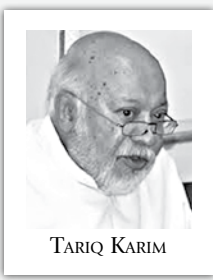


Bangabandhu's foreign policy legacy

The foundations for our state consolidation and development amidst global challenges



TARIQ KARIM

Bangabandhu 46 years ago—a heinous act designed to erase all that he stood for. It would, therefore, behoove us all to look around us today and take stock of the world we live in and the challenges we as a nation face.

Bangladesh's birth in 1971 was midwifed by the Cold War that had divided the world into two ideologically opposed camps and wet-nursed our early politics. Fifty years later today, the wheels of history have turned full circle and the world is once again in the grip of another cold war brewing, with somewhat different configuration.

For Bangabandhu, setting the parameters of the new state's foreign policy was a *sine qua non* for developing national resilience for his people's prosperity and the state's survival. Its essential moorings were: seeking better relations with all neighbours in our immediate region, the larger Asian region and the world at large, on the basis of respect for each other's sovereign independence, territorial integrity, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs; a deep and abiding commitment to "non-alignment, based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and friendship to all"; avoiding being caught in the jaws of competing regional or global powers; as one of the world's largest Muslim countries, fostering close relations with the OIC and all other Muslim countries; supporting the right of self-determination of all struggling people, everywhere; an abiding commitment to ensuring universal peace based upon justice for all peoples; and combating "the scourges of poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and unemployment", which required our proactive membership in all international fora, particularly the United Nations and all its specialised agencies, and the Commonwealth.

What are the challenges that threaten us or are likely to impact on us as a nation today and how should we cope with them?

Standing at the heart of Bangladesh, a panoramic view reveals conflict still raging between nations. On our west, in our immediate neighbourhood in India, we are witnessing an internal churning that appears as resurrection of the toxic narrative of the thirties that will not leave any neighbour untouched; the "cold-hot" conflict between India and Pakistan is more exacerbated than it was at the time of our independence; Afghanistan is in flames, with the Taliban's return to power imminent. Panning further west, one sees horrendous effects on a multitude of innocents caused by the continuing

hostility between the states that control the heartland of fossil fuel reserves of the world in the Persian Gulf, with continuing war "fought-at-distance" between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen showing no sign of abatement. An extension of this struggle magnifies and becomes more intangibly complex even further west, in what is known historically as the Levant.

Swivelling our gaze to our east, we see Myanmar in the throes of imminent

in the world. Like then, our foreign policy must continue, first and foremost, to remain committed to preserving, protecting, projecting, and promoting our national interests. At the same time, it must, realistically and pragmatically, accept that we cannot develop, nor our people attain their dream cocooned in isolation from our immediate neighbours, our larger region, and the world. We need positive engagement with all, to continue to develop

peace through our very active membership in the United Nations, its many specialised agencies, and particularly most commendably, with its global peacekeeping role. We must continue and further build upon this.

We must continue our proactive and energetic engagement with international fora, like the Commonwealth and NAM.

Being among the four largest Muslim-majority countries in the world, we must remain an active and engaged member of the OIC and with the larger Muslim "Ummah", not taking side with any one or group of fellow Muslim state against another brotherly Muslim state or states. Our value will lie in our advocacy and practice of moderation, tolerance and abjuring any self-righteousness. Our participation in the recent inauguration ceremony of Iran's newly elected president was the right thing to do.

Located at the apex of the Bay of Bengal, that is the middle Bay of the strategically contested Indian Ocean, we are now positioned to act as a vitally important hub of multi-modal connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceanic regions. We must consolidate this.

Vulnerable as we are to the devastatingly deleterious consequences of global warming and climate change that threaten us existentially by upending the ecological balance of the region, we have taken on, and must sustain, a leadership role in all environment-related dialogues and initiatives. We should champion the idea of a larger Bay of Bengal regional cooperation

framework that would encourage all Bay countries, littoral or adjacent with interest, to collaborate and devise a governance structure for this existentially important Commons.

All our foreign policy messages must continue to rebroadcast Bangabandhu's universal message of peace with justice and equity for all that he resonantly called for in his address to the United Nations in October 1974. In this context, I note with great interest and wholeheartedly commend our prime minister's initiative to hold the World Peace Conference in December this year. We must prepare well for hosting and guiding this event in these very troubled times.

I see this as an opportunity once again to reiterate to the world the essential tenets we believe the world should be guided by in international relations. Following our assuming the Chair of IORA later this year, we should use the platform of the World Peace Conference to reiterate Bangabandhu's clarion call for an Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. As a first step, let us take the initiative for ensuring that our own Bay of Bengal becomes a zone of peace, friendship, neutrality and tranquillity, free from disputes, with open passage for all peaceful maritime access, for sustainable conservation of its integrated ecosphere and managed harvesting of its blue water resources, facilitating connectivity between peoples east and west for comprehensive growth, development, and self-fulfilment.

Our foreign policy must continue to ensure our ability to achieve and project national resilience. Our demonstrated economic development must be underpinned by securing healthcare of our human capital. Without ensuring that, our infrastructure development will be meaningless. The current Covid pandemic has dealt a grievous blow to our immediate and long term economic growth ambitions. This virus has demonstrated totally unanticipated sentience qualities, mutating into more deadlier variants faster than human adaptability to subdue it. The only way out is to vaccinate at least 80 percent of not only our national population, but more importantly, of the global population. Vaccine production and development is controlled by a few governments and mega MNCs, who are practicing what is essentially "vaccine colonialism". This must be broken. We should strive to add vaccine manufacturing to our industrial mix, because this is the next growth industry.

If August 15, 1975 was the day when the "empire struck back" to roll back our Liberation War history and negate Bangabandhu's legacy, let us transform this day of mourning into a day for rededicating ourselves to his ideals and visions, strengthening and building further on the foundational moorings he left to us as his legacy.

Tariq Karim is a retired Ambassador of Bangladesh. At present, he is Director of the Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies at the Independent University, Bangladesh.



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implosion and possible state failure, likely to be followed by the probable explosion of multiple cluster bombs that will not leave unscathed any of its neighbouring states, including seemingly stable ASEAN. This explosive mix, exacerbated by fiercely contested disputes over waters of the strategic South China Sea, could be triggered by any spark to explode with dangerous consequences for all.

Overarching all these various conflicts or near conflicts within a "neo-Cold War paradigm", are two narratives: those of the US-led Indo-Pacific and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), both seeking to define a new world order, both set to robustly compete and contest in our home waters, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.

Surreally, my panoramic 360-degree gaze reasserts the truism uttered by Faulkner so presciently: "the past is never dead. It is not even past". A full 50 years later, we appear to be back in seemingly the same regional and global stage, only this time, perhaps more dangerous. It is rendered more complicated by the "Global War" being waged—without exception on us all—by the Covid-19 pandemic, with existential consequences.

Our salvation lies in the tools and principles given by our Founding Father that enabled us to pull ourselves up and out of the earlier morass, to today transforming into one of the fastest growing economies

and grow.

We must adhere, without wavering, to the bedrock principle of "friendship to all with malice towards none". We must not align ourselves with anyone, against anyone. On the contrary, all current conditions demand that we do, in geo-strategic and geo-political terms, become the "Switzerland of the East".

In that context, while we should continue taking part in the economic and human development strands of the two competing narratives, the Indo-Pacific vision and the BRI, we must eschew any association with any hidden strategic or defence-oriented agenda that may be imbedded within them.

We must continue building further upon the excellent all-round relations that we have developed with both India and China, each in its own parallel track. Our engine of growth needs both these tracks to roll forward on. We must at the same time synergise these relations to strengthening, and expanding, the still fledgling sub-regional and regional cooperation agenda.

This is Asia's century. The focus and attention of our diplomacy in the 21st century must qualitatively and vigorously shift eastward to Southeast and East Asia. We must revitalise our ancient ties with their peoples.

We have always demonstrated our total and unequivocal commitment to world

Our salvation lies in the tools and principles given by our Founding Father that enabled us to pull ourselves up and out of the earlier morass, to today transforming into one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Like then, our foreign policy must continue, first and foremost, to remain committed to preserving, protecting, projecting, and promoting our national interests.

A FOND TRIBUTE TO BANGABANDHU'S HUMANISM

A pluralism that transcended the sectarian divide



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

"Muslmane bole go Allah, Hindu bole Hari
Nidankale jabe re bhai eki
pothe choli"
(Muslims say Allah, Hindus say Hari
In the end, we all travel the same path.)
— Bengali folk song

BANGABANDHU Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is rightly celebrated for leading the people of Bangladesh to independence after a prolonged, decades-long struggle that required acute political acumen, a remarkable capacity to win the hearts of his people, and most important of all, that rare sort of courage that had the power to stare squarely into the eyes of death.

There is no gainsaying the fact that he had it all.

However, for me, there is something very special about Bangabandhu that singles him out among the world's statesmen who have led their people to freedom.

It is his transcendent humanism that makes Bangabandhu so exemplary and relevant in this fraught contemporary age.

It is our ill fate to live in an age of vicious sectarian schisms. We live today in a world where a rogues' gallery of unscrupulous political hucksters are exploiting hatred. Many parts of the world are plagued by a majoritarianism driven by a fearsome prejudice of a privileged majority. It is all the more dangerous because it is powered by a malice spurred by an erroneous sense of victimhood by the majority/powerful who cast a jaundiced eye at minorities.

In our subcontinent, Hindu-Muslim antagonism has bedevilled our polity for a long time. One of its terrible manifestations was the bloody partition of India in 1947. It is a bitter irony of partition that the biggest claim of its supporters also proved to be one of the most hollow. Instead of resolving the problems of minorities, Pakistan, the safe haven for aggrieved Muslims in India, compounded it. Now you had two nations whose minorities felt insecure—Muslims in India and Hindus in Pakistan—and the enmity between the two nations exacerbated that insecurity.

From 1947 to 1971, as the Bengalis of

erstwhile East Pakistan fashioned a new identity, sectarian prejudice (read anti-Hindu prejudice in East Bengal) was a potent tool used by the Pakistanis and their Bengali sympathisers who tried to nip a growing humane, inclusive Bengali consciousness.

It had a seductive appeal. The nascent Bengali community of East Bengal, predominantly Muslim, was susceptible to prejudice. Painful memories of socio-economic oppression by

remained steadfast in a Bengali identity that was open to all, regardless of faith, which embraced an ethos that celebrated Rabindranath and Nazrul in equal measure.

How different he is from many of today's political movers and shakers! I sometimes wonder which is worse, the outright political rogues who shamelessly exploit bigotry, or the more mainstream politicians who know better but nonetheless play footsie with prejudice out



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Bangabandhu's pluralism was more deeply rooted in the heart of Bangladesh, its rural hinterland.

the Hindu elite in the pre-partition era were deliberately stoked to incite it.

Thank goodness, the people of East Bengal balked. The Awami Muslim League dropped the "Muslim" from its name in the 1950s. And nowhere was this refusal to bow to sectarian prejudice better epitomised than in Bangabandhu's wondrously unshakeable commitment to pluralism throughout his entire career.

Bangabandhu and the Awami League

of political expediency.

After the creation of East Pakistan, a secular Bengali consciousness blossomed among the predominantly Muslim Bengalis of erstwhile East Pakistan.

It had two separate roots. One was more intellectual. I would argue that the nascent Bengali intelligentsia shaped by the University of Dhaka played a pivotal role in developing a rationalist, humane identity that was linguistic

and cultural, rather than religious.

Bangabandhu's pluralism was more deeply rooted in the heart of Bangladesh, its rural hinterland. It came from the more traditional syncretic traditions of rural Muslims and Hindus, informed by values that embraced a humanist interpretation of religion that shirked orthodoxy. Bangabandhu's secular, humane values, I would argue, did not spring from the intellect, but from the heart. That is the reason it struck such a deep chord with Bangladeshis from all walks of life. This is the humanism that is not from the academe but from grassroots spiritual humanist traditions. It is a humanism that draws its inspiration from the likes of Lalon Fakir, Hason Raja and Shah Abdul Karim.

I think we often err when we infer that orthodoxy and intolerance are the handmaidens of deep faith. Bangabandhu and Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah present a telling corrective. Jinnah drank whisky, loved his ham sandwiches and married a Parsi woman. He had the lifestyle of a *pukkah* Sahib. Yet his political credo centred around the dubious but implacable contention that Hindus and Muslims were two different nations. Bangabandhu was a practicing Muslim, yet he believed in a Bengali identity that warmly welcomed people of all faiths.

The true test of a statesman is not a professed commitment to an inclusive, plural identity that embraces people of diverse faiths, but his ability to stand steadfast even at the risk of losing political capital when battling the siren call of opponents who are happy to exploit sectarian prejudice.

Bangabandhu, let it be said, passed that test with flying colours.

And what of us, heirs to his glorious legacy? I do not think we can say in all honesty that we have done a satisfactory job of upholding Bangabandhu's humanism. Occasional outbursts in social media reveal the dark underbelly of our society. The flurry of outrageous bigoted remarks against cricketer Liton Das and actor Chanchal Chowdhury in the recent past, for example, are a stark reminder that the Sisyphian struggle to establish plural, humanist and inclusive values is still a work in progress.

Ashfaque Swapan is an Atlanta-based writer. "Mujib Hatya Chakranta", his Bangla translation of Lawrence Lipschitz and Kai Bird's investigative report on the murder of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is available on Kindle.

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