

Public money: Easy come, easy go

Wastefully expensive govt projects hurting the economy

IT'S quite frustrating that, even in the middle of sustained pressure on the public purse, hardly a day goes by without some government agency reporting losses, mispending or wasteful use of resources. Clearly, beyond passing the financial burden onto citizens, the government has no answer to the bad practices and policies that are causing this. On Saturday, three reports published by this newspaper showed how far the rot has spread.

The first report is about a project – a rail-cum-road bridge project of Bangladesh Railway (BR) in Kalurghat, Chattogram – that has been delayed by four years even before the work could begin. The project was taken up in 2018 after the Kalurghat railway bridge, built in 1931, was declared “risky”. It was supposed to be completed in 2024, at a cost of Tk 1,200 crore. But four years on, not only has there been no progress in work, but the BR has now scrapped the design calling it “incomplete” and revised the project proposal to add a road deck above the previously designed rail deck, pushing the total estimated cost to Tk 6,341 crore.

The sheer apathy with which the whole project was planned, with loan from South Korea, to be repaid with public money, has not only increased its cost five times over, it also made sure citizens would be forced to use a risky bridge at least until 2028. In other words, they will have to pay more and suffer more because the railway authorities, who never seem to do anything right or on time, once again failed to check mismanagement and irregularities.

The other examples of wastefulness in the name of project revisions include three undertakings, all in various stages of development, by three different government agencies. It goes without saying that by the time these delayed projects will be completed, the public will have paid a lot more than originally proposed. This near-habitual practice of time and cost overruns is as disturbing as the role of the Ecneec itself, which approves – and thereby encourages the culture of – project revisions without any accountability whatsoever for the officials involved. These officials often inflate project costs under various pretexts, as is evident from the third report of the day which details the findings of an audit report exposing gross corruption in at least three cases of purchase by the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

All this points to how entrenched mismanagement is in our public work culture, which continues to hurt the economy and the people. We urge the authorities to stop this culture by establishing accountability for all officials involved in government projects and services. They must stop normalising bad policies and practices.

Stop polluting Khanjar haor

BSCIC must ensure no untreated waste lands in the water

WE are alarmed to learn about the unrestrained pollution of a haor in Sylhet’s Moulvibazar area. According to a report in *The Daily Star*, factories in the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) Industrial Estate have been discharging untreated industrial waste into the Khanjar haor for about two decades, and hardly any action has been taken to stop this. This has not only made its water toxic – making it unsuitable for the fish population and other aquatic creatures – but also resulted in the loss of fertility of nearby arable land.

According to locals, hundreds of farming families are being affected by the activities of the factories located in the BSCIC estate. The soil quality there is reportedly so bad that it has become impossible for the farmers to cultivate paddy or other crops. Plants and soil in the neighbouring village have also turned black, as disclosed by an investigative team of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) in June.

The question is, why are factories dumping untreated waste in the haor when they are required to treat it in the Effluent Treatment Plants (ETP) set up on their compounds? What could possibly be the reasons for not utilising the ETPs? As we have also seen in other cases, many factories are still unwilling to use ETPs despite there being strict directives from the government to use those. Cutting the cost of production is certainly one motive behind their noncompliance. But many ETPs were also found to be faulty and lack the necessary components to treat different kinds of pollutants, as seen in the case of Savar tanneries. These tanneries would once pollute the Buriganga River when they were located in Hazaribagh. Now, after being shifted to Savar, they are doing the same in the Dhaleshwari River, thanks to the ineffectiveness of the central ETP at the Savar tannery estate.

Industrial pollution has already killed many of our rivers and canals. Despite the gravity of the situation, the government has done little to check this disastrous development. We urge the government to be tough on the polluters of our water bodies. The ETPs in all factories near them must be fully functional. In the case of the Moulvibazar BSCIC Industrial Estate, the government must ensure that all factories comply with the rules. They must be punished if they fail to do so.

CORRIGENDUM

In the article titled, ‘Can we follow India in redrawing our data protection law’, published on 13 August, 2022, it was wrongly stated that, “In fact, changes brought in the third draft of the bill proposed in Bangladesh, published on July 16, 2022 by the ICT Division, would make minorities more vulnerable as data related to their religious beliefs, political ideologies or sexual orientation have been excluded from the list of ‘Sensitive Data.’” These vulnerabilities were in the second draft, and since have been removed in the just published third draft. We regret this inadvertent mistake.

Pelosi’s Taiwan visit: Overstepping China’s ‘red line’



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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FOR domestic political reasons, it is not difficult to see why US politician Nancy Pelosi chose this particular time to visit Taiwan. The unpopularity of incumbent President Joe Biden, including among his fellow democrats, could be chief among them. As speaker of the US House of Representatives, Pelosi is arguably third in line for the presidency. The visit could have been a stunt to bolster her national security credentials.

Secondly, it could be that the US is looking for a face-saving reason to redirect its geostrategic focus away from Eastern Europe. The Ukrainian conflict seems to be quite unpopular at home, with the latest Gallup poll showing that just one percent of Americans consider Russia as a “major problem” for the US.

If, however, domestic reasons were not the prime motivators for the visit, then that would be most worrying for global stability. As a declining superpower, the US is clearly worried by the tremendous rise of China. Since time is on China’s side, many experts have warned that the world may be at risk of falling into the “Thucydides Trap” – an apparent tendency towards war, described by US political scientist Graham T Allison, when an emerging power threatens to displace an existing great power as the regional or international hegemon.

Upon landing in Taiwan, Nancy Pelosi tweeted: “Our visit is one of several Congressional delegations to Taiwan – and it in no way contradicts longstanding United States policy...” However, China doesn’t see it that way. And that’s because the situation now is far different from 25 years ago when then-house speaker Newt Gingrich visited the island. Back then, the then-ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party still maintained the “One China” line, reached under the 1992 Consensus established by the National Unification Council of the Republic of China (official title for what Westerners refer to as Taiwan), which saw itself as a government in exile. This line was still acceptable to the mainland, i.e., the People’s Republic of China, because it recognised that there is one China and Taiwan is part of it.

However, in 2019, current Taiwan

leader Tsai Ing-wen completely rejected the established 1992 Consensus. That was when Beijing started to refer to the Taiwan government as “Taiwan independence forces”. So, Gingrich’s visit, unlike Pelosi’s, was not seen as a recognition of separatist forces.

President Joe Biden had also recently sown doubts over America’s commitment to the “One China” policy, replying when asked if the US would get involved militarily to defend Taiwan: “Yes. That’s the commitment we made”. The US had never before directly promised to intervene militarily in a conflict with China. And this delicate equilibrium is what had helped deter Taiwan from declaring full independence and China from invading.

Beijing suggested Pelosi’s visit may have been a pretext for the US to deploy more of its military to the region, and declared a massive set of military exercises set in Taiwan’s own territorial waters, with some designated spot even being as little as 12 miles away from its coast. During his visit to Bangladesh, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that regional players ought to oppose the ramping up of America’s military presence near Taiwan, thereby hinting that Beijing is ready to up the stakes if necessary. And this clearly shows that US-China relations are at its worst in decades.

But looking back, all this seems inevitable.

In 2015, the US Rand Corporation conducted a scenario study – commissioned by the US army – of a future war against China. According to the Rand report, the need to think through war with China is made all the more important by developments in military capabilities. Sensors, weapon guidance, digital networking, and other information technologies used to target opposing forces have advanced to the point where both military forces seriously threaten each other, and creates the means as well as the incentive to strike enemy forces before they strike one’s own.

In light of that, one aspect of Pelosi’s Taiwan visit that has been largely overlooked is her meeting with Mark Lui, chairman of Taiwan’s Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC). As some experts pointed out, Pelosi’s visit coincided

with US efforts to persuade TSMC – the world’s largest chip manufacturer, on which the US is heavily reliant – to establish a manufacturing base in the US and to stop making advanced chips for Chinese companies. Semiconductors – or computer chips – are essential to all the networked devices that have become embedded into our lives and have advanced

was motivated by the US’ goal of “containing China”, that could be a big miscalculation. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the Western world order is under severe threat. The US has failed to “persuade” most countries outside of its main sphere of influence – i.e., the EU, Japan, Australia and others – to put pressure on Russia. With its diplomatic



US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi visits the parliament in Taipei, Taiwan August 3, 2022.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ANN WANG

military applications.

Taiwan’s position in the world of semiconductor manufacturing has become a bit like Saudi Arabia’s status in OPEC. TSMC has a 53 percent market share of the global foundry market (factories contracted to make chips designed in other countries), while other Taiwan-based manufacturers claim an additional 10 percent of it. The US is heavily dependent on a single company – TSMC – for producing its leading-edge chips. As such, the US has been trying to attract TSMC to the US to increase its domestic chip production capacity. In 2021, with the support of Biden’s administration, the company bought a site in Arizona on which to build a US foundry.

Coincidentally, the US Congress just passed the Chips and Science Act, which provides USD 52 billion in subsidies to support semiconductor manufacturing in the country. But companies will only receive Chips Act funding if they agree not to manufacture advanced semiconductors for Chinese companies. Meaning that TSMC and others may well have to choose between doing business in China or the US. And this could well be part of a broader “tech war” between the US and China – which we have been seeing of late with regards to Huawei.

But under the current global circumstances, if Pelosi’s visit

influence over other countries waning, will the US be overextending itself by getting involved in a confrontation with China over Taiwan?

With Russia and China seemingly marching in lockstep, this could be the perfect time for China to put its foot down regarding Western interference in the Asia-Pacific region, realising that the US is in no position to get involved in another conflict. Although using military might has not been the Chinese style, China has strongly indicated that it seeks to make the US pay for Pelosi’s Taiwan visit, which overstepped its “red line”.

As for Taiwan, “the rare high-profile visit was no doubt welcome in the face of increasing global isolation on account of China’s pressure,” according to The Hindu. However, that short-term benefit may “be offset by the fact that Ms Pelosi arguably left Taiwan with a far worse strategic environment.”

As for global stability, even though the long-term consequences of this visit remain to be seen, it has only increased the likelihood of a coming conflict between the US and China. And given the number of global crises the world is currently going through, that increased likelihood can only be detrimental for all.

To read the full version of this article, visit *The Daily Star’s* website.

Is the opportunity for Rohingya repatriation slipping away?

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FIVE years since the 2017 exodus of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar as a result of its military’s horrific persecution, there is no sign of repatriation on the horizon. And as long as the military junta continues to rule, there is hardly any scope for repatriation. This was reflected by Myanmar’s Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in 2017, when he said in a media interview, “we did not send them to bring them back.”

Even after the military coup in February 2021, when the junta was under tremendous pressure from inside and outside, General Min Aung Hlaing reiterated in May 2021, in an interview with an international media outlet, that there is “no option of bringing back the Rohingyas”. Whatever discussions on repatriation we hear and see are part of diplomatic rhetoric; no serious analyst would take it at face value. However, it is always better to have engagement with the present Myanmar government on this issue rather than a complete disengagement.

Lately, Myanmar has started speaking about repatriation after almost three years. It is with some

purpose, since their silence was creating frustration in diplomatic circles in Dhaka. Now, in exchange for this mere engagement, Bangladesh is likely to be cautious and avoid activities and casual comments against Myanmar. As the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case against Myanmar is moving forward, International Criminal Court (ICC) cases are round the corner and their economy is struggling, along with external pressure and internal troubles, the military junta is likely to undertake efforts that release some of the pressure on them. The Myanmar authorities know that there is an upcoming election in Bangladesh next year and is likely to want to take advantage of that. Some kind of repatriation deal could act as political mileage, and become an achievement that the ruling party could exhibit. However, we have to be watchful, since we are dealing with a meritocratic organisation run by a smart set of professionals, who are masters of deceit and deception and not easily swayed by individual interest over organisational interest.

Myanmar would like to tie Dhaka into a “token” repatriation deal, with the terms and conditions dictated

by Naypyidaw. Being at a position of disadvantage, Bangladesh is also not in a situation to dictate terms. However, we should be cautious about Myanmar exploiting this token deal in its favour among the international community, including at the ICJ, where it could be argued that accepting repatriation shows Myanmar has no intention of wiping out the Rohingya. In addition, they could also argue that this is a bilateral issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar which these two neighbours are amicably in the process of resolving. Making this an international legal issue could only complicate and delay repatriation.

What needs to be deliberated on now is whether the opportunity for repatriation is slipping away for the Rohingya refugees. In the past, the Rohingya could not create or did not have the scope for talks or peace initiatives. Now, the National Unity Government (NUG), led by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, has expressed their willingness to accept the Rohingya and repel the 1982 Citizenship Act, and even bring the perpetrators of the Rohingya genocide to justice. The foreign minister of the NUG in June 2022 expressed her frustration in an interview (with Bangladeshi journalists) over how she is unable to engage with Dhaka.

Whenever the Rohingya refugees are repatriated, they will have to go back to a Rakhine that is now dominated by the Arakan Army (AA), a formidable force that claims to be 30,000 strong, and rule 60 to 70% of the area, which includes control over police, judiciary and taxation. Only cities are under the

military’s control. It is also important to have communication with AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), without which Rohingya repatriation is unlikely to be sustainable. AA Chief Major General Tun Myat Naing has expressed his willingness to integrate the Rohingya into greater Rakhine society and support the Rohingya cause, but he and his party will have to listen to the aspirations of the Rohingya themselves, and to Bangladesh’s terms as well.

The military junta will not remain in power forever. The cracks are already visible. Corruption and desertion are taking their toll, and there are ambitious generals awaiting the consequences of the Myanmar military’s self-defeating brutality. It must be remembered that a brutal military is no good as a fighting machine. They shall crumble in the face of a dedicated and organised foe. The inability of Bangladesh and of Rohingya organisations of meaningfully engaging the National Unity Government, and the ULA in Rakhine, may prove to be expensive in future.

A substantial two-track engagement with both parties could provide dividends out of proportion to the efforts expended on resolving the Rohingya issue. Under the circumstances, both NUG and ULA have expressed their willingness to engage with Bangladesh. However, the proposition is risky, and caution from Bangladesh, and from the Rohingyas themselves, is understandable. Meanwhile, we have to remember that this window of opportunity will not remain open forever.