

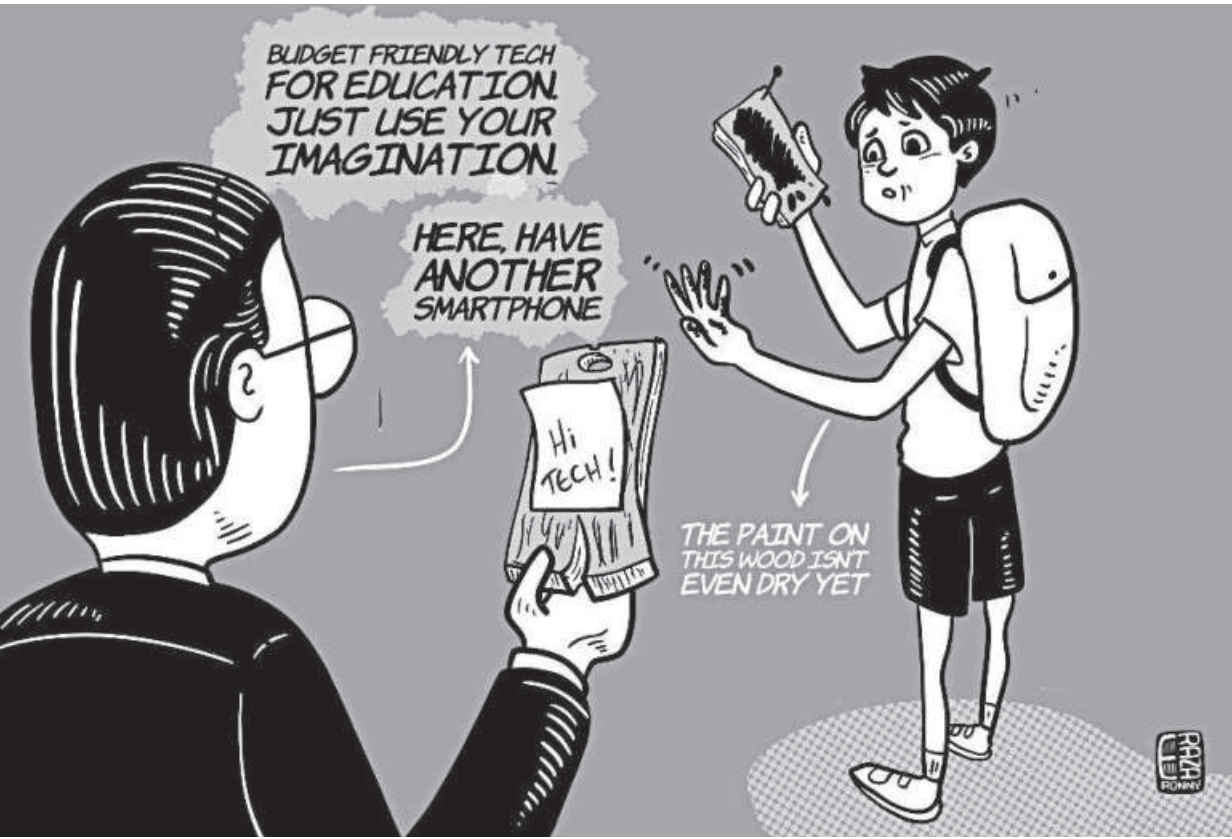


ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

What will it take to be Smart Bangladesh?



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin
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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

I have to admit, I like the sound of it – Smart Bangladesh; it has a nice ring to it. That we are going to transform ourselves from “Digital Bangladesh” to “Smart Bangladesh” (by 2041) gives an impression that something revolutionary is about to happen, albeit after a wait of almost two more decades, when many of us will either be too old, or just dead, to appreciate its impact.

It is, nonetheless, a seductive term that promises not only having everything digitised – from banking to basic healthcare – but we as citizens will know exactly how to use the technology at hand and become the “smart citizens” that we were destined to be.

This is hard for some of us to grasp, having grown up in the analogue days when, if somebody said, “You need to be smart,” it usually meant getting a nice haircut, or wearing an ironed, expensive-looking outfit from the given decade, alongside a pair of clean, shiny shoes. Funky sun-glasses could be added for extra “smartness.”

But this is not what entails a “smart citizen” of a “smart country.” Then what is it, pray tell?

This seems to be the greatest mystery of the year, and no one really knows exactly what it means. Yes, you have to be tech-savvy in the virtual world, but weren’t we told we had already achieved that, at least officially, through our “digital” Bangladesh, where everyone knows how to use a smartphone, post heavily edited pictures of their blissfully happy and successful selves on Facebook, and make endless cringeworthy TikTok videos? So what more will we achieve through being ‘smart’?

Like any brain-eating conundrum, it is always good to start at the beginning. In 2008 – a good 14 years ago – the Awami League government announced the launch of “Digital Bangladesh” as part of its Vision 2021 and in line with the party manifesto. Experts will be able to properly evaluate how successfully this vision has been realised. But from a layperson’s point of view, so far one cannot deny that some major strides have been made in digitisation.

The two horrific years of the Covid pandemic can be seen as the acid test of just how technologically ready we were to handle months of lockdown.

Thousands of students were able to connect to their educational institutions (at home and abroad) and attend online classes, however faulty the connections were at times. Newspapers were published either fully or partially through remote operations. The work-from-home model was successfully implemented across the board in almost every

sector. Even healthcare, to some extent, was provided through digital platforms. Like the rest of the world, we in Bangladesh became Netflix addicts, gourmet chefs, health freaks, cat video followers, and self-proclaimed life-skill coaches. We took Zoom meetings to a sickening level. We registered for vaccines and actually got the dates; even our courts went virtual.

And nothing could beat the expertise we developed in digital shopping; from groceries to gourmet meals, cosmetics to cleaning services – everything could be ordered online and delivered at the doorstep.

But while the educated, middle class and upwardly mobile went on to a turbo mode of digitisation, there were millions who were left behind. Remote learning through the internet

The term “Smart Bangladesh” is hard for some of us to grasp. Having grown up in the analogue days when, if somebody said, “You need to be smart,” it usually meant getting a nice haircut, or wearing an ironed, expensive-looking outfit from the given decade, alongside a pair of clean, shiny shoes. Funky sun-glasses could be added for extra “smartness.” But this is not what entails a “smart citizen” of a “smart country.” Then what is it, pray tell?

did not reach students in villages, especially in remote areas where they had no internet, smartphones or even TV. Thus, the benefits of the digital leap remained quite skewed and tilted towards a small section of the population.

That’s why we are not exactly jumping with joy at the prospect of a further technological leap that a “smart” Bangladesh is promising to deliver. Perhaps it’s the word “smart” that seems to nag like that stubborn piece of meat stuck between the teeth. Despite being part of the tech revolution, where even our land records are becoming digitised, there are little inconvenient truths that may question the smartness of our actions in critical areas that may dim the technological smartness we have achieved.

How smart, for instance, is it for forests to be cleared to make way for government-owned training academies, guest houses, recreation centres, and offices? The same is true for our rivers and canals – all victims of grabbing and pollution. How smart is a nation that has done virtually nothing to protect its natural

resources?

The catchphrase “smart cities” is certainly catchy – but in our case, still a figment of the imagination. Adnan Zillur Morshed, an architect and expert on urban planning, in his article in this daily last week, bemoaned how we have not incorporated walking as part of our urban lifestyle. In my view, walkability is the smartest benchmark of a city where 44 million people live, traffic jams eat away hours of our time while burning expensive fuel and messing up the air, and draining away our productivity, every single day. We have footpaths, but they are taken over by hawkers, plagued with open manholes, potholes, and truant motorcyclists speeding by to make sure that a walk will be as hazardous and as unpleasant as ever. From a pedestrian’s point of view the city is far from being ‘smart’.

How smart is a city where a seven-minute car ride becomes an hour-and-a-half-long ordeal, and where walking is a hazardous prospect?

How smart is it to have a digitised system to evaluate a vehicle’s fitness, when the streets are filled with unfit buses playing speeding contests and are driven by drivers with fake or no licences, who can crush people and speed away with complete impunity?

How smart is it to talk about women’s empowerment when a simple walk or ride to the workplace may entail being molested on the way?

How smart is it to crush diversity of opinions on digital platforms with the threat of arrest and years of imprisonment?

The list of just how “unsmart” we are is boringly long and endless.

The launch of the Tk 22,000 crore Dhaka Metro Rail next week, which will use all kinds of mind-boggling, advanced technology, and which reminds one of Bangkok’s speedy Sky Train, does make one want to believe that we are on our way to being a smart nation.

But while technological innovation and learning how to use that technology are key steps to a smart economy, let’s not forget that a smart economy is also one that promotes entrepreneurial spirit, is sustainable, uses resources efficiently, and aims to increase the quality of life of all citizens.

Are we on the right track?

SAUDI ARABIA’S GEOPOLITICAL SHIFT

Washington’s myopic tactics vs Beijing’s long-term strategy



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SAYEED AHMED

Before starting his trip to Saudi Arabia earlier this month, Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned two poignant historical events in an article in the Saudi media, which his hosts almost certainly found rather close to their hearts.

First, he pointed to Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) saying that one must seek knowledge even if that needs going to as far as China. Second, he mentioned the book by Wang Dayuan, a 14th-century Yuan Dynasty traveller, who described Mecca as a place with beautiful sceneries, mild weather, and a happy people. Xi also noted how Chinese porcelain and papermaking and printing techniques went to the West through the Arabs, while their astronomy, calendar, and medicine enriched the East.

Beijing, especially modern China, has always sought to befriend the Arabs through respectful gestures, and diplomatic and trade missions. Even when Saudi Arabia refused to accept China as a country in 1975, it continued friendly efforts and eventually succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations in the late 1990s,

is its largest trading partner in the Middle East and the de facto leader of OPEC+, a global group of the oil-producing countries, whose support Beijing needs to run its economy. It’s only natural for them to have a strong, mutually beneficial business relationship.

The scenario in Washington is starkly different. In an attitude rooted in history, The US considers Saudi Arabia as a client state, which the Saudis despise. President Franklin Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud struck a deal aboard the USS Quincy in 1945. They agreed that the US would guarantee a security umbrella for the Saudi monarchy. In return, the monarchy would ensure uninterrupted oil supply to the US.

However, the current Saudi rulers are an altogether new generation, more confident and assertive, who refuse to see themselves as a “client state.” They still need American security support, but this can no longer buy their unconditional loyalty.

Carnegie Endowment’s senior fellow, Aaron Miller, correctly

The oil-for-security deal somehow survived through these key disagreements but became significantly weakened. Both sides came to realise that times of unquestioned commitment to the deal was perhaps over.

The Saudis felt it even more when President Obama announced a policy of “Pivoting to Asia” in 2015 at the cost of the Middle East. The Iran nuclear deal, named Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), sent another message to Riyadh that the US might abandon them in case of a conflict with Iran. President Trump did not retaliate against Iran’s attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.

Finally, Joe Biden came as the Saudi’s ultimate disappointment as he publicly sought to ostracise MBS. Riyadh responded by not receiving President Biden’s phone call in March and reducing oil output at the OPEC+ meeting in July, despite Washington’s pressure not to.

Meanwhile, China was steadily increasing its foothold in the Kingdom and already became Saudi Arabia’s largest trading partner, with bilateral trades totalling USD 63.3 billion in 2018. Prior to that, the two countries signed deals worth around USD 65 billion during King Salman’s 2017 Beijing visit. They have since been increasing cooperation in energy, technology, and financial sectors, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing is also providing the arms and technology that Riyadh failed to secure from



Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman welcomes Chinese President Xi Jinping to Riyadh.

PHOTO: AFP

which grew stronger in the following decades. China’s Arab Policy Paper – drafted in 2016 coinciding with Xi Jinping’s first visit – starts by mentioning the two-millennia-old friendship between the two peoples when they were linked by land and maritime Silk Routes. Returning the gesture and further cementing the ties, King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) visited Beijing in 2017 and 2019, respectively. Sending a particularly strong signal to improve ties, the Saudis introduced Mandarin language lessons in their schools in 2020.

The relationship between Beijing and Riyadh is a symbiotic one. China is Saudi Arabia’s biggest trading partner, a source of growing investment, and the world’s largest oil buyer. For China, Saudi Arabia

pointed out that Riyadh is no longer locked in a monogamous marriage to Washington.

Such a realisation has taken years to come by for Riyadh. The aforementioned deal has since been subject to several tests, the first of which came in 1973 with the oil embargo following the Arab-Israel War. The deal almost collapsed, and the Saudis realised the extent of their hold on the global energy market and the US.

The next test followed 9/11, when several Saudi citizens took part in the terrorist attacks that shook the Americans to the core. Riyadh cautioned against invading Iraq, saying correctly, that it would unleash further chaos. They also proposed a peace plan for Israel and Palestine that was more viable than that of the Americans.

Washington.

But China is not interested in becoming a regional hegemon. It has keenly observed and learned from Iraq’s spiralling chaos and the nightmares of failed interventions elsewhere. Chinese wisdom says: “Seeking safety through development, cooperation and win-win growth is the right way towards world peace.” Modern China also believes that development and growth can be more effective than traditional military power in building sustained geopolitical influence. Being an astute long game player, China is maintaining a military balance in the Western Pacific while increasing its global dominance through trade, commerce, and business deals, proving again to be a master of grand strategy.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Grating sound

5 Troop member

10 List-ending abbr.

11 Joint account sharer

12 Flaring star

13 Kilt pattern

14 Dentist's request

16 Warm spot

20 Chef's protectors

23 Flower plot

24 Saloon orders

25 Flower girl, often

27 Bikini top

28 Soup dumpling

29 Christmas season

32 Something for nothing

36 Evergreen shrub

39 See the sights

40 Marzipan base

41 Cuzco native

42 Lacking flavor

43 Invites

DOWN

1 City on the Truckee

2 Resting on

3 Except for

4 Take into account, as contingencies

5 Digging tool

6 Hearts

7 Ump's call

8 Can. neighbor

9 Toe count

11 Mixes

15 Takes the title

17 Skeptical

comment

18 1920s art style

19 Genesis site

20 First name in advice

21 Cuzco setting

22 Authentic

25 Junction

26 Resistance to change

28 Brandish

30 Zac of "Hair-spray"

31 Pollster's find

33 Charged atoms

34 Pond paddler

35 Important times

36 Research spot

37 Completely

38 Thurman of "Gattaca"

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SATURDAY'S ANSWERS

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