

Strengthening Bangladesh's ties with South Korea

Greater engagement in trade and investment will benefit both

IT is heartening to note that the South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, during the official summit talks with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on July 14, has assured Bangladesh of considering duty-free and quota-free market access for all Bangladeshi products to their market. Since currently the bilateral trade is heavily tilted towards South Korea, if Bangladesh gets duty-free and quota-free market access of its products such as woven garments, pharmaceuticals, knitwear, jute and jute products, leather and leather goods, frozen food and ceramic items to Korean market, this will definitely narrow down the trade imbalance between the two countries. We also welcome the signing of the three instruments during Lee Nak-yeon's visit—on strengthening cooperation in the areas of investment, culture and diplomatic training.

Korea has been a long-time friend and development partner of Bangladesh. Korean companies have substantial investment in our textiles, tanneries and footwear factories in EPZs. Currently, the size of total investment by Korean companies in Bangladesh is USD 1.12 billion and most of them are in the textile and leather sectors. So, there is scope for further investment in other sectors. Bangladesh has huge investment opportunities in the energy, ICT, defence, construction, shipbuilding and energy sectors. It is good to learn that Korea has shown interest in investing in many of these sectors. It has expressed its interest in helping set up 10,000 ICT centres across Bangladesh. Recently, South Korean Super Petrochemical has proposed investments worth USD 2.38 billion in petrochemicals. It is encouraging that the Korean side has earmarked USD 1 billion ODA for Bangladesh for 2020. Such investment plans, if materialised, will definitely strengthen the ties between the two countries.

Besides, as there is an increasing demand for labour in the booming industries in Korea, it could be a potential destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers. Bangladesh should start exploring such opportunities. Moreover, currently many Bangladeshi students are pursuing higher education in Korea. Therefore, Korea should also consider increasing scholarship and career opportunities for the Bangladeshi students. These will further strengthen the fraternal bond between the two countries.

A dramatic World Cup final!

Congratulations to team England

IT was a Super Sunday in England this week with the Cricket World Cup and Wimbledon finals taking place on the same day. Both the finals made for a thrilling watch and went on to make history. The nail-biting World Cup final at Lord's between England and New Zealand led to a first-ever Super Over.

We would like to congratulate England on their magnificent triumph against New Zealand and for clinching their first-ever Cricket World Cup title. Fantastic batting and sheer luck turned things around for England which needed 15 to win in the final over.

It was a heart-breaking loss for New Zealand who fought to the bitter end, only to have the World Cup title slip away from their hands and luck was largely to blame for that. The New Zealand team deserve nothing but praise for the fierceness with which they played in the entire tournament.

The World Cup final has brought to an end the six-week fiesta. Although none of the South Asian teams made it to the final, their dominance in the tournament was visible throughout. Bangladesh did exceptionally well in a few matches, but it is obvious that our expectations were higher. The Bangladesh team could have done much better than finishing eighth in the group standings. It is unfortunate that a top-notch player like Shakib Al Hasan, despite delivering the performance of his life and being in unbelievable form in the World Cup, faced an early exit along with his team and was not awarded the Player of the Tournament award, which has come off as a bit of a disappointment for all Bangladeshis. As the four-year wait begins again, we hope to see better cricket, from South Asian teams, and Bangladesh in particular, in the next World Cup. For that, the management of the Bangladesh cricket team need to set a long-term vision and invest in new talent and proper training.

Bolai, Avatar, and our environment

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

A common scene along the road began to haunt me. Felled trees were stacked up on both sides of the road, to be processed locally or transported to lumber mills on the outskirts of cities. The continuity of the spectacle revealed the enormity of scale in tree cutting. It felt as if a full-scale war on nature—a kind of "ecocide"—was going on.

Unfortunately, this war is raging all over Bangladesh (and in other countries). Every day in newspapers one would find the news of illegal cutting of trees, some are 200 years old, in this district or that district, to clear land for building a regional government office or expanding an existing college. A common news: in the dead of night, the local land mafia cut trees to facilitate some "development."

The road that I travelled on in rural Chattogram appeared to be a micro-theatre of the age of Anthropocene. Anthropocene, derived from *anthropo* for "man," and *cene*, for "new," signifies an age in which the humankind has transformed the geographic DNA of planet Earth by causing mass extinctions of plant and species, altering the atmosphere, and polluting the oceans (plastic?).

In Chattogram it was hard not to be struck by a "Bolai effect." Rabindranath Tagore's character Bolai is a motherless, nature-loving boy who had the habit of staring at trees for hours and speaking to them without uttering a word, or who would flinch at the mere thought of cutting a tree. Back in 1928, Tagore poignantly foreshadowed the environmental crisis that would plague Mother Nature in our fragile delta today.

In Bangladesh, population growth, economic boom, urbanisation, and the need for energy are clearly taking their toll on nature and, in particular, the green coverage of the country. This by no means is Bangladesh's problem alone. Cities, particularly in developing countries, are expanding into farmlands, wetlands, and forests. Every week cities worldwide are taking in 1.4 million new inhabitants. Researchers estimate that global urbanisation typically results in the loss of up to 7.4 million acres of agricultural land each year and tropical deforestation accounts for 17 percent of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions.

At the heart of the environmental debate today is the very idea of development. We need to ask a few broader questions with a view to understanding the environmental

crisis that we face today: what is the environmental cost of development? Given this deltaic country's delicate ecosystem, what would be an optimal intersection between development and environment? Does the ill intention behind indiscriminate tree-cutting, land-grabbing, and river-filling originate from the same crisis of environmental ethics that lay at the centre of profiteering development mentality?

Environmental problems today require a bit of philosophical thinking on how the very notion of nature was framed within western Enlightenment ideals at the beginning of the modern era. The preservationist attitude toward nature that propels contemporary environmental consciousness didn't exist as such 200 years ago. Wilderness was viewed as the terrifying *other* of man and clearing it was considered progress. The English

German philosopher and a member of the Frankfurt School of social research Max Horkheimer wrote: "The disease of reason is that reason was born from man's urge to dominate nature." The rational thinking that justified clearing the forest as human development was increasingly criticised as self-centred, exploitative, and unsympathetic human intervention in nature.

In 1962, Rachel Carson wrote, *Silent Spring* (1962), a book many consider as the harbinger of the modern environmental movement. The book explained how nature was poisoned by synthetic pesticides, especially DDT. Pesticides were used to enhance agricultural production but when they entered the biosphere, they not only exterminated insects, but also compromised the natural food chain to threaten bird and fish populations and

some presumed environmental costs. About two decades ago in Brazil, the Amazon witnessed a dangerous rise in deforestation as a result of the expansion of pasture and soybean croplands in response to international market demand.

The Canadian filmmaker James Cameron's futuristic and environmental-conscious blockbuster, *Avatar* (2009), sought to protest the development-at-any-cost mindset. The film is about the machinations of a greedy corporation from planet Earth, about to steal a rare mineral from a distant planet, found at the centre of a tropical forest, under a gigantic tree, the spiritual home to the planet's native population. Reaching the mineral would require driving away the aboriginal inhabitants by uprooting the symbolic tree they venerate. Although the story is set in a faraway world, *Avatar* made a powerful argument against environmental injustice in our own planet.

In many ways, Tagore's Bolai and Cameron's *Avatar* make the same pro-environment argument—focusing on a symbolic tree—that offers intellectual resistance to predatory capitalism.

Bangladesh's future is urban. Meeting the demands of a burgeoning urban population will drive the rampant appropriation of land for development. In the context of this reality, ultra-protectionist environmental activism would be counterproductive. What the country needs is a new generation of fact-based and science-minded environmental movements. If development is not balanced with data-driven and people-centric environmental policies and regulated in the court of law, the country will continue to lose its agricultural lands, canals, rivers, wetlands, trees, forests, hills, wildlife, ecosystems, deltaic character, environmental DNA, and, ultimately, the very essence of Bengal that inspired Tagore, Jibanananda, Jashimuddin, and many others.

Seeing an indiscriminate culture of tree cutting across the country, I wondered what it would take to bring about changes to the ways we consider and ignore the environment question within development planning. The melancholic story of Bolai seemed like a necessary antidote to the failed culture of environmental protection. Bolai should be a mandatory reading for all age groups, at all levels of education. It should be an essential reading for all officials inside city corporations, municipalities, and environmental agencies. Rajuk officials should memorise it, word for word. Perhaps the "Bolai effect" can humanise our developmental aspirations and sensitise us to the environmental plight that threatens the Bengal delta.

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Logs from felled mahogany trees on Amlahar Degree College ground in Sadar upazila of Panchagarh.

PHOTO: STAR

philosopher John Locke asserted that nature without man is worthless and if any man employs his labour to harvest a piece of land then he should be allowed to own it as his private property. Another English philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill argued that dominating and controlling the "irrational" nature would be the most "rational" enterprise of man.

In the west, the framing of nature as an object of control through property relationship has been the bedrock of the ordering of the natural environment and, ultimately, creating the capitalist world system. Materialistic progress and market economy took precedence over the wellbeing of environment. The anthropocentric doctrines of progress, based on an "exploit the nature" ethos, continued through the mid-20th century.

But many thinkers began to question those notions of progress that hubristically placed humankind at the very centre of the natural world. The

eventually humans. In 1970, eight years after its publication, Americans ranked environmental pollution as the country's most severe problem.

On January 1 of that year, President Richard Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act. The first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970, attracting over 20 million people across America. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations defined "sustainable development" as a "development which meets present needs without compromising the ability of the future generations to achieve their needs and aspirations."

All of these good initiatives of course didn't mean everybody agreed or all environmental movements succeeded. This is because profit-centric market economies continued to view nature as a vast resource that would be harnessed for material growth. For example, if mining coal can generate economic prosperity, then that activity is more important than

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The end of "Chimerica"



MARK LEONARD

THE escalating rivalry between China and the United States is ushering in a bipolar world. While the past few decades have been defined mostly by cooperation among the world's leading powers, the next few will be marked by zero-sum competition. Already, globalisation and the deepening of ties between countries is giving way to what has euphemistically been called "decoupling." Countries and regions are sorting themselves into smaller economic and geopolitical units under the guise of "taking back control."

All of these trends are on display in the fight over the Chinese technology giant Huawei, a multinational company that purchases components from the US, Europe, Brazil, and elsewhere, sells its products in 170 countries, and is leading the expansion of 5G networks in many parts of the world. Until recently, Western businesses welcomed Huawei's low-cost, high-quality products; its presence kept US and European tech firms on their toes.

But now, the Trump administration's ban on sales of key components to Huawei by US firms, and its pressure on US allies to do the same, seems to have triggered a full-scale reversal of globalisation. If Huawei and other Chinese "champions" are to survive, they must end their supply-chain dependency on the US.

Moreover, the Trump administration's warnings about potential Chinese espionage have prompted many American universities to break ties with Chinese companies and educational institutions. US start-ups are refusing, or being blocked from accepting, Chinese investment. Not surprisingly, Huawei reports that its overseas smartphone sales have fallen by 40 percent. It now expects to lose USD 30 billion in revenue over the next two years.

Behind the Sino-American conflict are two aspiring strongmen competing for primacy: US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Each has pursued an agenda of national rejuvenation and fundamentally changed

his country's standing in the world.

Trump believes that the US is suffering relative decline because it benefits less than others from the current global order. Convinced that as China grows stronger, the US necessarily becomes weaker, he has launched a campaign of "creative destruction," undermining institutions such as the World Trade Organization and NATO, and scrapping trade deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The idea is to force individual countries into bilateral renegotiations with the US while it is still in a position to set the terms.

For his part, Xi has radically recast the Chinese political system and put his stamp on economic and foreign

Province, where at least one million Chinese Uighur Muslims are being held in concentration camps. And, beyond China's borders, Xi hopes to use USD 1 trillion in transnational infrastructure investment—his signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—to establish a sphere of Chinese influence stretching across Eurasia, Africa, and the Pacific Rim.

But while Trump and Xi have disrupted the domestic *status quo* in their respective countries, their geostrategic agendas have merely accelerated developments that were already underway. Economically, the global balance of power has long been shifting from Washington to Beijing, making competition inevitable. What has

prefer to remain neutral.

These findings will certainly suit the Chinese. Back in 2003, when the US invaded Iraq, China started looking for diplomatic inroads into Europe. The reason, the influential Chinese academic Yan Xuetong told me, was that, "When we go to war with the USA, we hope Europe will at least stay neutral." It is this little wonder that Xi and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang have been making the rounds in Davos and at the Munich Security Conference, pressing for multilateralism. The hope, clearly, is to drive a wedge between Europe and a US governed by Trump's "America First" administration.

But neutrality is not really an option for Europeans. As the US and China decouple, both sides will ask Europe to pick a side. Moreover, Europeans have begun to take note of the threat posed to their own companies by China's state-capitalist economic model and closed market. A recent European Commission paper refers to China as a "systemic rival" and proposes a new mechanism for screening Chinese investment.

The problem is that while Europe's relations with China are cooling, so, too, have its ties to the US. Europeans want to live in a multilateral world where decisions are guided by rules, and traditional alliances are observed. Trump and Xi want something else entirely.

Fortunately, although European voters have remained passive, the EU and key European governments have been thinking more about European sovereignty. There is a growing realisation that if Europe does not have its own competencies in AI and other technologies, European values will scarcely matter.

The question, then, is how to protect European sovereignty in the face of US secondary sanctions, Chinese investments, and other external sources of coercion. The answer isn't obvious. But if Europe succeeds, it could become a coequal power in a bipolar world, rather than merely a pawn in a game played by Trump and Xi.

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While Trump and Xi have disrupted the domestic status quo in their respective countries, their geostrategic agendas have merely accelerated developments that were already underway.

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policy. Through his Made in China 2025 policy, he hopes to elevate China from a low-tech manufacturing economy to a global leader in cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). His plan seems to involve acquiring western technology and knowhow, and then driving western companies out of the Chinese market.

The technological revolution Xi envisions would consummate China's transformation into a Big-Data dictatorship. The Communist Party of China's power will be secured by a twenty-first-century surveillance state, currently being tested in Xinjiang

changed is that the US-China relationship is no longer a complementary arrangement between developed and developing economies. Now that China and the US are increasingly vying for the same prize, a zero-sum logic of competition has set in—"Chimerica" is no more.

This change has come as a shock to Europeans, who now must worry about becoming roadkill in a Sino-American game of chicken. Recent polling by the European Council on Foreign Relations suggests that most Europeans—including 74 percent of Germans, 70 percent of Swedes, and 64 percent of French—would

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Repercussions of tax on Sanchaypatra

Traditionally, retired service holders as well as people of low and fixed-income group and impoverished groups—especially dependent widows and struggling women in rural areas—buy Sanchaypatra to acquire a stable, dependable running income. Accordingly, reduction in its return and imposing taxes on the Sanchaypatra renders a direct decline in the income of these groups of people.

In the 2015-16 budget, the interest rate on all types of Sanchaypatra was reduced from 12-13 percent to 10-11 percent (rounded) and remained as such until June 2019. During this period, salaries and wages in all service sectors went up by at least 25-30 percent—including by a higher amount in the government sector. Come this budget, imposition of an additional 5 percent tax essentially discourages rush for buying saving certificates, which will in turn inculcate financial misery for dependent families and individuals. Senior Awami League leader, Matia Chowdhury—also presidium member of the party—had raised the point at length at the Parliamentary debate, but her decries seem to have turned deaf ears. Regardless, the appeal to immediately withdraw the tax on Sanchaypatra through a special ruling should be treated with utmost priority, to help save needy individuals who are facing the repercussions of this inconsiderate taxation.

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