

A great dream of a nation, finally fulfilled

Heartiest congratulations to the PM, technical team and workers, and the people of Bangladesh

THERE can be no doubt that the Padma Bridge, set to be inaugurated today, is going to forever change the course of the lives of people in the south and southwestern parts of Bangladesh. The 6.15km multipurpose bridge, one of the longest river crossings in the world, is expected to increase the GDP of the impoverished south-southwest Bangladesh by as much as 2.3 percent, and the national GDP by 1.2 percent. In addition to establishing the much-needed direct road and rail communications between Dhaka, the capital city and the hub of all things, and 21 districts in the southern region, the bridge will also lead to greater connectivity and trade among Asian countries. Despite concerns about the escalated cost of the project, credible and independent research has concluded that for every taka spent on the bridge, it is expected to generate about Tk 2 of social good. It is reassuring to know that the people's investment will be returned to the people.

But beyond all facts and figures, the Padma Bridge stands as the embodiment of the dream of hundreds of thousands of people in south and southwest Bangladesh for decades. It is a testament to a nation's determination to confront and conquer all challenges and stand on one's own feet. Padma is notorious for its strong current. Taming this river to build the foundation of the bridge was no mean feat. This mammoth project has been implemented with money raised by ourselves. It did face challenges: Deadlines had to be extended, project cost was revised several times, a pandemic almost brought the construction work to a halt. But all these challenges fell flat before the sheer determination of our prime minister to see the project through.

We congratulate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on this auspicious occasion for her vision and determination. There is no doubt that without her steely resolve, this project would not have seen the light of day. We also note the invaluable contribution of the experts who turned dreams into concrete realities, the workers who toiled day in and day out, even during the pandemic, to breathe life into the steel and concrete, and the local industries who supplied quality materials for the project. Most of all, we congratulate the people of the country, whose dreams and funds have truly made it possible.

Moving forward, we hope that the Padma Bridge is only the beginning of a new future for the people of southern Bangladesh, and that steps are taken to ensure that judicious support is provided to the southern districts and those most vulnerable to truly benefit from the mega investment. It is a proud moment for Bangladesh, a moment that can launch us into a future where the needs and aspirations of the people finally take centre stage of policymaking.

Demolish illegal structures, recover Chaktai canal

CCC should be held to account for occupying a part of the canal

WITH the waterlogging problem of Chattogram city going from bad to worse, we are shocked to learn that the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) has actually played an active role in deteriorating the situation. Reportedly, a building constructed by the CCC on the city's Chaktai canal – without taking any clearance from the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) – has been clogging the drainage system and causing waterlogging in the adjacent areas during monsoon for the last two decades. Although the CDA issued a notice to the CCC in 2016 to demolish the building, the latter did not comply. The structure is still there despite an order by the High Court in March this year to evict all the structures built on the canal.

Reportedly, over the last few decades, many such structures were erected on the land of the canal. According to a report submitted to the HC recently by the deputy commissioner of Chattogram, 48 illegal structures, including the city corporation establishment, residential flats, tin-shed buildings, business establishments and warehouses, have been built on around 20,000 square feet of the canal, obstructing its natural waterflow. While the Chaktai canal was once 61 feet in width (according to the BS survey), it has now been reduced to a narrow flow of 10 to 30 feet.

As the canal, which used to serve as one of the key drainage channels of the port city, has been choked by these structures, many parts of Chattogram city now go under knee-to-waist-deep water even after a moderate rain. All these structures need to be demolished and the Chaktai canal needs to be excavated to reduce waterlogging in the city. Besides, all other canals and water bodies of the port city also need to be recovered.

The problem, however, is that there is a rivalry going on between the CCC and the CDA about their job responsibilities. While the CCC claims that it is the CDA's responsibility to solve the issue, the CDA says that they are just implementing a project to recover some of the canals and drains of the city. According to them, the CCC should take responsibility to recover the rest of the canals and water bodies that have been grabbed and filled up. And that is only justified. How can such a big-scale problem be solved by only implementing one project? We think the CCC and the CDA should work in coordination with each other to resolve the issue. The CCC can prove its willingness to work in this regard by first demolishing the building it has constructed on the Chaktai canal.

What does Padma Bridge mean to a southerner?



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THE need for a bridge over the mighty Padma River may not have been felt so dearly by people other than those who have been born and bred in the southwestern part of Bangladesh. The Padma has been a major stumbling block for the people of the relatively underdeveloped southern region, in terms of communication and trade, as the turbulent river literally isolated the entire region from the rest of the country – including the capital, Dhaka.

As someone with a root in one of the southern districts, I have been a witness to the innumerable miseries that people have been enduring while crossing the river. From getting stuck in tailbacks at the ferry terminals to the agonising wait for boarding ferries or launches – many of which are in dilapidated conditions – and the risks involved in travelling by launches by navigating the strong current of the river, the journey of millions of people from the 21 southwestern districts to and from Dhaka has always been strenuous and perilous. And the suffering compounds ahead of any festival like Eid or during natural calamities.

I have been commuting to and from the capital quite regularly since mid-1999, when I came to Dhaka to pursue my higher studies. At that time, the long-haul buses would come to Dhaka either via Daulatdia-Paturia route or Mawa-Kawrakandi route. And every time before I took a trip back to my home and before I returned to Dhaka, I used to shudder at the thought of getting stuck in a tailback at the ferry ghat at Daulatdia of Rajbari and taking the long ferry journey. In fact, my first ever experience on the Padma River was terrible and tedious. I can still remember the day when our bus, after being stuck at the ghat for two hours, boarded a seemingly decades-old larger ferry, popularly known as a ro-ro ferry. The weather was gloomy, with strong currents disrupting the normal ferry services. It took us more than three hours to reach Aricha ghat. At that time, ferries and launches used to follow the Daulatdia-Aricha route for crossing the river – a route that would take more than two hours to complete by ferries. When it came to trucks loaded with non-perishable goods, the situation got quite horrible as they had to wait for two to three days at the ghat to cross the river on a ferry.

But it was around that time that I, like millions of people in my region, started dreaming of a “Padma Bridge,”



PHOTO: STAR

As someone with a root in one of the southern districts, I have been a witness to the innumerable miseries that people have been enduring while crossing the Padma for years.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How the US could lose the new cold war



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THE United States appears to have entered a new cold war with both China and Russia. And US leaders' portrayal of the confrontation as one between democracy and authoritarianism fails the smell test, especially at a time when the same leaders are actively courting a systematic human rights abuser like Saudi Arabia. Such hypocrisy suggests that it is at least partly global hegemony, not values, that is really at stake.

For two decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the US was clearly number one. But then came disastrously misguided wars in the Middle East, the 2008 financial crash, rising inequality, the opioid epidemic, and other crises that seemed to cast doubt on the superiority of America's economic model.

Of course, America does not want to be dethroned. But it is simply inevitable that China will outstrip the US economically. Not only is its population four times larger than America's, but its economy also has been growing three times faster for many years.

While China has not done anything to declare itself as a strategic threat to America, the writing is on the wall. In Washington, there is a bipartisan consensus that China could pose a strategic threat, and that the least the US should do to mitigate the risk is to stop helping the Chinese economy grow.

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as a bridge across the mighty Padma had already been in talks. The idea gained momentum after the construction of the Bangabandhu Multipurpose Bridge (which was opened for the public in June 1998) over the Jamuna, ushering in new hope and optimism among the people of the southwestern region. I can remember the chitchat of fellow passengers desperately yearning for a

work of the country's most challenging engineering project in December 2015, we realised our dream was inching closer to reality. As the construction work progressed – with tonnes of steels and rocks piled up on both banks and gigantic cranes installing spans – we, the southern people, and the entire nation, started waiting with bated breath for the glorious moment. Today is the day when

bridge over the Padma when we would get stuck at the ferry ghats on our way home or to Dhaka. We saw our collective dream slowly taking a shape in the following years when the newspapers and television channels reported primary measures like the feasibility study being finalised for building a bridge. And in 2007, the people of the southern region were elated to see the government approving the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project to be built with donor assistance.

However, in September 2011, our dream faced a severe blow when the lead donor, the World Bank, suspended its promised USD 1.2 billion in loans over allegations of corruption conspiracy, which the government denied. Other financiers, like Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica), also cancelled their loan proposals, leading to the billion-dollar project being stalled for some time.

Although the allegations against the government officials were later found to be untrue by the Anti-Corruption Commission and a Dhaka court, we were heartbroken and prayed that the endeavour of building the bridge would succeed. Then, in 2012, we saw a revival of our dream when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made her bold announcement to go ahead with the implementation of the project using the country's own funds. Hope was rekindled among the southern people. And when the prime minister inaugurated the main construction

our dreams come true as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurates the Padma Bridge.

From tomorrow, the agonies of crossing the Padma River only by ferries or launches would come to an end. From tomorrow, a new chapter is expected to begin in the lives of the people of the southern region as the bridge will enhance connectivity, facilitate transportation of agri-products, and play a significant role in boosting trade and commerce in the region. The impacts that the 6.15km Padma Bridge is going to have on the communication system and the economy have widely been discussed with economists, projecting a growth of the GDP by 1.2 percent.

Of course, the economic benefits of the bridge can only be attained to its potential if it is considered as an economic corridor instead of a mere means of connectivity. For that, the government needs to build infrastructures like special economic zones and industrial parks so that a wide range of industries can be developed, which will create employment opportunities. As a native of the region, the inauguration of the bridge will be a moment of pride for me, and the bridge itself is something I feel emotionally attached to. It will be a dream come true for the people of the southern region. Yet, I believe, the real benefits of the Padma Bridge will be brought about when the government puts the supporting investments and policies in place.

According to this view, pre-emptive action is warranted, even if it means violating the World Trade Organization rules that the US itself did so much to write and promote.

This front in the new cold war opened well before Russia invaded Ukraine. And senior US officials have since warned that the war must not divert attention from the real long-term threat: China. Given that Russia's economy is around the same size as Spain's, its “no limits” partnership with China hardly seems to matter economically.

But a country at “war” needs a strategy, and the US cannot win a new great-power contest by itself; it needs friends. But Trump did everything he could to alienate those countries, and the Republicans have provided ample reason to question whether the US is a reliable partner. Moreover, the US also must win the hearts and minds of billions of people in the world's developing countries and emerging markets – not just to have numbers on its side, but also to secure access to critical resources.

Its long history of exploiting other countries does not help, and nor does its deeply embedded racism. Most recently, US policymakers contributed to global “vaccine apartheid,” whereby rich countries got all the shots needed while poorer countries were left to their fates. Meanwhile, America's new cold war opponents have made their vaccines readily available to others at or below cost, while also helping countries develop their own vaccine production facilities.

The credibility gap is even wider when it comes to climate change, which disproportionately affects those in the Global South, who have the least ability to cope. While major emerging markets have become the leading sources of GHG emissions today, US cumulative emissions

are still the largest by far. Developed countries continue to add to them, and, worse, have not even delivered on their meagre promises to help poor countries manage the effects of the climate crisis that the rich world caused. Instead, US banks contribute to looming debt crises in many countries, often revealing a depraved indifference to the suffering that results.

Europe and America excel at lecturing others on what is morally right and economically sensible. But the message that usually comes through – as the persistence of US and European agricultural subsidies makes clear – is “do what I say, not what I do.”

At the same time, China has excelled not at delivering lectures but at furnishing poor countries with hard infrastructure. Yes, these countries are often left deeply in debt; but given Western banks' own behaviour as creditors in the developing world, the US and others are hardly in a position to point the finger.

If the US is going to embark on a new cold war, it had better understand what it will take to win. Cold wars ultimately are won with the soft power of attraction and persuasion. To come out on top, we must convince the rest of the world to buy not just our products, but also the social, political, and economic system we're selling.

The US might know how to make the world's best bombers and missile systems, but they will not help us here. Instead, we must offer concrete help to developing and emerging market countries, starting with a waiver on all Covid-related intellectual property so that they can produce vaccines and treatments for themselves.

Until we have proven ourselves worthy to lead, we cannot expect others to march to our drum.