

# The Daily Star

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LATE S. M. ALI

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## The persistent problem of plastic pollution

*We have the policies, but when will authorities act on them?*

THIS year at the UN Climate Change Conference, Bangladesh played an important leadership role as the head of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), pushing for greater accountability from big polluters and fighting for climate action on the global stage. As a country that is already bearing the brunt of the climate emergency—despite contributing to less than 0.5 percent of global emissions—we not only have the moral authority to speak out, but have also led the way with actions like the creation of the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan. By all accounts, Bangladesh remains a respected and important player in climate diplomacy circles.

However, climate change and environmental pollution are two sides of the same coin, and in minimising the latter, Bangladesh's performance has been woefully inadequate—if not downright negligent. This is especially the case in terms of overconsumption of plastic and mismanagement of plastic waste. While globally there is a push to reduce plastic consumption, in Bangladesh's urban areas, it has tripled in 15 years (between 2005 and 2020), according to a World Bank study. Of the 977,000 tonnes of plastic consumed in 2020, only 31 percent were recycled—the rest ended up in landfills, rivers, canals, drains and unserved areas.

The sorry state of our rivers is testament to the crisis that has been created by our apathy towards plastic pollution. In March this year, it was announced that the cost of dredging the Karnaphuli River had increased by Tk 49 crore (19 percent) due to the removal of a thick layer of plastic waste from the riverbed. Dredging operations to remove silt from Barishal river port also dragged on for months due to the huge amounts of polythene and plastic dumped into the water. Every year, about 200,000 tonnes of plastics flow into the Bay of Bengal from Bangladesh, having far-reaching consequences not only on marine life, but on human health, too, as a result of microplastics seeping into our ecosystem.

How can a country that is well-known for its climate diplomacy—and for taking progressive steps such as banning the use of polythene bags as far back as in 2002, and banning single-use plastics in coastal areas in 2020—still have such recklessly high levels of plastic pollution? It is clear that, so far, the government has failed to match its policy with suitable actions. This cannot be allowed to continue—the authorities must ensure that they stick to the National Action Plan for Sustainable Plastic Management in order to reduce plastic waste generation and recycle as much as possible.

At the same time, there must be a concerted push to use alternatives to plastic packaging. Bangladeshi scientists have already invented jute polymer packaging and biodegradable packaging materials from corn. We have all the resources at hand to reinvent ourselves from being one of the worst plastic-polluting countries in the world to one that brings its own sustainable solutions to global platforms. It is now up to the authorities to demonstrate their commitment towards this end, and act accordingly.

## US drone strikes must stop

*International community should ban the use of killing machines*

A recent investigation by the *New York Times* (NYT) has once again brought to the fore the tragic and inhumane killings of civilians by US drone strikes, which could amount to war crimes. A trove of newly obtained confidential documents covering more than 1,300 reports show that the US air wars in the Middle East led to the deaths of thousands of civilians, including children which, according to the documents, were the results of "deeply flawed intelligence." We condemn such unwarranted killings, which do nothing for the security of the US; on the contrary, such acts increase resentment among the people of the nations who have been victims of the West's imperialistic wars fought under the guise of the War on Terror.

The report further revealed that none of the incidents of civilian killings have managed to make the US government see any evidence of wrongdoing, or take disciplinary actions against any US personnel responsible for such deaths. Even though many of these incidents were previously reported, the NYT investigation showed that the number of civilian deaths had been "drastically undercounted" by at least several hundreds. It is hard to believe that this was the result of an accident or error. One event covered in the report, for example, showed that a drone strike, which had allegedly killed 85 Islamic State fighters, had actually led to the deaths of 120 farmers and other villagers.

According to a spokesperson for the US Central Command, even with the best technology in the world, mistakes do happen, and they are trying to learn from them. Given, however, that the US has yet to take any action against anyone responsible for the thousands of deaths caused by its drone strikes, it is difficult to see how that can be true. Moreover, the only person who has been punished in regards to US drone strikes is whistleblower Daniel Hale, who leaked documents to *The Intercept* detailing how, between January 2012 and February 2013, nearly 90 percent of those killed by such aerial strikes were not the intended targets, but civilian bystanders, who were nonetheless classified as "enemies killed in action." Such actions by the US, which claims to be the premier upholder of human rights in the world, is truly deplorable.

Through its aerial warfare, not only has the US killed thousands of civilians of other nations—which could amount to war crimes, according to many experts and human rights organisations—but it has continually destabilised other regions, particularly the Middle East. Therefore, it is time for the US to end the bombardment of other nations using unmanned aircraft, which also dehumanises its pilots. The international community, too, has a role to play here, as it needs to come together and ban the wholesale use of such killing machines by all nations.



The US is reworking its foreign policy to counter China's influence.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

# Sanctions against Rab and the shifts in US policies

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

SINCE the US Department of Treasury and the Department of State imposed sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and seven of its current and former officials on December 10, the future of the Bangladesh-US relationship has become a topic of analysis and intense speculation in Bangladeshi media. Although these discussions are often prefaced by why the US imposed sanctions, even the staunch critics of the US decision have implicitly acknowledged that extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh—the primary factor in the US sanctions—have been a matter of concern for a long period. Some insist that such a harsh punitive measure is disproportionate, pointing at poor human rights records of other countries, particularly countries in South Asia, against which the US has taken no actions yet.

The proponents of these arguments miss the point that drawing parallels with other countries' poor human rights records is essentially an acceptance of the rationale of the sanctions. The habitual deniers have continued to do what they do best. Some pundits are also trying to trivialise the sanctions and insisting that soon it will be pushed to the backburner and the status quo will prevail. On the other hand, another group of people are

*Important aspects of the security strategy and foreign policy of the Biden administration were highlighting the values of democracy in opposition to the growing authoritarianism, and focusing on the Asia Pacific region.*

speculating that it will be followed up soon with more robust punitive actions.

While the US decision to impose sanctions were prompted by increasing incidents of extrajudicial killings and serious erosion of democracy in Bangladesh in recent years, it is also intrinsically tied to the ongoing shift in US foreign and security policies under the Biden administration. As such, the sanctions need to be located within these shifts, which have implications for any future Bangladesh-US relationship.

The Biden administration's determination to make a clear break from the Trump-era foreign policy of waltzing with authoritarian leaders became clear from day one of the administration, as Biden was elected with this promise. Besides rejoining

international entities such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Accord on Climate Change, the Biden administration made strengthening the US alliances and working with other countries on global common goods a priority. But important aspects of the security strategy and foreign policy of the Biden administration—as reflected in the Interim National Security Guidance, published in March 2021—were highlighting the values of

Rise of extremism within US society is endangering its democracy and posing challenges to its security. As such, there are legitimate questions as to whether the work should start at home rather than focusing outward. The insurrection on January 6, 2021 by Trump supporters has laid bare the serious threats that US institutions face; it has also demonstrated the growing influence of anti-democratic forces in the US, including violent white supremacist groups. The Biden

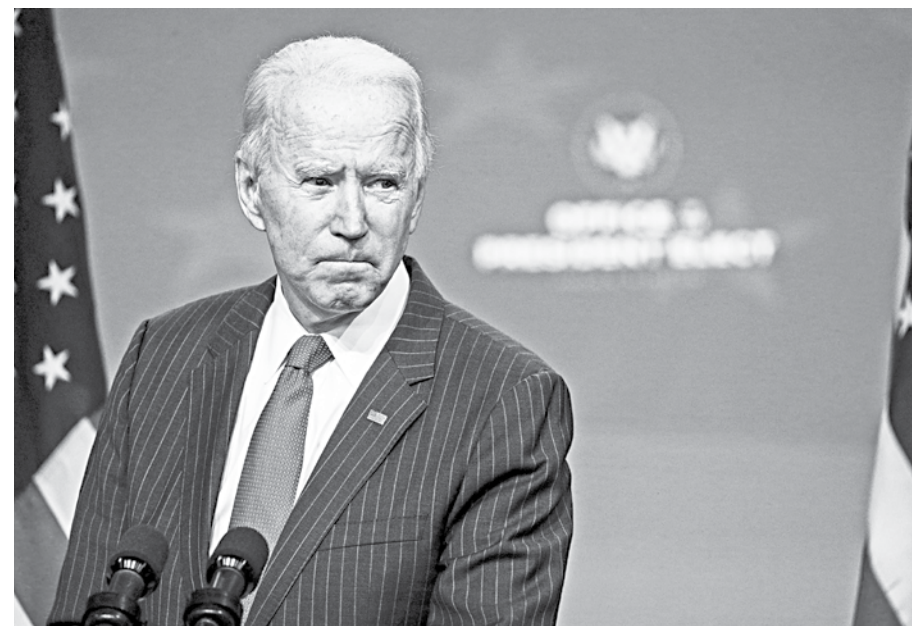
interests did not face any formidable challenges in the region warranting any actions. As the centre of gravity of the global economy began to shift to Asia Pacific in the 1990s, it drew US attention. However, not until Barack Obama came to office did the US deploy additional resources or take any initiative for further alignment. Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia policy took shape in 2010 for several reasons, including the economic importance of the region and the growing influence of China. Obama accepted the inevitable rise of China as he repeatedly said, "The United States welcomes the rise of China." He characterised the US-China relationship as the most important bilateral relationship.

However, the relationship started to change as China became more assertive and began to challenge the global power architecture. The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Xi Jinping's proposal for US-China relations as a "new type of great power relations" and subsequent efforts to expand its sphere of influence became the bone of contention. Consequently, the US expedited its efforts to reach a deal under the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The objective was to advance strategic interests of the US along with the economic integration of 12 countries covering 40 percent of global trade. Trump on his first day in office withdrew the US from the treaty. While the other treaty partners went ahead, the US lost its ability to influence the region, leaving the region open to Chinese pull. Trump's transactional foreign policy efforts with China failed, and he turned to a belligerent posture. In 2017, the US took initiative to revive the moribund Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad)—a strategic security dialogue between the US, Australia, Japan, and India. In 2019, Trump realised the need for US presence in the region and devised the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), aimed at curbing China's influence.

Since coming to power, although President Joe Biden has not used the term IPS, his administration seeks to build a strategic framework to counter the growing influence of China. Biden has made it amply clear that the US considers China as a rival and would like to halt its growing influence—both at strategic and ideological levels. Highlighting the human rights violation in Xinjiang, China's support for Myanmar's military junta, and its assertiveness in various regions including South Asia, the Biden administration has taken a strong stance. Its heightened efforts to align Asia Pacific countries with the US is reflected in the recent trips of the US secretaries of state and defence to the region.

Recent punitive actions by the US of varying degrees against Myanmar, China, North Korea, and Bangladesh need to be seen as an integral part of the twin policy thrust of the Biden administration, democracy and confronting China's assertiveness. As the Bangladesh government devises its response to the sanctions on Rab, it must also consider the larger picture and the geopolitical dynamics of the Asia Pacific region. Addressing the institutional aspects of Rab and the sanctioned individuals should constitute one element of the response—the other aspect involves these dynamics.

Dr Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University in the US, and a non-resident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council.



President Joe Biden has put rights at the heart of US foreign policy.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

democracy in opposition to the growing authoritarianism, and focusing on the Asia Pacific region. Both have bearing on the recent decision regarding several countries, including Bangladesh.

Biden's emphasis on democratic values as a security strategy is distinctly different from his predecessors—not only Donald Trump (2017-2021), but Barack Obama (2009-2017) and George W Bush (2001-2009) as well. Bush's militaristic strategy engendered the so-called War on Terror and weakened both US security and its global standing. Obama's strategy was somewhat less ambitious, yet focused on global security intended to achieve a leadership role for the US. But it didn't achieve a great deal because of the US's engagement in various wars, particularly in the Middle East and the North Africa (MENA) region. Under the Bush and Obama administrations, democratic norms and values were not placed at the centre of US policies. Biden, on two separate occasions, underscored that democracy and human rights would be the focus of his foreign policy. He said on February 4, 2021, "We must start with diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity." After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, Biden said, "I've been clear that human rights will be the centre of our foreign policy. But the way to do that is not through endless military deployments, but through diplomacy, economic tools and rallying the rest of the world for support."

Ironically, Biden's emphasis on democracy comes at a time when the US is experiencing a serious democratic backsliding, and pernicious polarisation has made many of its democratic institutions dysfunctional.

administration has taken note of it; the National Security Guidance states, "Domestic violent extremism challenges core principles of our democracy and demands policies that protect public safety, while promoting our values and respecting our laws." These threats can be countered not only through legal measures, but also through reinvigorating ideological underpinnings and addressing the core issues, such as the lack of trust in institutions, elite dominance in policymaking, and economic insecurity. The Biden administration's domestic agenda intends to address these issues through several measures.

On the other hand, the Biden administration wants to regain a formidable place on the world stage—even if not the leadership position of the yesteryear—by pursuing the values which can unite a wide range of countries. It wants to take a clear stand against ideologies which intend to undermine the liberal world order. With that objective, the Summit for Democracy was convened in December 2021. But the US's close relationship with various authoritarian regimes and inclusion of some of the semi-authoritarian countries in the summit reveal some weaknesses of this approach.

The second element of the foreign and security policies of the Biden administration is its focus on the Indo-Pacific region. Since the mid-1970s, particularly after the defeat in Vietnam, the Asia Pacific region has received little attention from US policymakers. US policy on South Asia has been ad hoc since the 1950s with one distinct feature—the tilt towards Pakistan. The lack of interests in the Asia Pacific region and ad hoc South Asia policy did not change, although the US became deeply engaged in the Afghan war against the erstwhile Soviet Union between 1979 and 1989. US security and economic