects from East Germany that offer a window into everyday life.

In the streets, the remnants of East Germany are easy to spot. A porcelain mural depicting East Germany as a workers' paradise still adorns a long wall of a concert hall in the centre of the city. Large uniform apartment blocks surround historic city centres.

The late 1980s witnessed important

pro-democracy movements: the Philippines in 1986, South Korea in 1987, Poland in 1988.

In 1986, the new leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, had started a series of economic and political reforms. After years of tension, the US and Soviet Union had begun a new era of detente in the mid-1980s. The pro-democracy demonstrations in East Germany occurred in the context of these sweeping changes.

I was living in Seoul, teaching

South Korea began to think about scenarios for Korean reunification. The most common prediction was that North Korea would collapse when Kim Il-sung died. Another common prediction was that economic difficulties would cause an East German-style uprising, leading to the collapse of North Korea.

These predictions were wrong because they viewed the collapse of East Germany from above, but it really happened from below.



Tourists at the truce village of Panmunjom, situated at the military demarcation line separating North and South Korea.

PHOTO: AFP

English at Korea University, when East Germany collapsed.

News cycles were slower before the internet and social media, but the demonstrations in East Germany were big news in South Korea because Germany was a divided nation.

As pro-democracy demonstrations led toward the talk of reunification, commentators in

The pro-democracy movement in East Germany had roots in two social movements that were closely related: a peace movement and an environmental movement.

In the 1980s, East Germany devoted more resources to the military at a time when the economy began to weaken in response to the weakening of the Soviet economy.

Study groups in protestant churches

began advocating peace as a way to overcome militarisation.

East Germany was a very polluted place and it affected the health of people and the quality of life. Concern about the environment created a nascent environmental movement as people complained about the worst effects of pollution.

The peace and environmental movements could not be openly critical of the government, but they think about politics and created the infrastructure for the democracy movement that blossomed once it perceived a weakness in the regime.

The East German situation remains relevant for Korea, despite the failed predictions of the 1990s.

Change in East Germany began as a pro-democracy movement, not a

reunification movement. Talk of reunification became serious only after the collapse of the East German economy.

West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl then saw a chance to negotiate conditions for reunification with the major powers—US, the Soviet Union, France, and the UK—that had defeated Germany in World War II and created the conditions for the division.

Economic issues played an important role in the background, but they were not the spark. Instead, the gap between reality and the regime's official orthodoxy caused it to lose all credibility. When challenged, the regime responded harshly, which inflamed passions and spread resistance.

North Korea probably does not have nascent peace and environmental movements. It has no memory of having been a democratic state and it is far more closed than East Germany. This does not mean, however, that North Koreans do not want freedom and that, even in the subtlest of ways, they do not resist oppression.

They do, and when the gap between reality and official orthodoxy becomes unsustainable, change will come quickly—just as it did in East Germany.

Robert J Fouser, a former associate professor of Korean language education at Seoul National University, is a columnist for The Korea Herald.

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