



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

## Cold War redux in Dhaka

HA Shovon is a senior research associate at Central Foundation for International and Strategic Studies. Md Himel Rahman is a research intern at KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs.

HA SHOYON and MD HIMEL RAHMAN

The dynamics of the US-Bangladesh and Russia-Bangladesh relations cannot be viewed outside the context of Bangladesh's increasing geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic salience.

Bangladesh, with the second largest economy in South Asia and eighth largest population base, is currently the 35th largest economy in the world. Bangladesh's rapid socioeconomic development, its huge domestic market, its military-strategic significance for India and China, its role as a gateway between South and Southeast Asia, and its strategic location on the Bay of Bengal have all incentivised great powers, including the US and Russia, to seek expanded influence in the country. The US, motivated by the urge to retain its global hegemony through stalling the meteoric military economic rise of China, and guided by its Indo-Pacific Strategy, is currently bent on expanding its foothold in the Asia-Pacific region.

On the other hand, Russia, compelled by its growing estrangement from the West and its own geo-economic necessities, is seeking to engineer a pivot to Asia in general and the Asia-Pacific region in particular. Accordingly, Bangladesh has attracted both US and Russian attention.

The position is awkward and unenviable for Bangladesh because getting entangled in the Russia-US rivalry is contrary to Bangladesh's national interests. Moreover, the US is Bangladesh's third largest trading partner, the single largest market for exported RMG products, the topmost source of foreign direct investment, historically one of the largest providers of foreign aid, and the largest provider of aid for the Rohingya refugees. The US-Bangladesh relationship is therefore multifaceted, ranging from trade and investment to security and counter-terrorism.

Meanwhile, although the volume of Bangladesh's bilateral trade with Russia is relatively modest – worth USD 1.1 billion annually – Russia is currently the principal financier of some important projects in Bangladesh, including the 2,400 MW Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, and is the fourth largest provider of foreign aid to Bangladesh, amounting

USD 1.22 billion in 2022. Taking into account recent energy shortages in Bangladesh, Dhaka's energy cooperation with Moscow is critical to ensuring the former's energy security. More importantly, after China, Russia remains the second largest source of military equipment for the Bangladesh Armed Forces.

Needless to say, Dhaka has its own share of problems with both Washington and Moscow. A number of US activities – including the refusal to reinstate GSP facilities, the imposition of sanctions on Rab and its officials, the continued criticism of labour rights conditions, and the expression of dissatisfaction with internal politics – have irked Dhaka. Conversely, Washington is unhappy with Dhaka on account of a number of issues, including Bangladesh's close ties

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with China and Russia, and its internal political dynamics. However, Dhaka is less than satisfied with Russia's role in the Rohingya refugee crisis, as Russia has persistently supported Myanmar at the UN.

Taking into consideration the points of convergence and divergence between Dhaka and Washington as well as Dhaka and Moscow, it is in Dhaka's best interests to maintain friendly and cooperative relations with both of them. So far, Dhaka has aptly managed to strike a balance between the great powers, but the advent of the Ukraine crisis and consequent intensification of geopolitical rivalry has made the task far more challenging for Dhaka than ever before.

The war has adversely affected Bangladesh's economy. Moreover, Bangladesh has been compelled to walk on a politico-diplomatic tightrope since

the start of the war. Bangladesh has so far refused to condemn Russia in clear terms for its invasion of Ukraine and abstained from voting on anti-Russian resolutions before the UN on a number of occasions.

On the other hand, Bangladesh has voted against Russia at the UNGA on a few occasions and has prevented the US-sanctioned Russian ship *Ursa Major/ Sparta III* from docking at the Mongla seaport on December 24. However, Dhaka has sought to placate Moscow by receiving the goods from the ship via India, too. Moreover, the Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh, Aleksandr Mantysky, has accused Bangladeshi media outlets of anti-Russian bias in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war.

However, both Washington and Moscow have responded to Dhaka's careful balancing act by increasing their diplomatic, economic, and military engagement with Bangladesh. For instance, the Exercise Tiger Lightning-3 between the armies was held in March 2022, the eighth US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue was held in Dhaka on March 20, 2022, the eighth US-Bangladesh Security Dialogue was held in Washington on April 4, 2022, and the second Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) between Bangladesh and the US naval special forces was held in October-November 2022.

More recently, the visits of US Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration, Julieta Valls Noyes, that of the US National Security Council official, Rear Admiral Eileen Laubacher, and the recent visit of US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, manifest renewed diplomatic engagement and the growing importance of US-Bangladesh ties. Meanwhile, Russian engineers and specialists continue work on the construction of the Rooppur NPP. Russia has also offered to sell oil to Bangladesh at discounted prices, although the offer was not accepted.

In a nutshell, Washington's controversial interference in domestic politics and Moscow's equally controversial criticism are both unwelcome developments for Dhaka.

The recent activities of Washington and Moscow are indicative of the fact that Bangladesh, against its will, is being turned into a potential battleground for influence between the two top nuclear powers. Thus, Bangladesh must navigate carefully amid these murky geopolitical waters.

### DIGITAL BANGLADESH

## A story of transformation, resilience, and sustainability



Zunaid Ahmed Palak, MP, is the state minister for the ICT Division, Government of Bangladesh. E-mail: mc@palak.net.bd

ZUNAID AHMED PALAK

Being "digital" has become one of the most important trends in Bangladesh over the last decade. As the pioneer of the digital brigade, Bangladesh has been able to achieve an inspiring level of success in bringing about a digital revolution within the country. The Digital Bangladesh Vision, declared on December 12, 2008 by the honourable prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, brought about significant improvements for the economic, educational and social inequality factors that determine the digital divide, including income, access to digitised services, and socioeconomic factors.

The prime minister announced in her election manifesto that Bangladesh would be a dignified middle-income Digital Bangladesh when the country completes 50 years of independence. The idea of the Digital Bangladesh vision was to promote harmonised and sustainable digitisation so that society as a whole can benefit from

online labourers across the globe. Bangladesh is now developing frontier technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain, Internet of Things (IoT), and preparing to exploit the potential and challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Specialised labs of high technology in IoT, robotics, and cyber security have been set up in different universities. IT Business Incubators are being set up in universities as well. Initiatives have been taken to set up Sheikh Kamal IT Training and Incubation Centers in every district, with the aim of building innovation and a knowledge-based generation.

Startup Bangladesh Limited and iDEA were established with a fund of Tk 500 crores, and so far, we have supported 382 startups. We invested in a few organisations, providing seed money and making equity investments in various seed and growth-stage startups. More than a thousand women entrepreneurs were provided with Tk 50,000 as seed money each through the Startup Bangladesh initiative on behalf of the prime minister. Our main aim with such investments was to empower the youth to build their courage and take the risk of doing innovative business.

We have been able to create 20 lakh employment opportunities for the youth in the software and hardware sector, and from the ICT sector, we have earned USD 1.4 billion from exports, which was only USD 26 million 13 years ago. We have around 13 crore active internet users, and through 2,000

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digitisation. It was her integrity, foresight, and courageous leadership that helped us identify ourselves as proud citizens of a prestigious middle-income, technology-based Digital Bangladesh in just 13 years. The initiatives led by the architect of Digital Bangladesh and ICT affairs advisor to the prime minister, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, made our technology industry an advanced and knowledge-based driving force for the country's growth. He turned the vision into a strategic roadmap to change the fates of common people, using ICT as a driving force while creating knowledge, innovation, and efficiency throughout the economy. As per his guidance, we implemented the vision emphasising human resource development, digital government, connectivity and infrastructure, and ICT industry promotion – the four pillars of the vision.

Moving forward with this philosophy, we established the Sheikh Kamal IT Training and Incubation Centers. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman used to say that the wealth of Bengal is its soil and people. Sajeeb Wazed Joy made studying ICT compulsory for Classes 6 to 12. On the other hand, in just 14 years, 13,000 Sheikh Russel Digital Labs have been set up across the country so that our children can be well aware of knowledge relevant to ICT.

We were able to curate and deliver timely and relevant programmes, emphasising the leadership, vision, and ideation of the youth for constructing a knowledge-driven economy and ensuring a leadership position for Bangladesh. There is a cultural belief that if one doesn't acquire a Bachelor's or Master's degree, they will not be able to earn any respect in their family or society. But Sajeeb Wazed Joy said that only those who want to teach, do research, and want to take up higher education should do so. HSC graduates can become proficient in technical skills such as web development, mobile app development, game development, image processing, digital marketing, etc, through short-term training, and take up jobs or become self-employed. This particular philosophy has changed the lifestyle of the youth in Bangladesh. With our initiatives, we have been able to groom around 6.5 lakh freelancers with technical knowledge, who made Bangladesh the second-largest supplier of

digital portals for service, we are serving about one crore users per month.

One of the major success stories of Digital Bangladesh, that has helped put the country on the map of research circles, is its resilience in the face of the Covid pandemic. Had the prime minister not implemented Digital Bangladesh, it would not have been possible to deal with Covid successfully. If we were to face the Covid epidemic before 2008, how would 1.70 lakh educational institutions (which were physically closed for two years) have run their educational programmes? How would five crore students have studied? And how would three lakh women entrepreneurs have conducted their e-commerce businesses? Without the successful initiatives of Digital Bangladesh, it would not have been possible to process over two crore e-files through mobile phones, conduct the proceedings of around 3.47 lakh hearings, and carry out over two lakh bails.

Our prime minister set a record of leading 1,600 virtual meetings in a span of two years during the pandemic, which included cabinet meetings, E-nec, and political meetings. In 2010, if we hadn't got the bill passed in parliament, after getting approval from the prime minister, for the Digital Hi-tech Park, running the activities of 109 Hi-tech parks (both government and private) in the country wouldn't have been possible.

During the pandemic, people availed the services of police, fire service, and ambulances through 999. Fifteen crore people registered for services through the Surokkha app. On the other hand, the 333 call centre inaugurated in 2018 assisted people suffering from lack of food. Digital Bangladesh is not a dream anymore, but a reality. It's now all about resilience and sustainability.

The prime minister recently declared that we will transform the country into Smart Bangladesh by 2041. The four pillars of the Smart Bangladesh vision are: Smart Citizen, Smart Government, Smart Economy, and Smart Society, which will be achieved under the dynamic leadership of Sajeeb Wazed Joy. We are preparing our youth to lead the way towards the fourth industrial revolution. Our goal is to ensure Bangladesh not only takes part in the next wave of innovation, but also leads it.

**Opinion**

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**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

1 Over-sight  
6 Trashy mags  
11 Earthy color  
12 Blazing  
13 Declare  
14 Winter quaff  
15 Near-eternity  
16 Really impress  
18 Baseball's Mel  
19 Tire track  
20 Performed  
21 Surgeon eggs  
22 Hot  
24 Tough spot  
25 Stupid  
27 Pound hound  
29 YouTube uploads  
32 Fire remnant  
33 Clothes line

34 Card spot  
35 "– the ramparts..."  
36 Hockey's Bobby  
37 – de France  
38 Exem-play  
40 Harriet's hubby  
42 Hack-neyed  
43 Caught some z's  
44 Right now  
45 Flies high

**DOWN**

1 Also-rans  
2 Misbehave  
3 Paul Thomas Anderson film  
4 Ready to go  
5 Device for a book lover

6 Showed nervousness  
7 Alien craft  
8 Paul Thomas Anderson film  
9 Nucleus part  
10 On the sofa  
17 Sway  
23 Whole bunch  
24 Auction signal  
26 Block-heads  
27 Chinese hard-liner  
28 Familiar with  
30 More nuctuous  
31 Ignores the limit  
33 Like colanders  
39 Copying  
41 Chaotic spot

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**SATURDAY'S ANSWERS**

S	U	M	A	C	Q	U	A	R	T
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T	A	K	E	N	T	E	M	P	T
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P	L	E	D	O	R	I	E	N	T
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A	L	A	M	O	A	G	N	E	S
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**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

I THOUGHT YOU GAVE UP SMOKING. EVERY SO OFTEN I HAVE JUST ONE FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE. WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE? I'M EXPERIENCING SECONDHAND SMOKE... FOR OLD TIME'S SAKE.

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

HAMISH MacPHERSON? HERE. ARE YOU ANY RELATION TO ZOE MacPHERSON? SHE'S MY SISTER. ZOE WAS SUCH A DELIGHT TO HAVE IN THE CLASSROOM! STAND BY FOR A REFRESHING CHANGE.