

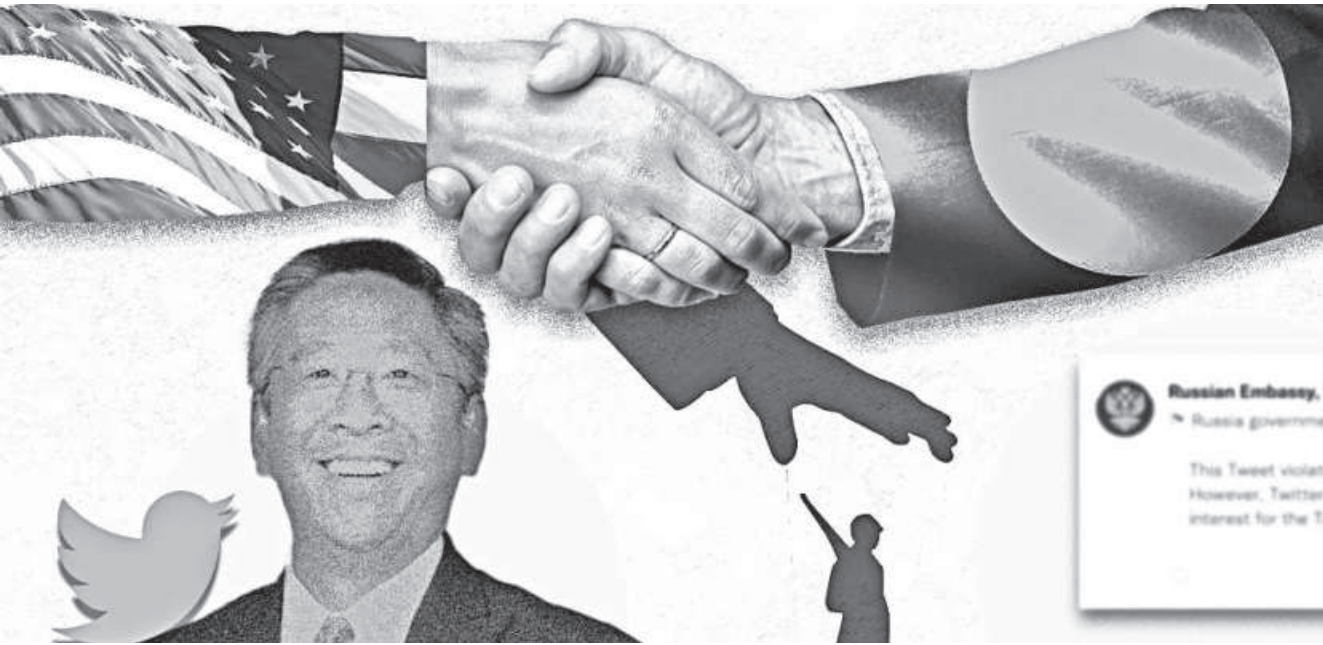


ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

DONALD LU’S VISIT

Old message, only louder



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ALI RIAZ

US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Donald Lu’s two-day visit to Dhaka has drawn significant attention in the media in Bangladesh, which continues to reverberate even after the visit is done with. What message did Lu bring? And has the government of Bangladesh succeeded in making its points?

Although it was Secretary Lu’s second visit to the country, discussions surrounding the visit spilled over to politics, transcending the usual diplomatic circles.

When Secretary Lu visited Bangladesh in March last year, as a part of the US delegation to attend the partnership dialogue, he wasn’t featured much in the media. The Under-Secretary for Political Affairs, Victoria Nuland, led the team. In the formal sense, the agenda for Lu’s visit was nothing different from the visits of high-level US diplomats last year. From the US side, the agenda included the concerns regarding human rights situations, absence of political space for the opposition, dwindling freedom of speech, and the fairness of the upcoming election insofar as domestic politics is concerned. Other important issues were Bangladesh’s position on the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), two outstanding proposed defense agreements – the Generalised Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition and Cross-section Agreement (ACSA). Bangladesh’s agenda was to reiterate its request to rescind the sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), reinstatement of GSP privileges, and more support for the Rohingya refugee situation. In some measures, throughout 2022, two parties were coming to the table with two sets of priorities.

However, Lu’s visits came against two backgrounds, involving domestic and international dimensions. Of the domestic developments, the most prominent was the one involving US Ambassador Peter Haas’s visit to the home of a victim of enforced disappearance. It brought the latent tensions between these two countries to the fore. During his visit to the victim’s house on December 14, 2022, the US envoy was confronted by a group of people demanding justice for those who were executed after military trials, allegedly for engaging in coup attempts in 1977

during Ziaur Rahman’s rise to power. The actions of the group erred the envoy and were considered a security threat. This led to uncomfortable exchanges between the Bangladesh government and the US State Department, and a phone call from Wendy Sherman the Deputy Secretary of State. An already tense relationship, due to the imposition of sanctions on the Rab in December 2021, and Bangladesh’s criticisms of the ambassador’s comments on the human rights situation, aggravated the situation.

This issue gained an international dimension when the Russian embassy in Dhaka and its foreign ministry in Moscow interjected and made disparaging comments about the ambassador’s visit and the US’ insistence that there is a lack of democracy in Bangladesh. Exchanges between the two embassies took place over the internet, largely on Twitter. But ahead of Secretary Lu’s visit, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang’s surprise stop in Bangladesh at midnight on January 11 and meeting his counterpart AK Abdul Momen at an airport in Dhaka added to this international dimension.

The second background was the growing discontent in Bangladesh in the past few months, thanks to the economic crisis in the country and demonstrations by the opposition parties, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Until last summer, the government was harshly dealing with any attempt to organise rallies and demonstrations by the BNP and was arresting its leaders. But in the face of criticisms, the government has allowed the BNP to organise rallies, although persecution of its workers and leaders have continued unabated. The government’s move is strategic as it wants to show the world, particularly the US, that the allegations of the BNP of an environment not conducive for an inclusive fair election next year are unfounded, and that, therefore, the ball is in the court of the BNP regarding participation in the election. No wonder Home Minister Asaduzzaman and Foreign Minister Momen have repeatedly referred to the BNP’s rally of December 10 as an example of its tolerance to the opposition. But they have forgotten that the violence ahead of the rally in front of the BNP office on December 7 was well covered by the international media, and that the US embassy, as well as the White House, had reacted to it.

Secretary Lu’s visit, against these backgrounds, reiterated the message of the past year that the US would like to see a fair and inclusive election in Bangladesh and that it is concerned about the shrinking civic space. In meetings with government officials and members of civil society on two separate occasions, the message was repeated.

One might ask why a trip was necessary to communicate a message which has been delivered so many times. Looking at Lu’s itinerary, it can be safely assumed that it was to gauge the depth of the commitment of the incumbent on these issues. It is not surprising that the trip itinerary was overwhelmed with meetings with government officials. One may recall the comments of Ned Price, the State Department spokesperson, on January 7, that the US welcomes “the words of Sheikh Hasina and her government that they want free and fair elections,” but that the US is “going to be watching that those words are ultimately matched with corresponding actions.” How much the government has succeeded in making a convincing case will be seen in the coming days, but Lu’s statements during the trip have not indicated any shift.

The government can take comfort that Donald Lu has referred to the Human Rights Watch’s report about the decline of extrajudicial killings by the Rab and then praised its work on “carrying out counterterrorism efforts and important functions while respecting human rights.” Home Minister Asaduzzaman said the US side did not discuss anything on the reform of Rab but described the Rab’s current activities as “satisfactory.” This diplomatic language only indicates that the sanctions are working. A subsequent statement by the US embassy in Dhaka reaffirms the US position. It said, “We applaud the government of Bangladesh’s efforts in these continued reforms and encourage the Bangladesh government to conduct independent investigations of alleged extrajudicial killings.” But it is also worth noting that, after the trip, the foreign minister has acknowledged that the Rab has done “bad things” in the past. The once belligerent tone of the minister seems to have mellowed a bit.

While Donald Lu’s trip has received lots of attention, it will be a mistake to consider this as a stand-alone visit, or a trip that will have a decisive result regarding the unresolved issues between these countries. Instead, it should be seen as a part of the continued engagement of the US administration with the Bangladeshi government. In the past two years, at least 12 officials have visited the country to drive home one message: it would like to see Bangladesh have an open, inclusive, and democratic process going forward and be a part of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Lu’s visit has made this message sound louder.

To catch a plagiarist

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.



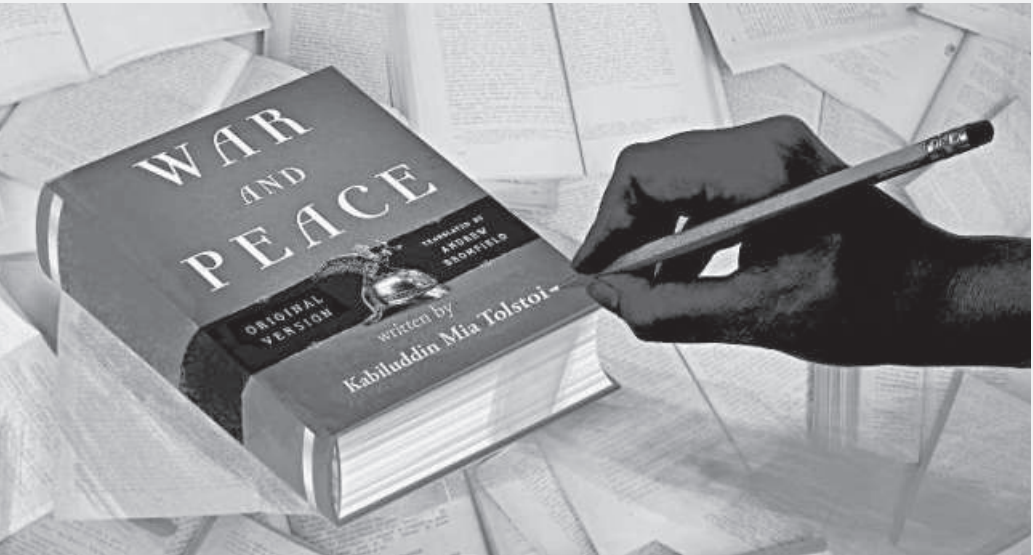
AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

It goes without saying that editors of texts have a thankless job. They laboriously go over content – no matter how badly written it is – correct spellings, reconstruct sentences, sometimes even completely rewrite the script, and make it palatable, only for the writer to receive all the applause. It’s a behind-the-scenes job that remains invisible. And yet, without it, everything would fall apart. Which is why when we editors get an engaging, well-written, well-argued, and error-free piece, we get a kind of high from the sheer joy of reading something for the pleasure of reading, without the constant hiccups of all the decoding and deconstructing.

Then, we feel dread. If the language is too flawless and the writer unknown, if the nit-

be to write to NatGeo and get their permission, which may or may not have been procured. By not acknowledging the source, however, the writer broke the trust placed on them by the editors and made them take the flak for their own dishonesty. The worst part is that it is unlikely that the person in question will get any more punishment than an exclusion from future textbook writing, which is hardly a deterrent for the next plagiarist.

What is mind-boggling is that certain writers feel no compunction about just lifting whole paragraphs from others’ texts and inserting them in their own pieces. The most common culprits are students who need to hand in many essays and papers in their academic life. Despite all the warnings of dire consequences if they are caught, some students will take the risk of stealing content from other papers, sometimes even buying entire papers written by someone else and handing those in as their own work. The incidents of university professors submitting papers with plagiarised sections is perhaps the most shocking. When teachers – who are responsible for imparting knowledge to



VISUAL: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

picking editor cannot put a single mark on the script, chances are that it is too good to be true.

In the newspaper industry especially, among the tsunami of outside contributions, only a handful turn out to be in the category of the brilliant and excellent, and even those will have at least one or two minor errors – dashes and dots mainly, or a silly typo. Otherwise, it is most likely someone being too clever and passing off someone else’s work as their own.

The recent hullabaloo on social media about a section of a Class 7 science textbook being allegedly plagiarised from the National Geographic website shows how insidious this practice is and how often it can go undetected. In this particular case, the section was Google-translated to Bangla, which is what really clever plagiarists do and often get away with. Professors Zafar Iqbal and Haseena Khan, the editors of the book, have admitted that they checked and, indeed, the text had been plagiarised, conveying that they were very embarrassed that it had gone unnoticed.

While people are ranting against the editors, they really should stop to think how difficult it is to suspect a Bangla text to be plagiarised if the original content is in another language. The person who first made the discovery must have really gone deep in his investigation, because he would have had to re-translate the Bangla piece to find out that it was a translation of an English script, because Google translate is not always very reliable and can come up with the most bizarre results. So kudos to the person who exposed the theft and also to the editors for quickly acknowledging that it had occurred – although they were not involved in writing that particular section – and assured that this was not the final version of the book.

But what about the particular writer who took the section and glibly passed it off as his own work? The obvious thing to do would have been to admit their own laziness and give credit to NatGeo. The most ethical thing to do would

others – resort to such deception, what message will their students get?

Ironically, Google, which has provided a limitless supply of such perfect writing to steal from, can track most such intellectual robbery with just a simple search of a sentence from the text. These days, there are special plagiarism trackers that can track sentences and paragraphs that have not been cited or attributed properly. Imagine how much material had been stolen all those years before Google!

Apparently there is also a thing called unintentional plagiarism when someone “forgets” to cite content taken from somewhere else or when one presents an idea thinking it to be their own when in fact it was, say, Milan Kundera’s. These unintentional plagiarists mean no harm and are either somnambulant when they steal or just scatterbrained, though they are still committing a crime. There are also “plagiarists-in-denial” who, no matter how many times you send them the piece with highlighted sentences that they have clearly “taken” from other texts and inserted into their own articles, will still insist that it was just coincidence!

Shabby plagiarists are those who forget to change the font of the parts they stole, or forget that their own language skills are quite poor and the beautiful sentences they have lifted stand out like precious stones in a pile of garbage. Meanwhile, “accidental plagiarists” diligently attribute the paragraph or idea to the source they had found online, but it so happens that the very source is fake and the attributed paragraph has actually been lifted from somewhere else. Talk about rotten luck!

But most plagiarists are well aware that they are stealing stuff from someone else’s hard work and feel no remorse about it. Thus, for editors, no matter how gruelling their hours and how brain-numbing their work, checking for plagiarism is really worth the trouble. It will not always be foolproof but in many cases will expose this intellectual poaching and help one avoid a lawsuit or zealous public shaming on social media.

/Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Luminous rings
7 Says further
11 Halloween hue
12 Aerobatics feat
13 French soup
14 Olympics sled
15 Radiates
16 “Return of the Jedi” villain
17 Hamlet, for one
18 Waco school
19 Isn’t well
21 Print units
22 Blue hue
25 Take in
26 Coffee dispensers
27 Deodorant

target
29 Reckless
33 Horse sound
34 Racer
Andretti
35 Possess
36 Truck fuel
37 Midmonth day
38 Smitten
39 Silent okays
40 Grimacing, perhaps

DOWN

1 Had aspirations
2 Bakery come-on
3 Caesar’s language
4 Running wild
5 Quiche base
6 Spot

7 Soothe
8 Tennis game
9 Treat for a terrier
10 Harpoons
16 Argo captain
18 Say without thinking
20 Poor sport’s cry
22 Transport to Oz
23 Dry-eyed
24 Tel Aviv native
25 Redeem
28 Printer’s need
30 Fiery crime
31 Colander’s kin
32 – up (hid out)
34 “Dracula” girl
36 Brief drop

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TUESDAY’S ANSWERS

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