

Bangladesh's geopolitical position provides for unique opportunities



ZILLUR RAHMAN

BORN during the height of the Cold War, Bangladesh is a nation state that is uniquely embroiled in the machinations of geopolitics. There seems to have never been a point of time where Bangladesh hasn't been caught between the rivalries of powerful states—whether it be the rivalry between India and Pakistan, the Cold War rivalry between the US and the former Soviet Union, and now the rivalry between China and the Western world.

However, the Bangladesh of today is a different state from the one that was so violently birthed in 1971. Once branded as a "bottomless basket," Bangladesh is now hailed as a "South Asian miracle." While economic growth comes with its own challenges—particularly in relation to the huge wealth inequality—the country's general economic development remains positive. Fifty years after its independence, the country is firmly graduating from the category of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), and is projected to become one of the 25 largest economies in the world by 2035. As its economy booms and the balance

is a natural link between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Therefore, any regional coordination between the giant trade blocs of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) has to include Bangladesh. The country is also a vital geopolitical ally to India, in that it has the potential to facilitate greater integration between Northeast India and Central India.

Bangladesh is uniquely suited in this regard to play a vital role in furthering regional integration, and allowing all neighbouring regions to prosper together.

It is also due to this unique geography that Bangladesh is being approached by China. Bangladesh is a prime candidate to partner with China in the hypothesised "String of Pearls" strategy and the formation of the "Maritime Silk Road." China's Western rivals, along with India, are quite aware of this possibility, and have already initiated steps towards building greater ties with Bangladesh. It is also this possibility that has changed Bangladesh's status from decades of geopolitical irrelevance to a key player in shaping the future of Asia. However, to maintain this geopolitical value, Bangladesh needs to play an intricate, diplomatic balancing act. It needs to maintain favourable and balanced

diplomacy" to gain the trust of its allies. Part of this policy was to send vaccines to Bangladesh as a top priority. However, when the second wave of Covid hit India, they decided to defer the supply. Seeing this sudden pause by the Indian government, China became preferential in delivering vaccine doses to Bangladesh. A significant amount of the delivered vaccine doses were gifts, while the rest were commercial

not consider Bangladesh an actor in enforcing Western dominance in the Indian Ocean. This is both good and bad—bad in the sense that this indicates the US tendency to look at Bangladesh from the Indian perspective, and good because the US attitude has allowed Bangladesh to look to China to update its naval capacity. The ongoing arms race between the navies of Myanmar and Bangladesh

socioeconomic progress. This refugee crisis needs to be solved post-haste. The recent military coup in Myanmar and the assassination of Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah make the situation more complicated. It is high time for Bangladesh to tighten its relationship with the Western states and urge proactive initiatives in the negotiation process for Rohingya repatriation.

Bangladesh maintains a historical relationship with the UK as a Commonwealth nation. Since independence, the UK has been a significant development partner of Bangladesh. The UK appeared to be one of the major countries that condemned the Rohingya genocide and continued with its Myanmar sanctions. Bangladesh will require solid political support from the UK to take the Rohingya issue to the international arena.

The European Union (EU) is Bangladesh's largest trade partner. The EU's aid to Bangladesh also accounts for 40 percent of the total aid that the country receives from the rest of the world. Although the EU-Bangladesh relationship seems aid-centric, there are other areas to work on to realise this relationship's full potential. Since the Biden administration took office, the US' position in Europe has changed. Most recently, the introduction of AUKUS has created havoc in the region. In addition, the Angela Merkel era has come to a close. The introduction of new leadership in Germany will undoubtedly reshape the political stance of the EU in the world order. Geopolitical shifts such as these might give Bangladesh a chance to work closely with the EU in the new format.

The three thematic areas where Bangladesh might approach the EU could be: a) Seeking support for a sustainable Rohingya repatriation; b) Access to Covid-19 vaccines; and c) Managing GSP+ status to enjoy zero duties on export products.

Bangladesh has so far been practising a balanced foreign policy strategy. It must maintain a middle-ground approach instead of leaning towards anyone too much. Tectonic shifts in geopolitics are happening even as you read this. Every day comes with new opportunities, while every year comes with new challenges. By analysing the present geostrategic reality, Bangladesh needs to find justification for its current status in the global political realm. Exploring new opportunities in this new geopolitical pendulum is crucial to surviving the challenges that lie ahead.

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of world power moves eastward, our role on the world stage becomes more and more prominent every day.

The key factor in Bangladesh's geopolitical play is its geography. The country shares land borders with Myanmar and India. Towards the sea, Bangladesh maintains three—Chittagong, Mongla and Payra—out of the 12 ports in the Bay of Bengal. India, an economically emerging state, spans three sides of the border with Bangladesh, and now more than ever, has a keen eye for Bangladesh's strategies and policies. Due to its geographical position, Bangladesh

bilateral relations between two major parties—one being China, and the other being the Quad nations, namely India, Japan, Australia, and the US.

The diplomatic ties between Bangladesh and India are historical. Since the Awami League came to power in 2009, bilateral relations have peaked between the two countries. But some unsettled issues still remain, such as water disputes, border killings, religious tension, and maritime border disputes. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen high-level talks between the top leaders of the two countries. India has played "vaccine

The unpredictable foreign policy of Donald Trump created a vacuum in the relationship between Bangladesh and the US. During the Trump era, the presence of the US in the South Asian region was not sufficiently visible.

However, the Biden administration already appears to have been re-arranging and re-engaging with the Asian nations to uphold their influence in the Asia Pacific region. In such circumstances, it would be imperative for Bangladesh to observe the US motive, and avail any opportunity of enhancing diplomatic ties and acquiring a more active role in the Indo-Pacific theatre. Currently, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) does

will prove crucial in maintaining regional stability in the days to come, and both India and China stand to profit greatly from the sales. It should be noted that even though Bangladesh has bought submarines from China, it is also actively participating in joint naval exercises with India—just another example of the diplomatic balancing act in play.

Another major diplomatic hurdle for Bangladesh is the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis. The country currently hosts more than a million displaced Rohingyas from neighbouring Myanmar. Since the inception of the crisis, efforts made by the Bangladesh government for Rohingya repatriation have been inadequate. Decisive diplomatic actions must be there to accelerate the repatriation process. The willingness of the Myanmar government to provide repatriation seems uncertain, while the United Nations and other international humanitarian agencies don't appear to be proactive enough. Although some Western countries have been delivering relief funds, this can't be a permanent solution. Due to the pandemic, Bangladesh has already fallen behind in terms of its

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

What future do we have to offer our youth?



DEBRA EFROYMSON

In the past few generations, the world has changed extremely rapidly—and it is likely to continue to do so.



It is our responsibility to equip our youth with proper tools to face the challenges waiting for them in an increasingly difficult world.

PHOTO: RANAK MARTIN

been told: plant a few trees, throw your rubbish in the garbage bin, perhaps eventually switch to cleaner energy, and all will be well.

Not to be a doomsayer—and I am no expert on issues such as the threat of artificial intelligence to humanity—but all is not going to be well if we continue blindly on this consumption-oriented path. Youth have the right to know that the destruction we have wreaked on our planet is serious, and not something that's just going to go away with a few minor technical fixes. They should be angry at the situation they have inherited and the expectation that they will learn to cope or be clever enough to fix it—despite being given almost none of the tools that they need to do either.

May I gently suggest that we all take a few moments to reflect on these issues? What kind of a world

It would be wise to consider how well we are preparing our youth to face these threats and challenges. From what I know of the Bangladeshi educational system, I would say, not very well. In a rapidly changing, dynamic world, it is crucial to have the ability to think on one's feet, to respond with flexibility and creativity to new situations, and to utilise logic rather than fall victim to conspiracy theories. And yet, rate

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