

Dhaka will have own Indo-Pacific strategy: Shahriar Alam

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh will come up with its own strategy for the Indo-Pacific for a robust socio-economic regional cooperation, at a time when the region sees great power competition.

The priorities of the strategy would include strong regional connectivity, peace and stability, trade and investment, technology, climate change and energy, said State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam yesterday.

He said this at a dialogue on “Bangladesh and the Indo-Pacific Collaboration: Priority Issues and Concerns” jointly organised by the Bangladesh Centre for Indo-Pacific Affairs (BCIPA) and the Department of International Affairs of Jahangirnagar University at a city hotel.

In May last year, the US launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) that now has 13 members. Washington wants Dhaka to be on its side in the Indo-Pacific, something that Dhaka says it's still studying.

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Journo found dead in his home

STAR REPORT

Police recovered the decomposed body of a journalist of an English daily, The Financial Express, from his rented flat in Dhaka's Mirpur area yesterday afternoon.

The deceased was identified as Biplab Zaman, aged around 60, a news consultant of the daily, his colleagues said.

Police broke open the door of his house on the fourth floor of the building in Mirpur's Journalist Colony and recovered the body lying on the balcony, said Jasim Uddin Mollah, deputy commissioner of



Biplab Zaman

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Local resident Mariia, 78, carries a cart with humanitarian aid, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in the village of Nykyforivka, Donetsk region, Ukraine, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

REFUSAL TO GIVE UKRAINE TANKS Germany faces backlash from allies

Kyiv denounces ‘global indecision’; Russia launches offensive in Zaporizhzhia

AFP, Kyiv

Germany yesterday faced a strong backlash from allies over its refusal to supply Ukraine with its vaunted Leopard tanks to bolster its fighting capacity in the nearly year-long war with Russia.

On Friday, some 50 nations agreed to provide Kyiv with billions of dollars' worth of military hardware, including armoured vehicles and munitions needed to push back Russian forces.

But German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius told reporters on the sidelines of the event at the US Ramstein Air Base that despite heightened expectations, “We still cannot say when a decision will be taken, and what the decision will be, when it comes to the Leopard tank.”

Ukraine yesterday denounced the “global indecision” of its allies on providing heavy-duty modern tanks, saying “today's indecision is killing more of our people.”

“Every day of delay is the death of Ukrainians. Think faster,” presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak tweeted.

Several allies echoed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in saying the tanks were essential to Ukraine's fight with its much larger neighbour.

In a joint statement – and a rare public criticism of Europe's top power – the foreign ministers of the three Baltic states said they “call on Germany to provide Leopard tanks to Ukraine now.”

“This is needed to stop Russian aggression, help Ukraine and restore peace

in Europe quickly. Germany as the leading European power has special responsibility in this regard,” said the statement, tweeted by Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics.

Berlin has been hesitant to send the Leopards or allow other nations to transfer them to Kyiv, with reports earlier in the week saying it would agree to do so only if the US provided its tanks as well. Washington has said providing its Abrams tanks to Ukraine is not feasible, citing difficulties in training and maintenance.

But expectations had grown ahead of Friday's Ukraine Contact Group meeting of around 50 US-led countries that Germany would at least agree to let other countries operating Leopards transfer them to Kyiv's army.

ACC ill-equipped to probe cases

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Canada, the US, the UK, Singapore, Australia, Malaysia and Thailand are identified as a haven for Bangladeshi money launderers.

Five organisations – National Board of Revenue, Criminal Investigation Department of Police, Department of Narcotics, Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC), Department of Environment and ACC – are tasked to deal with money laundering.

Of these, only the ACC has a separate investigation unit and prosecution team for money laundering cases.

But its jurisdiction is limited: it can only investigate the laundering case related to corruption and bribery, said an ACC official referring to the Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012.

There is a working committee on the prevention of money laundering to supervise the activities of organisations.

About 80 percent of the laundering takes place through over-voicing and under-voicing and the NBR and CID are responsible for monitoring that, said one of the members of the working committee on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly on the issue.

But they rely on public prosecutors who remain burdened with other cases and lack the required skills to deal with money laundering cases.

“ACC is left crippled while others are not given proper support to fight money laundering – it shows a lack of willingness of a section in the government,” he added.

Bangladesh lost approximately \$8.27 billion on average annually between 2009 and 2018 from mis-invoicing import-export goods to

evade taxes and to illegally move money across international borders, according to the report.

In September last year, the CID estimated that Bangladesh may have lost about \$7.8 billion (around Tk 75,000 crore) in remittance between 2021-22 through mobile financial services.

Let alone repatriating the wealth, the investigation authorities face several obstacles to just find out about the money is laundered abroad, the official said.

Initially, the ACC requests the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) to confirm the information on wealth laundered abroad. The BFIU collects it from its counterparts abroad.

“But there is an embargo on using this information in public. Therefore, we cannot use it before the court,” Khan said.

In such instances, as per the United Nations Convention against Corruption, the ACC files Mutual Legal Assistance Requests (MLAR) to the respective countries for information.

“The ACC cannot file the MLAR directly to the authority concerned either,” Khan said, while pointing out 12 steps to obtain information.

The first step entails writing to the home ministry, which forwards the letter to the foreign ministry. If the foreign ministry finds the request implementable, it sends it to the respective authority of the foreign country through embassies.

The respective country's authority sends a reply via its foreign ministry.

Bangladesh's lost foreign ministry gets the information from the embassy and channels it to the home ministry. Investigators get a reply only when

Bangladesh's home ministry sends it to the ACC or other investigation agencies.

“It's a lengthy process. It becomes lengthier when the responding authority seeks supportive information,” said an investigation officer.

The ACC had filed an MLAR to Japan about laundered money in January 2020.

“In response, the country's authority asked us to refile requests in the Japanese language,” he said, adding that the ACC requested both Dhaka University's Institute of Modern Languages and the local Japan International Cooperation Agency office for translation.

But the ACC's request was refused.

“Another reply came from Cyprus partly in the Greek language,” he said, adding that out of the 34 requests so far they got just two responses and even then the responses did not inform much.

The main drawback of MLAR is that a country is at liberty to accept or refuse Bangladesh's request, according to ACC officials.

“Not only foreign offices, local offices often do not give importance to our requests. It seems to us they assume regular follow-up as an extra burden,” said an investigation officer.

To quicken the process, the anti-graft watchdog in September 2021 wrote to the cabinet division to take measures for Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) with the countries where huge amounts of money are laundered, Khan said.

The home ministry is now finalising the draft treaty. At present, Bangladesh has MLAT with only two countries: India and South Africa.

WB keen to help Bangladesh in its transition

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2022-23 through 2026-27 and is synced with the government's 8th Five-Year Plan. The WB's latest Systematic Country Diagnostic (SCD) update informs the CPF.

The SCD update identified four frontier challenges which, if tackled properly, can enable Bangladesh to accelerate its transition to a higher-middle income country level of development.

The challenges include the private sector's inability to drive growth and job creation for a lack of competition.

“Only a few large firms, including conglomerates, drive formal sector markets. Such firms remain mostly inward-looking and benefit from rents from protected domestic markets and RMG exports under special incentive programmes, and from being supported by close links with the banking sector,” the WB said in the SCD.

Another challenge identified is that the pattern of spatial transformation is inefficient, unsustainable, and less inclusive.

“The current urbanisation process is creating significant negative externalities from environmental degradation and congestion, such as decreased productivity and inclusivity, and has resulted in a rising number of urban poor.”

The recent increase in spatial welfare disparities across the country, such as access to quality education, health and other basic services highlights the country's challenges in managing the country's overall spatial transformation, the WB said.

Climate and environmental vulnerabilities pose serious risks to

sustainable growth.

“Bangladesh is one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate risks. Adapting to climate change remains a serious challenge to the country's development, especially in terms of managing its delta environment, which makes it particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise.”

Climate change poses a serious threat to the country's agricultural productivity growth, said the Washington-based multilateral lender.

“Fourth, cutting across the above three challenges are weak institutions and markets.”

There are significant gaps Bangladesh needs to overcome in terms of the overall quality of institutions, including capacity, regulatory quality and availability of formal institutions to create markets and make them contestable, it said.

Key areas for institutional capacity enhancement in the public sector include public service modernisation, public financial management, public procurement, statistics and citizen engagement.

“In addition, the current regulatory environment is not conducive to developing broad-based private sector growth.”

The country's poor performance in terms of business environment can be partly explained by many outdated laws governing economic issues such as foreign exchange, land and company formation.

“Regulatory rules often overlap or contradict one another, and administrative processes are opaque and poorly enforced. Such business environment challenges

are underscored by the weakness of institutions available to support market-based development.”

This SCD Update identified eight priorities to tackle the four frontier challenges and support the country's transition to upper middle-income status.

Four priorities are foundational, as they provide an essential basis to propel the country's transformation towards the upper middle-income status. Another four priorities are enabling priorities to shift gears for accelerated transformation.

During the meeting yesterday, Kamal requested the WB to fund the country's mega projects.

Besides, he stressed that WB can share its vast experience in different countries with Bangladesh for its graduation from the least-developed country bracket.

Rab man

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Police are looking for another suspect named Jalal, 25.

Banani police seized a black vest of Rab, a toy pistol, a pair of handcuffs, a hand traffic light of police and a car.

Shahidul told a reporter of Jamuna TV who happened to be near the scene that some of those who stopped his car were wearing black vests that said Rab. “They pointed a pistol through the window. After we got out of the car, they said that we were gold smugglers. As we told them to check, they started hitting us.”

“They said that they would shoot us. Then they cuffed our hands. We started screaming for help. A man then stopped his car and a policeman who was returning home on his motorcycle after his duty also stopped.”

The policeman named Sakib told the TV reporter, “When I went forward, people wearing Rab vests showed me their ID cards. The ID card had expired. Then I had doubts. Later they also wanted to take me in the car. At one point, the men fled. But we caught one of them.”

Shahidul then called 999 and a team of Banani police appeared there soon afterwards and uncuffed the victims.

Joy, the man caught at the scene, told officers that he works at a garment factory in Tongi and was a Rab informant.

He told police that Momen told about an operation and took him to Mohakhali floyer that night.

This correspondent repeatedly tried to contact Rab-1 commanding officer and Rab media director but they did not pick up phone calls.

Police informant stabbed to death in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A police informant was brutally stabbed to death by unidentified criminals in Karnaphuli upazila of Chattogram.

Md Kayes, 33, of Koigram area in Patiya upazila, went missing Friday night and his body was spotted at CDA Residential's field at around 10:00am yesterday, said police.

“We found stab injuries on his shoulder, abdomen, chest, and back. His phone was found switched off in his pocket. Family members said he had been working as a police informant. We are investigating the matter,” said Arifur Hossain, the assistant commissioner of Chattogram Metropolitan Police (Karnaphuli Zone).

His body was sent to Chattogram Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Rangpur man sent to jail for raping 7-yr-old

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A man accused of raping a 7-year-old girl in Rangpur's Kaunia was sent to jail by a district court yesterday.

Mofazzal Mondal, 52, of Dhushmara village, was arrested after the girl's mother filed a case Friday night.

According to the case, he raped the girl Friday afternoon after abducting her as she left home to meet her mother who was working in a nearby field.

Hearing the girl's screams, two women rushed in and rescued her while Mofazzal fled the scene.

Kaunia Police Station OC Montaser Billah said she was undergoing treatment at Rangpur Medical College Hospital.

2 black bear cubs rescued in Cox's Bazar

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Police rescued two Asiatic black bear cubs during a raid in Digar Pankhali area in Chakaria, Cox's Bazar around 9:30pm on Friday.

The cubs are around two months old and weigh over a kilogram each.

The district DB Police also arrested Deepak Das, 32, a member of an international wildlife trafficking ring, who had the cubs in his possession with the intent to smuggle them abroad.

The Asiatic black bear is categorised as “vulnerable” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in its Red List.

Middle-income group most affected

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urban areas of Bangladesh throughout 2022 compared to the first month of the year.

The general inflation rate started rising from February last year.

After a slight decrease in May, the rate began going up again in June and became much higher in August after the fresh hike in fuel prices. It continued increasing for two months before coming down slightly in December, the report said.

The food inflation rate in the capital for the low-income group was on a declining trend up to April last year, but both the food and non-food inflation rates started rising from May.

It stood at 10.32 percent in June. In July, it had slightly come down, just before hitting the year's highest of

15.31 percent in August.

After August, the rate continued to fall and it finally stood at 7.04 percent in December.

Meanwhile, the non-food inflation rate went all the way up to 18.86 percent in July last year.

Kabir assumed that due to the increase of house rent and prices of electricity and gas, the non-food inflation rate might go up further in 2023.

The CAB has proposed policy recommendations in its analysis of inflation trends.

The recommendations suggest the government increase subsidised food aid and social protection to reduce pressure on the people.

It also suggested the government extend social protection schemes in urban areas to protect low- and middle-income consumers from the

rising inflationary pressures.

The government had significantly increased OMS activities during the pandemic, which was further extended in 2022 to protect the consumer groups from the economic slowdown and inflationary woes.

But there is an inadequacy of OMS food supply against extremely high demands, and a lack of proper monitoring to ensure equitable distribution of OMS food products among low-income people.

The CAB recommendation has also opposed the decision to increase gas and fuel oil prices at the retail level as the bulk price hike of those would further affect the lower-income people.

Speaking at the virtual press briefing, CAB Chairman Ghulam Rahman said there has been a lot of

development in the country over the last decade and the per capita income of the people has also increased. However, the income of the upper class has been much higher than those of the lower- and middle-class people.

“The year 2022 was not a relief for the general people. The Russia-Ukraine War has also had an impact on Bangladesh. There is no way to deny that the incomes of many people had decreased during the coronavirus [pandemic] and its post period.”

Rahman urged the government to take special measures to increase the income of the common people to reduce inequality.

He said that once the price of a product increases in the country, it cannot be expected to come down quickly.