

Bangladesh-India ties are not a zero-sum game

MOHAMMAD A ARAFAT

It all began with an op-ed that Shyamal Dutta, the editor of the *Bhorer Kagoj*, wrote on the front page of the Dhaka-based newspaper. The blistering intro narrated the genocidal events that took place in what was East Pakistan in 1971 in the hands of the Pakistani military. It went on to remind readers that successive Pakistani leaders failed to apologise for those atrocities committed by their predecessors.

The article would have been just fine as a lesson on history. Instead, Shyamal Dutta invoked all these painful memories because Pakistan's current leader, Imran Khan—who he mistakenly called the nephew of General AAK Niazi, the man responsible for the carnage in 1971—spoke to Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for about 15 minutes.

A mere phone call, the article suggested, represents a major shift in tone vis-a-vis Bangladesh's stalled relations with Pakistan—that too, at the expense of Dhaka's historical relations with India.

The call was initiated by the Pakistani side, and it would have been discourteous of Bangladesh if it declined a call from a foreign head of government. "After all," Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Abdul Momen has said, "we live in the same world."

Thorny matters such as the Kashmir issue were raised by the Pakistani premier, to which the Bangladeshi prime minister reiterated the country's position that it was India's internal matter—an act publicly appreciated by India's high-level officials. In fact, Bangladesh did not take cognisance of the standing of Pakistan regarding these issues, as evident by the statement put out by Bangladesh which only mentioned discussions related to Covid-19.

For all its explosive claims, Shyamal Dutta's article did not garner much attention at the initial stage and it would have perhaps remained so only if it had not been for *The Hindu*, the influential Indian newspaper which picked up the

story with grave urgency.

The Hindu avoided Dutta's emotional remembrance of atrocities committed in the war and instead focused solely on some of the piece's most incendiary claims, such as priority towards Chinese projects in Bangladesh and disregard for Indian ones. The title of the report was equally suggestive: "Bangladesh's PM Sheikh Hasina did not meet the Indian envoy, despite requests."

That a foreign envoy did not have a meeting with a country's prime minister

the world and completely altered the way people talk, meet and communicate with each other. Yet, the paper failed to consider the possibility that the outbreak might have been a key factor in why the meeting did not materialise.

What's more, the report left out the fact that PM Sheikh Hasina has not met any other foreign envoys since the outbreak began four to five months ago. In fact, in a subsequent report, *The Hindu* itself cited "diplomatic sources in Dhaka" who said any planned meetings

the narrative, the last four months saw some key progress in bilateral relations between the two countries. On July 21, the first Indian commercial vessels reached Chattogram port, from where goods were quickly transported to the north-eastern part of India. The transit, which saves huge amounts of money and time, has fulfilled a key and longstanding Indian demand, despite the expensive political prices involved for Dhaka.

In recent months, two countries reached commercial deals such as the

issues dating back a very long time. Even sensitive maritime boundary issues have been resolved in an amicable and exemplary manner. These achievements should be celebrated as a victory of peaceful diplomacy in a world beset by a myriad of land and maritime disputes, not least the South China Sea crisis.

There is no denying that Bangladesh has appreciated Chinese investment proposals, including in major infrastructure projects. But PM Sheikh Hasina's government has made it very clear that it intends to strike a delicate balance when it comes to its relations between China and India. It is in line with the policy that the country continues to maintain its relations with two major Asian powers.

Although Indian policymakers understand Bangladesh's positions, certain members of the Indian media are more than eager to paint a picture of fraying proximity between the two neighbours. Especially in the wake of the Galwan standoff, some media outlets are trying to cash in on the increased sensitivity among the local population regarding anything remotely related to China. Let us also remember how *Ananda Bazar*, the prominent Indian Bangla daily, disparagingly described Bangladesh taking Chinese "charity" in a story, which was later retracted due to intense public pressure coming from social media.

Amid the hostile treatment from certain sections of the Indian media, the leadership of both countries have opted for continuous harmony. On July 27, at a virtual meeting, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Abdul Momen termed the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh as "rock solid." His Indian counterpart, J S Jaishankar, was equally effusive, "very few countries in the world share such close fraternal ties as ours." If anything, this affirmation should quell the confusion spiced up by the click-hungry media.

Mohammad A Arafat is a professor of management at the Canadian University Bangladesh and chairperson of Suchinta Foundation.



Indian PM Narendra Modi, Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina and Pakistan PM Imran Khan.

in four months is not earth-shattering news anyway. But, against the backdrop of the phone call between Sheikh Hasina and Imran Khan, suddenly it became a big deal.

There was only one problem, though. The source of the news was not Shyamal Dutta himself. In the original Bangla article, he referred to "the Indian media" when he claimed Riva Ganguli Das, the outgoing Indian high commissioner to Dhaka, was reportedly not given access to PM Sheikh Hasina in the last four months despite multiple requests.

Even then, *The Hindu* did not only omit Dutta's attribution to "the Indian media" but also failed to take into account a key factor: the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives around

could not take place due to the threat of coronavirus.

To put the final nail in the coffin, a highly placed source in the High Commission of India in Dhaka disputed the very premise of the story: the high commissioner did not even seek any appointment with PM Sheikh Hasina in the last four months whatsoever.

Nonetheless, the story was picked up by other regional outlets including *Dawn* and *Asia Times*. It will go down as an international example of uncritical reporting influenced by preconceived bias, not to mention the poor attribution practices.

Not just this particular aspect of the story; the entire notion that Bangladesh is shifting away from India, bit by bit, is grossly exaggerated. In fact, contrary to

acquisition of Beximco LPG, one of Bangladesh's largest liquid petroleum gas provider, by India's state-owned Indian Oil Corporation. During the pandemic, India has also shown several instances of goodwill gestures to Bangladesh.

Most importantly, the two countries share a relationship that is not based on a zero-sum game. By the same token, Bangladesh's relations with India should not be measured by its relations with other countries and vice versa. In fact, the ties are so powerful that even the realpolitik issues—which would have been the thorniest had it been between countries with normal ties—have been peacefully resolved by the two countries.

For two nations sharing the longest boundary in the world, Bangladesh and India have resolved land boundary

Revitalising these four areas will help developing Asia cope with the new normal



SHIXIN CHEN

despair to countless families and caused unprecedented economic damage. The response has been significant: governments halted global travel, imposed nationwide lockdowns, quarantined large swaths of the population and scaled up medical care services. Governments have also funded the development and production of testing technology, in addition to the ongoing search for a vaccine.

Yet, it is widely accepted that even when a vaccine is ready and effective, the virus is likely to persist given challenges associated with universal vaccination. The highly contagious nature of the virus means that where there are resurgences in cases, areas that had reopened will need to reimpose restrictions. This is the pattern that we are seeing playing out in several countries including Kazakhstan, India and Pakistan, the People's Republic of China, and most recently Viet Nam.

So, we must learn to live with the virus. In this uncertain "new normal", the prospects for rapid economic recovery are limited. A return to business as usual looks unlikely, too, and may not

fully restore the economy. Focusing on high-impact segments of the economy is therefore an efficient approach to reaching a new normal.

Revitalising four key areas can help developing Asia cope with the new normal and find a path to economic recovery.

First, revitalise the health sector. Due to the lack of long overdue investment, there is a significant gap not only in hospital infrastructure, but also at the primary care level, including human resources necessary to staff effective health systems. In response to the pandemic, developing Asia has made record investments in strengthening the health sector. For example, the Indian government in April sanctioned approximately USD 1.9 billion to address the immediate gaps in strengthening the Covid-19 response by scaling up delivery of services. This was followed by the recent announcement of a major programme to comprehensively strengthen the public health system. Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have adopted similar approaches in their pandemic response plans. There is also a sizeable gap in health-related sectors such as pharmaceuticals and health insurance. Current levels of investment are insufficient to achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC); however, countries have committed to achieving UHC by 2030. The health sector has huge growth potential.

Second, revitalise the social protection

sector, which remains fragile and underfunded in developing Asia. In response to Covid-19, great efforts have been made to ensure that affected populations are covered by social safety nets. For example, in India, the government announced a scheme to provide free food to 800 million people until November 2020, as well as direct cash transfers and free cooking gas to women, old and socially disadvantaged groups. The Pakistani government has allocated USD 1.2 billion for emergency cash transfer payments to 16.9 million poor households, including daily wage workers. In Nepal, over one million poor families have been assisted by similar programmes. In Uzbekistan, more than USD 70 million has been allocated to expand the social safety net for the poor and vulnerable. Yet, social protection schemes require long-term efforts to develop, including establishing disaggregated databases, registration and monitoring systems, and strong budget support. The development of the social security sector will help promote economic inclusion and sustainable growth.

Third, revitalise digital technology. The pandemic is transforming people's behaviour and social norms. Working from home has completely changed people's mindset. Web-based collaboration and sharing platforms have been widely recognised for their effectiveness in facilitating remote collaboration and co-working, while webinars are successfully replacing

physical seminars. More importantly, digital technology has been widely and effectively used to promote trade and tourism, support small and medium-sized enterprises and boost microfinance. It is being used increasingly in government, procurement, and education. Strategically developing digital technology will have a huge impact on the quality of growth.

Fourth, revitalise the global supply chain. During the great lockdown, the global supply chain virtually came to a standstill, resulting in incalculable job losses and economic damage around the world. For example, Bangladesh's exports of apparel products were affected due to cancellation or suspension of orders, while international contracting projects in Pakistan, Nepal, Uzbekistan and Georgia were largely suspended due to the interruption of raw materials supply. The pandemic has highlighted the need for urgent reform of the global supply chain. We must pursue high-level multimodal transport, more effective trade facilitation, and stronger trade and supply chain financing mechanisms. In addition, further enhancing the international network of global supply chains will help to ensure that goods continue to flow in the face of disruptions. The global supply chain is the main artery of the world economy and its smooth flow is the basis of economic recovery.

Developing Asia has experienced many crises and disasters and has always bounced back. Following the

Asian financial crisis, which severely hit the banking sector, the region adopted painful but necessary regulatory reforms of its systemically important financial institutions. These reforms introduced vital resilience into the Asian banking



PHOTO: COLLECTED

system, enabling it to survive the global financial crisis a decade later. The Covid-19 pandemic should give us similar inspiration—the more severe the crisis, the greater the chances for reform and revitalisation.

As we confront the new normal, a return to business as usual looks unlikely and may not fully restore the economy. Instead, a unique revitalisation in these areas can offset losses and help realise developing Asia's potential.

Shixin Chen is Vice-President (Operations 1) at the Asian Development Bank.

QUOTABLE Quote



JAMES BALDWIN (1924-1987)

American essayist, novelist, and playwright.

There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Hunt
- 7 Pulsate
- 11 Gazelle's cousin
- 12 Take apart
- 13 Orders to set aside
- 15 Old car starter
- 16 Enjoy the tub
- 18 Long sandwiches
- 21 Influence
- 22 Train stops
- 24 Throw in
- 25 Model buy
- 26 Sticky stuff
- 27 Applied with a trowel
- 29 Phoenix team
- 30 Close by
- 31 Church area

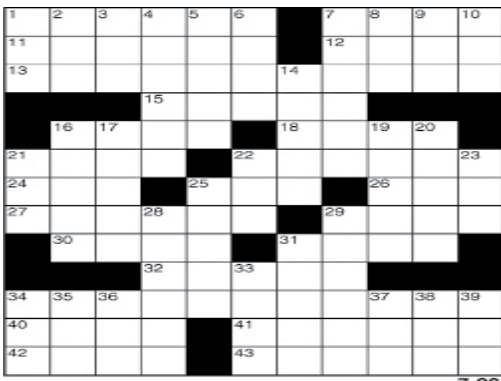
- 32 Kaaba setting
- 34 Injures, informally
- 40 "Got it"
- 41 Clothing
- 42 Banana leftover
- 43 Service for a social

DOWN

- 1 Tentative taste
- 2 Aussie bird
- 3 Fitting
- 4 Knave
- 5 Lewis's partner
- 6 "Very funny!"
- 7 Build body mass
- 8 Finish
- 9 Commotion
- 10 Great weight
- 14 Beginning

- 16 African nation
- 17 Nostalgic song
- 19 Fake
- 20 Go piece
- 21 Buddy
- 22 Racket
- 23 Sinking signal
- 25 Asian nation
- 28 Maiden

- 29 Rival of Athens
- 31 Not obtuse
- 33 Casual talk
- 34 Card spot
- 35 Take advantage of
- 36 Golf need
- 37 "My country – of thee"
- 38 Mine material
- 39 Badminton need

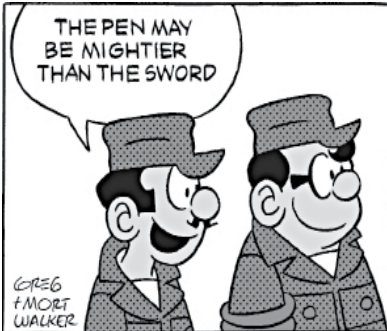


YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.