

US foreign policy and the Bangladesh factor

SOHEL RANA and ALEX INGULSRUD

IN Bangladesh, the US ambassador enjoys a seemingly prophetic status, who with a mere diplomatic statement shakes the hearts of many politicians. While many dismiss the ambassador's statements, others ascribe them considerable merit. One might expect politicians in Bangladesh, a nation with a full grasp of 21st-century information technology and 48 years of experience in diplomatic rhetoric, to be adept solvers of interest equations of different countries or analysts of geopolitical trends. Yet it remains common for leaders of the two largest parties to openly base their hopes and frustrations on the latest comments from the US ambassador in the media.

Often, the disadvantaged party will react in the most alarming way, and in the name of diplomatic solutions start knocking on the doors of diplomats in the naive hope of solving some of Bangladesh's biggest internal crises. All of this begs the question, where does Bangladesh fall in the geopolitical landscape, and how important is Bangladesh to the policies of the US and its allies? Fresh insights to these questions may boost the collective political wisdom of all competing parties.

The foreign policy of the United States under Donald Trump has shifted dramatically from the long-held status quo. Originally an isolationist republic, the US has since established itself as the global hegemon. Critics of traditional US foreign policy, such as Noam Chomsky, argue the US has forcefully established a geopolitical landscape that suits American business interests.

American colonialism evolved from prior European mercantilism into the forced liberalisation of global markets, with a torrid history of guerrilla warfare and support of revolutionaries to depose of implacable governments, all justified under the guise of anti-terrorism. For nearly a century, it's been a reliable axiom that US foreign policy remains consistent, regardless of the elected government. Republicans and Democrats alike are expected to unequivocally support foreign

allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Israel.

The geopolitical landscape has shifted in the past two years of Donald Trump's term. The US president and his highly unsure administrative coterie announced an alternative foreign policy, claiming past foreign policies have portrayed America as "weak and soft." Regarding friends and foes, Trump has stated a belief in "no permanent ally" and "no owes to its current allies," leaving many of its decades-long East Asian allies guessing. Specifically, he stated the US

will not

protect Japan and South Korea forever because the nation can't afford it. This narrowly defined national interest marks a departure from "America first" to "America only". Trump focuses on US short-run financial interests, a narrow perspective devoid of the values like democracy and liberty that America at least purported to treasure in the past.

Trump clearly evaluates foreign affairs in economic terms. Nothing exhibits this more clearly than his beloved trade war. Under President Trump, America has waged economic war to level its trade gap with China to USD 200 billion from the current USD 370 billion. Upon entering office, Trump enacted a 25 percent tariff policy on

how it fits into this renewed "Trump America" especially the US-China trade war? As things currently stand, trade between the US and Bangladesh was a 4.2 billion-dollar surplus in 2017 for Bangladesh, an insignificant amount for the nearly 20 trillion-dollar US economy. The key industry in US-Bangladesh trade relation is ready-made garments (RMG). Bangladesh ranks fifth among the RMG exporters to the US (roughly 5 percent of US apparel import). China is currently the biggest exporter of RMG and Textile to the US supplying 33.7 percent of total US imports.

If the escalating trade war results in tariffs on Chinese apparel, the American economy will need to fill the void, from alternative sources. In this respect, Vietnam, India,

Bangladesh include fighting terrorism and fighting potential global powers. And the war is significantly different across the geography. Trump's protectionist view toward Israel or Taiwan is not at all comparable to what seems to be a drowsy look at South Asia. The version of terror on war in South Asia is complicated because of the region's complicated interest equations.

On the one hand, US is determined to wipe and thwart Islamist terrorism for which the most potential geography could be Pakistan and Afghanistan but, on the other, US has not yet totally come out of its Cold War era affair with Pakistan. Therefore, fighting terrorism with a partner like Pakistan is becoming increasingly hard for the US. The problem is, US has never been in a

democracy, one is the largest and the other is the strongest, according to Modi, can "shrug off" and look forward. Though many seem to be quite a sceptical about such high voltage rhetoric by statesmen, Trump sounded extremely welcoming to that proposition. Trump, recalling his election campaign, said that he had pledged true friendship with India. "I pledged

that if elected, India would have a true friend in the White House." Though Trump believes in no permanent friendship, these dialogues and impending actions of the US like backing India up in its dream to become a security council member may mean a favourable interest equation for Indians in this region.

Therefore, the interest equation of US in the sub-continent is a sum of three factors: i) Continued distance and distrust with Pakistan; ii) A passionate trade and influence war with China; and iii) a firm and unconfused relationship with India.

Where is Bangladesh in this equation? Bangladesh's recent close and equating relationship with India which has its root established during its liberation is a meaningful relationship both countries want to focus on. India would certainly want to continue it and the US under the light of its recent policies will certainly want India to be on their side in its stated war against China and terror. As a result, India's position regarding its closest neighbour Bangladesh will continue to matter to US foreign policy even if it means a sharp divergence from the US foreign policy values like human rights and democratic ideals which according to Trump administration is a distraction from its core ideals of influence and strength in foreign policy.

To conclude: the US is happy to see a stable Bangladesh economy. Regarding terrorism and war on influence, Bangladesh hardly matters to US foreign policy

and the recent geopolitical trend suggests that the Trump administration respects India's say on the matter more than ever.

Within the geopolitics of the US-China trade war, Bangladesh is well positioned to use the "America First" foreign policy to its own benefit. Politicians in Bangladesh should carefully consider what steps might be taken to solidify this advantageous relationship with US trade in this strange time and political landscape in which the US is an unpredictable ally.

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US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl R Miller with Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen.

PHOTO: PID

the USD 34 billion worth of Chinese imports. The figure under tariff is now a staggering USD 250 billion worth of import from China. Many have criticised the president's trade war as reckless and economically short-sighted. Whether the president's trade war is poor "zero-sum" economics or appropriately hard-ball negotiating is the subject of debate. In either case, it's clear the economy will be at the heart of US foreign policy for at least the next two years, while the fight on terrorism as he dispassionately said will "maintain a status quo". No wonder, Donald Trump earned his fame as a businessman!

The US-China trade war represents a drastic shift in US foreign policy and a rare window of opportunity for Bangladesh. The most critical question Bangladesh faces is

Mexico, Bangladesh, and Pakistan all stand to gain from the trade war. As long as Bangladesh supplies price competitive apparel to the US, US foreign policy should consider Bangladesh an ally. This conclusion may seem at odds with Obama's GSP suspension and Trump's continuation of that suspension. But, as rightly pointed out by the commerce minister of Bangladesh, GSP is slowly becoming irrelevant for Bangladesh since Bangladesh is progressing fast to become a middle-income country.

Given the burgeoning economy of Bangladesh and the US tensions with China, there may be an opportunity for Bangladesh to achieve the economic-ally status of Malaysia and Singapore. The only other US foreign policy issues that are pertinent for

comfortable relationship with India either. The United States is an unreliable power, and India is a reluctant partner. Starting from the US support to India's border conflict against China in 1956 to impose sanctions for India's nuclear weapons programme in 1998, the relationship has been a turbulent journey. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the geometric measure of the relationship was a 180 degree where a Cold War orchestra was staged and America's so-called values for human rights were proven hypocritical.

But, since then the relationship dwindled pretty much between good and bad. It is a story of confusion and hesitation which Narendra Modi in his 2016 address in American Congress hoped that both the

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Lessons of East Asia's human-capital development



LEE JONG-WHA

NELSON Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Education does not just enable individuals to improve their lot in life; it enriches an

economy's human capital, which is vital to prosperity and social progress.

Nowhere is the value of human capital to development more apparent than in East Asia. The top four (of 157) spots in the World Bank's recently introduced "Human Capital Index"—a composite measure of survival, learning-adjusted years of schooling, and health—are occupied by East Asian economies: Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong.

The new index estimates that a child born today in Singapore will be 88 percent as productive when she grows up as she could be if she enjoyed complete education and full health. In Sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, a child will be only 40 percent as productive. Globally, 57 percent of all children born today will grow up to be, at best, half as productive as they could be.

Given the effect of human capital on productive and development capacities, developing countries should be placing a high priority—as East Asia's most prosperous economies have—on boosting human capital, as they pursue sustainable and equitable growth. What lessons can East Asia's experience provide?



From the early 1960s to the late 1990s, when many East Asian economies were undergoing rapid industrialisation, the development of a well-educated and skilled labour force, combined with well-directed economic policies, was key to enabling the diversification and upgrading of export industries. In a virtuous cycle, rising incomes and industrial upgrading stimulated continuous investment in education and skills, which contributed to productivity increases, technological progress, and the achievement of equitable growth.

Public policy was central to this success, with East Asian leaders ensuring that economic-development plans and associated measures always accounted for human-capital objectives. In South Korea, each of the five-

year development plans implemented from 1962 to 1996 contained action plans for manpower development, including education and training policies.

Such policies—designed and implemented in close coordination with industrial and trade policies—enabled East Asian countries to meet evolving economic demands in a cost-effective manner as the industrial structure continued to be upgraded. The key was a sequential approach.

Faced with a growing school-age population, weak educational infrastructure, and limited funding, owing to low levels of national income, the East Asian economies could not simply overhaul the entire system at once. So, early in the development process, as governments promoted labour-intensive

industry, they focused on basic education. Later, when governments were promoting heavy manufacturing and technology-intensive industries, they focused on developing upper-secondary and tertiary education, vocational education, and training programmes.

Another component of the East Asian economies' strategies for developing human capital was a gradual shift in focus from quantity to quality. At first, when primary education was the emphasis, policymakers sought to get every child in school, even if it meant accepting lower-quality inputs, such as large class sizes. They then began to invest more in boosting the quality of primary schooling, say, by reducing class size and improving resources, from books to teachers. When the focus shifted to secondary and tertiary education, the same sequence was followed.

Of course, even with this sequential approach, considerable—and expanding—financial resources had to be directed toward education and skill development. From the start, governments allocated large shares of their budgets to these objectives. As national income rose and birth rates dropped, total and per capita educational expenditures increased continuously.

In the earlier stages of human-capital investment in East Asia, countries also relied on foreign aid. External financial and technical assistance was a great help to South Korea and Singapore, for example, as they established their education and training systems.

Later, the private sector played a significant

role in East Asia's educational and skills development, especially at the upper-secondary and tertiary levels. In South Korea, for example, about 60 percent of upper-secondary students were enrolled in private schools in the 1980s. The private sector was also encouraged to provide training: in Singapore, employers contributed to a skills-development fund to promote upskilling and retraining workers.

Learning from these experiences, developing countries today should move to invest a substantial and growing amount of the public budget—augmented by foreign assistance—into education and skills development, while working to attract private investment into higher education and skills training. They should take a more cost-effective sequential approach to upgrading their education and training structures, which complements their stage of development. And they should enshrine human-capital development in policy.

Many developing countries today boast rapidly growing young populations that could be a boon for economic growth and dynamism. But, to meet their potential, these young people need strong educational and employment opportunities. Without deliberate and practical human-capital strategies, that will be virtually impossible to deliver.

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A WORD A DAY



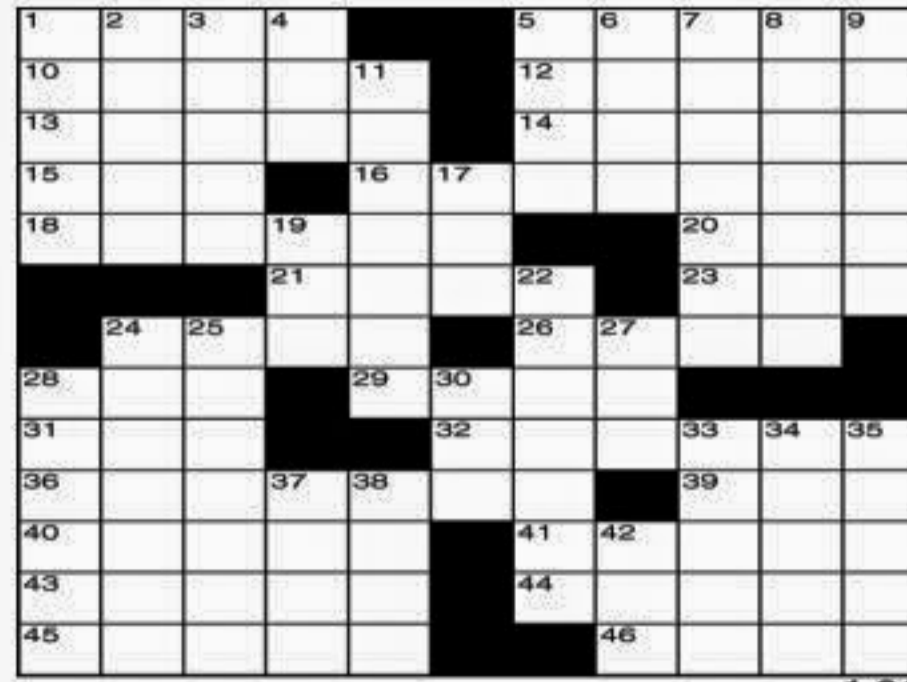
PLENUM

NOUN

An assembly of all the members of a group or committee

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 New York area
 - 5 Elegance
 - 10 Some signs
 - 12 Studio work
 - 13 Floppy top
 - 14 Conjecture
 - 15 Swelled head
 - 16 Plunder
 - 18 Unpredictable
 - 20 Golf need
 - 21 Blunder
 - 23 Related
 - 24 Fibula or femur
 - 26 Vaulted area
 - 28 Puppy sound
 - 29 Identical
 - 31 Cain's mother
 - 32 Western spread
- DOWN**
- 1 Very serious
 - 2 Last Greek letter
 - 3 Wading bird
 - 4 Counting start
 - 5 "Let's go!"
 - 6 Cuts off
 - 7 Flies
 - 8 Heartfelt
 - 9 Harry Potter's position in Quidditch
 - 11 Cox-swain's count
 - 17 French friend
 - 19 Writer Brown
 - 22 Yoga Studio greeting
 - 24 Munich setting
 - 25 Theater event
 - 27 Signing need
 - 28 Seuss title character
 - 30 Radius setting
 - 33 Pursue
 - 34 Swiss cheese feature
 - 35 Milky stones
 - 37 Cook's mint
 - 38 Smell
 - 42 Zodiac animal



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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G	U	T	B	R	A	N	E	W	
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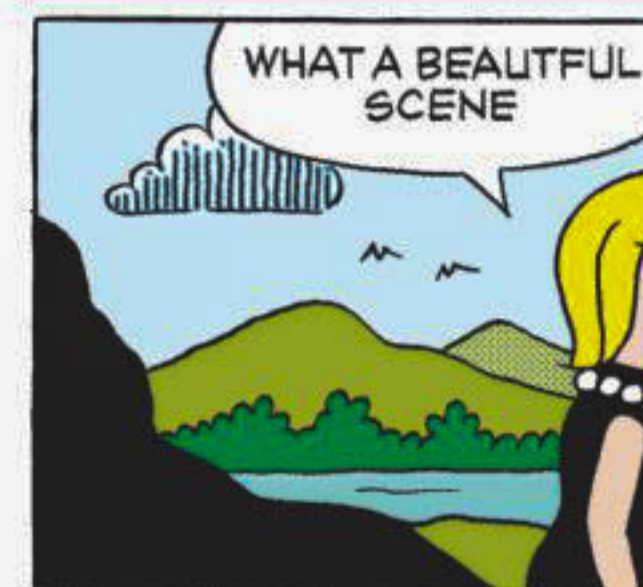
BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES



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