



VISUAL: STAR

Infrastructure Diplomacy: What it means for Bangladesh



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The greatest bottleneck for a civilisation’s development in the modern world is its infrastructure. As populations increase, people’s needs and demands increase, the opportunity for industry increases, wages and disposable income increase, and thus you have a cycle of growth.

However, none of this is possible if there aren’t good roads, bridges, and railways that people can use to move from home to work and to deliver products from manufacturers to consumers. This is one of the biggest issues holding back development in the Global South.

Now, as international investors step up to fill these infrastructure voids, we see incredible stories of growth and development.

In South Asia alone, millions of people have been lifted out of poverty in the last decade, and a growing middle class has emerged in the region. More growth demands more infrastructure to sustain it. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) produced a research finding in 2009 stating that collective infrastructure investments of USD 8 trillion will be necessary to continue rapid economic development in Asian countries.

Building infrastructure, however, is one of the most expensive projects a nation can partake in. And sometimes, a nation can only get the money to build infrastructure from another nation. Therefore, it makes sense to look at nations from the lens of potential investors and investees.

Traditional investing wisdom dictates that investors should only invest in a nation with steady growth and little to no civil unrest or geopolitical tension. These kinds of investments guarantee the safest returns. However, it should be noted that the nations in the Global South that may require infrastructure the most are the ones that are the least safe to invest in.

It should also be noted that investing nations are never only concerned about monetary returns in the current geopolitical climate. They are also looking for the inevitable soft power gained over investee nations due to the one-sided dependence. And when it comes to providing risky infrastructure investment in return for soft power, one country stands out above all else.

In Asia, the term “infrastructure diplomacy” is used almost synonymously with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Perhaps the most prominent infrastructure initiative in recent years, the BRI was launched by China’s leader Xi Jinping in 2013. It goes without saying that the Initiative is critical to the growth and integration of China’s provinces with neighbouring nations, which is in line with China’s struggles for hegemony in Asia and in the world. However, with the rising number of nations participating in the BRI, as well as the growth of China’s power on regional and global scales, criticism of the strategic tools used for expanding Beijing’s economic dominance has steadily intensified. The BRI has received particular accusations of purposefully putting regional nations in so-called debt traps.

Western experts, in particular, point to examples of China’s dealings with Sri Lanka and Pakistan as examples of such

debt trap policies.

And yet, nations receiving infrastructure support from China consider the investment a great opportunity. For example, opinion polls from the US think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) indicated that the political elites of Southeast Asia favourably appraise China’s infrastructure development initiatives, which have delivered tangible benefits to the majority of Southeast Asian countries.

The rise of the BRI and the irresistible offer of development can be hard to deny. As a result, China has managed to provide USD 770 billion of investments to 138 countries worldwide in the last decade. They are leaps and bounds ahead in this game while everyone else is still at

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the starting line.

But the biggest competition against China’s diplomatic strategy in Asia comes in the form of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The military cooperation between America, Australia, India and Japan go far beyond just regional security affairs. Japan is the most active player among the QUAD nations in countering China’s infrastructure diplomacy campaign. The vision of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is one that is shared among all QUAD members, but it is Japan that is targeting enormous amounts of ODA towards Asia in order to provide an alternative to China.

This, of course, is very good news for the region’s developing nations. Developing economies dominated by a single foreign investor tend to exhibit distinct indications of neocolonialism. However, investee economies with multiple large investors who have diametrically opposed interests, and are permitted to compete in an open market framework, would likely result in having more equitable infrastructure development.

In the context of Bangladesh, which is set to soon graduate out of its least developed country (LDC) status, we see all the lessons of infrastructure diplomacy in full swing.

Generally, the type of economy, governance and level of democracy in a

developing nation play a massive role in determining the kind of infrastructure developments taking place. For example, if a nation relies on natural resource export and is governed as an autocracy, the only infrastructure developments that will take place are from the port to the mines and oil fields. This is, however, not possible in a democratic nation where the government is accountable to the people, and all infrastructure will have to prioritise the common people over the interests of the elite. The situation in Bangladesh, which is identified as a hybrid regime, is, unsurprisingly, somewhere in the middle.

The only true resource Bangladesh has is its people. The people who produce the affordable garments sold around the world, and the migrant workers who send back remittances. Infrastructure development taking place in Bangladesh is targeted to increase the productivity of these people, and as a side effect, somewhat increase their quality of living.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia war, Bangladesh gladly took advantage of current great power rivalries to facilitate well-rounded levels of infrastructure development in roads, bridges, railways, airports, energy, and in building climate resilience. However, the recent economic shocks from abroad and rising worldwide inflation, compounded with the current internal civil unrest due to rising anti-government sentiments, are proving quite the stress test to the nation’s macroeconomic stability. The main concern now is whether Bangladesh can emerge out of the LDC category without being in crippling debt.

Early warning signs are already in the wind, particularly in terms of Bangladesh’s energy bottlenecks.

Though it is true that Bangladesh is nowhere near the dreaded debt trap situation, the nation is already deeply committed to multiple nations. And the true cost of these commitments is yet to be felt. For example, the Rooppur Power Plant will be Bangladesh’s first nuclear power plant, with the first unit expected to start operating in 2023. The plant is predicted to eventually provide 15 percent of the country’s electricity. Russia is financing up to 90 percent of the project through credit. In addition, Rosatom, the Russian state-owned company running the project, will supply equipment, expendable materials, and training to maintenance crews throughout the plant’s operation. Nuclear power plants such as those constructed in Bangladesh, Egypt and Turkey require routine maintenance in order to remain operational. By using Russian reactor technology, these power plants will be reliant upon Russia for upkeep and capital indefinitely.

This dependence is one of the key pillars in Russia’s nuclear and energy diplomacy, and it also has tremendous geopolitical implications for developing countries such as Bangladesh. While China and Japan battle over Bangladesh’s rails, roads, bridges and ports, with just this one project, Russia may have gained more soft power in Bangladesh than what the Western world is yet to realise.

For a developing country, geopolitics is almost always a losing game. The more the country attempts to modernise and develop, the more dependencies it has to step into. The calculation then becomes a question of damage control.

If investments come with strings attached, perhaps one course of action is to take on as many different strings from as many different puppet masters as possible. True autonomy and sovereignty may be a pipe dream, but at least no one puppet master will ever have full control.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Eating the Last Cannibal



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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Recall the story about the explorer who encounters an aboriginal tribe for the first time, “Are there cannibals among you?” he asks. “No,” they reply, “We ate the last one yesterday.” To constitute a civilised community by eating the last cannibal, the final act must be called something else. It is a kind of original sin that must be erased from memory.

Similarly, the transition to a modern legal order in the American “Wild West” was accomplished through brutal crimes and the creation of myths to cover them up. As a character in the John Ford western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* put it, “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

But the “facts” that are born of legends are not verifiable truths. Rather, they are social artefacts: shared ideas that form the basis of the actually existing sociopolitical order. If enough people were to reject them, the entire order would disintegrate.

These social artefacts allow a society’s original sins to remain in the background, where they continue operating silently because modern civilisation still relies on barbarism. Recall how the legal apparatus of power was used to sanction the extralegal practice of torture by calling it “enhanced interrogation.”

Yet now, a new type of political dispensation is emerging. As the philosopher Alenka Zupancic observes in her new book, *Let Them Rot* (on which I rely here extensively), we increasingly have leaders who take pride in their crimes “as if it amounted to some kind of fundamental moral difference or difference of character, namely, ‘having the courage,’ ‘the guts,’ to do it openly.” But, Zupancic hastens to add, “what may appear to be their courageous transgression of state laws by avoiding the ‘hypocrisy’ that those laws sometimes demand is nothing more than a direct identification with the obscene other side of state power itself. It does not amount to anything else or different. They are ‘transgressing’ their own laws. This is why, even when they are in power, these leaders continue to act as if they are in opposition to the existing power, rebelling against it – call it the ‘deep state’ or something else.”

Obviously, this description summons up images of Donald Trump, who just this month called for the “termination” of the US Constitution. But, of course, appearances have also been disintegrating in Russia. For ten months, President Vladimir Putin insisted that there was no war in Ukraine, and ordinary Russians risked criminal prosecution for suggesting otherwise. But now, Putin has broken his own rule and acknowledged that Russia is at war.

Likewise, Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Putin crony, long denied that he had anything to do with the Wagner Group of Russian mercenaries. He has, however, now admitted that he founded the group, and that he has interfered in US elections and will continue to do so.

For political figures like Trump and Putin, courage is redefined as a willingness to break the state’s laws if the state’s own interests – or their own – demand it. The implication is that civilisation endures only if there are brave patriots who will do the dirty work. This is a decidedly right-wing form of “heroism.” It is easy to act nobly on behalf of one’s country – short of sacrificing one’s life for it – but only the strong of heart can bring themselves to commit crimes for it.

Hence, in 1943, Heinrich Himmler, the architect of the Holocaust, spoke of “a chapter of glory in our history which has never been written, and which never shall be written.” The question was what to do with Jewish women and children. “I decided here to find a completely clear solution,” Himmler told a gathering of SS officers. “I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating

the men ... and to allow the avengers in the shape of the children to grow up for our sons and grandchildren. The difficult decision had to be taken to have this people disappear from the earth.”

But in today’s Russia, the idea that atrocities “never shall be written” is increasingly out of fashion. Far from ignoring the eating of cannibals, such acts are being enshrined into law. On December 14, the Russian Duma (legislature) adopted a bill stating that any atrocities committed in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson before those Ukrainian regions’ annexation “will not be considered a crime punishable by law” if they are deemed to have been “in the interest of the Russian Federation.”

How this determination will be made is unclear; but it is safe to assume that all the torture, rape, murder, looting and vandalism committed by Russian forces will be excused – even celebrated. One is reminded of the paradox in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, where it is riskier to obey morality than to become complicit in criminality.

“Russian culture,” the historian Timothy Garton Ash observes, has become “a collateral victim of Putin’s self-devouring cannibalism.” Accordingly, “The time has come to ask whether, objectively speaking, Vladimir Putin is an agent of American imperialism. For no American has ever done half as much damage to what Putin calls the ‘Russian world’ as the Russian leader himself has.” Offering a similar analysis, Kazakh journalist Arman Shuraev recently excoriated Russia’s bullying ambassador to his country: “Russophobia

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is all that you have achieved with your stupid actions. ... You are idiots. You are cannibals who eat themselves.”

Paradoxically, Russia’s exercise in false transparency makes the mystifications of state power even more dangerous, by eroding our moral sensitivities. It shows why we need figures like WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange more than ever. Assange is our Antigone. For years, he has been kept in an undead, isolated state, awaiting extradition to the United States for serving as a spy for the people, making public just one small part of the obscene dark side of US policy. Although Assange may have done some very problematic things, my wish for the New Year is that President Joe Biden will show true courage and drop the charges against him.

CORRIGENDUM
On January 2, 2023, the incorrect answer block was printed alongside the crossword puzzle. We apologise for this error. The answer block to puzzle 4-15 is being printed today.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Hindu mystic

6 Open-handed hit

10 Eagle’s claw

11 Highway sections

13 Duo

14 quadrupled

14 Insurance seller

15 Mamie’s mate

16 Deli meat

18 Ruin

19 Building block

22 Annoy

23 Formerly

24 Wise saying

27 Sugary

28 Snack

29 West of Hollywood

30 David Bowie genre

35 Chaney of horror

36 List-shortening abbr.

37 Bit of wordplay

38 Writer Jong

40 In the know

42 Jeans material

43 Act the waiter

44 Aegean and lonian

45 Doles (out)

DOWN

1 Impassive

2 Eccentric

3 Change

4 “The Simpsons” bartender

5 Pitched right over the plate

6 Closes with a bang

7 Fall behind

8 Showy flower

9 Act of contrition

12 Parade site

17 Noah’s boat

20 Dark time

21 Castle part

24 Not straight

25 Stephen King’s “—Claiborne

26 Foolish

27 Cutting humor

29 Ran into

31 League makeup

32 Dizzying designs

33 Road bend

34 Leg joints

39 Spying org.

41 Petite

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 4-18

SUNDAY’S ANSWERS

PAPA MOES
EWING ORALS
CACTI RESEE
KIN BLASTED
STIR SIN EVA
SCOOP WREN
BUN FIB
SCAT TAPAS
LASTAKESTO
IRKSOME KEN
TREED IDEAS
SITED TITLE
ESPY PSST