

VISUAL: STAR

Can the US Eagle Fly to Bangladesh?



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ZILLUR RAHMAN

The American bald eagle is known to fly over 125 miles per day during its seasonal migration. Though undoubtedly an impressive distance to travel, this flight range pales in comparison to the astounding 8,214-mile distance between Washington and Dhaka. Perhaps no bald eagle could ever fly across the Pacific to visit our shores, but the nation that the eagle represents now regularly flies high-level diplomats to visit Bangladesh.

The growing presence of the US in Bangladesh’s national political dialogue is one of the most interesting trends in the latter’s domestic politics today. The Bangladesh government has expressed that it is not the role of foreign ambassadors to make any assertions or opinions about a nation’s internal governance and electoral system. On the other hand, we see multiple embassies, particularly from Bangladesh’s most important development partners, come together in solidarity to advocate for human rights and democratic values and repeatedly state the need for inclusive elections. This drive to promote democracy is commonly seen as a counterpoint to China’s growing power in Asia. Bangladesh is but one of the many nations that fall under this democratisation initiative currently spearheaded by US President Joe Biden.

In the landscape of world power rivalries, Bangladesh has somehow found itself in a dangerous and opportune position. We now have significant commercial relationships with Washington, Beijing and Moscow. We also have significant dependencies on all three. With Bangladesh’s economy making dramatic progress over the last decade, such a situation was somewhat inevitable. Bangladesh is now too big and too important in the power balance of South Asia to ignore. However, that is not the only reason behind the US’ recent step-up in diplomatic activities in our country. To understand why the current US ambassador is so prominent in the national news cycle, and why high-level US diplomatic officials are visiting the country, we must understand the turbulent bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and the US.

Changing bilateral realities

Over the last two years, both countries have increased their diplomatic engagement. Till now, 19 mid- and high-level bilateral visits have taken place: Bangladesh sent seven delegations to the US, while the US sent 12. Counsellor of the US Department of State Derek Chollet’s visit earlier this week was the 12th in the last two years.

These visits are indicative of a big paradigm shift in the way the US approaches South Asia. Under its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US has tried to move away from its traditional focus on India and towards bilateral approaches with each South Asian nation. The real-time example of this new paradigm is US Ambassador Peter Haas and his words and actions in Bangladesh. The ambassador has been much more outspoken and

public about promoting democratic values than any of his predecessors. This unabashed promotion of democratic values is the core tenant of US foreign policy under the current Democratic Party.

A significant portion of Bangladesh welcomes the US’ renewed interest in promoting a democratic climate here, but this kind of assertiveness also fuels its biggest detractors. All democracies are flawed, and Bangladesh is definitely more flawed than others. Those who gain the most from the failures of democracy will definitely be the most critical of those who advocate for it. Detractors frequently portray this advocacy as yet another example of American imperialism; this is perhaps the strongest counterpoint to Peter Haas, but this point also falls short in the face of contemporary geopolitics.

The inconvenient truth must be accepted that Bangladesh is far

Friendship towards all, malice towards none: this is the only way for Bangladesh to survive and thrive in the world to come. Looking at the situation from a purely Machiavellian perspective, democracy and human rights are the US’ trump cards in its policy to contain China in Asia. Coincidentally, those two cards are also the ones that the people of Bangladesh desperately need, and which will benefit them the most in the long run.

removed from the typical notion of sovereignty in the realm of geopolitics. The economy is far too dependent on imports and exports. India, China, the US, Russia, and Japan – all have significant strategic interests in Bangladesh. The nation is economically bound to all these world powers in far too many ways to count. And in this scenario, risking the ire of the most significant trade and development partner is out of the question. Friendship towards all, malice towards none: this is the only way for Bangladesh to survive and thrive in the world to come. Looking at the situation from a purely Machiavellian perspective, democracy and human rights are the US’ trump cards in its policy to contain China in Asia. Coincidentally, those two cards are also the ones that the people of Bangladesh desperately need, and which will benefit them the most in the long run.

Envoy hardships

Of all the world powers, Bangladesh is most linked with the US in economic terms. The US is

the single largest importer of Bangladeshi RMG products. It also tops the charts in providing foreign remittances to Bangladesh. However, this kind of one-sided relationship is no basis for mutual cooperation – particularly when the US politically opposed the ideologies and circumstances behind the nation’s founding at the time.

Even to date, it would not be amiss to say that no government in Bangladesh had any problem with the US. Now, relations with the US and the incumbent Awami League government are visibly strained. Bangladesh’s removal from trade benefits after the Rana Plaza collapse, the multiple expressions of disappointment in both the 2014 and 2018 election proceedings, and the most recent US treasury sanctions against members of Bangladesh’s security forces for violation of human rights – all of these acts, though entirely justifiable, have also served to broaden the divide.

However, some people are selectively blind to the enormous amount of US soft power over Bangladesh. Though not as glamorous as the infrastructure megaprojects funded by China, Japan or Russia, the massive levels of intangible and straight-out monetary support the US has been single-handedly providing to Bangladesh since liberation is a fact somehow quickly forgotten. Case in point, the US has contributed the most to the Rohingya refugee crisis so far. The US secretary of state announced USD 170 million in additional humanitarian aid at the last UN General Assembly. Including this new fund, the country’s contribution to the Rohingya crisis response has reached nearly USD 1.9 billion.

Added to that are the enormous amounts of vaccines donated during the height of the pandemic, and the other intangible ways the US has aided growth in Bangladesh.

In comparison, the treatment faced by the US diplomatic mission in Bangladesh should be a matter of shame. Previous US ambassadors Dan Mozena and Earl R Miller were not granted audience at the high offices in Dhaka before their final departures after completing their terms. US Ambassador Marcia Bernicat’s convoy was outright attacked. And most recently, US Ambassador Peter Haas expressed concerns over his security after he was obstructed by a group of people during a programme.

The occasional tone taken by the incumbent government against US representatives may not be the best in the world of diplomacy. Several not-too-respectful statements have been made against previous envoys and state officials. This tone certainly wasn’t missed by the US, as Donald Lu stated to *The Daily Star* during his visit last month, “We all agreed that we could work a little harder to prevent misperceptions on both sides... That it’s important that when friends have concerns or questions that we’re raising. But I think we can do that in a friendly environment.”

Maybe the best thing that can come out of these high-level diplomatic visits from the US is that the elephant in the room is finally talked about. Due to Bangladesh’s steady growth and progress, the US has finally begun to approach the nation on a strictly bilateral means outside of the lens of India. It would be foolish for any government not to see the value of this opportunity presented to us.

The appearance and disappearance of Tagore



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The installation and the consequent removal of a sculpture from the Dhaka University campus has triggered an interesting debate. On Tuesday, a group of students installed a large sculpture of Rabindranath Tagore next to the iconic Raju Memorial Sculpture. The campus authorities later removed the figure of a rather pensive-looking author of our national anthem, with a taped mouth, holding a nailed copy of his *Gitanjali*. The protesters responded by hanging a banner saying, “Tagore has been ‘forcibly disappeared.’”

The left-leaning student body, Bangladesh Chhatra Union, has claimed responsibility for the installation of the protest art created by some fine arts students. The follow-up banner, with its crafty use of “disappearance,” pokes at another political riddle now being investigated by different national and international agencies. The DU authorities have unwittingly opened a fresh can of worms.

The selection of Tagore and

newly partitioned country naturally felt threatened by the cultural materials available in Tagore. The Pakistani junta banned Tagore’s songs in the 1960s. In response, Chhayanaut was created, and its contribution to the formation of our cultural identity is well-known.

The question then arises: do we have the same situation prevailing in Bangladesh today to forward Tagore as a symbol of freedom of expression? The answer is probably no. It is not an exaggeration to say that Tagore is more celebrated in Bangladesh today than in West Bengal. Then why tape him and pierce his work with a bleeding nail? Why didn’t the protesters choose the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, whose body lies in the heart of the Dhaka University campus? Or the persecuted community of Bauls?

If you ask me, the in-your-face sculpture of Tagore placed at the entry of the ongoing Ekushey Boi Mela would have died a natural death because of its vague references. If the

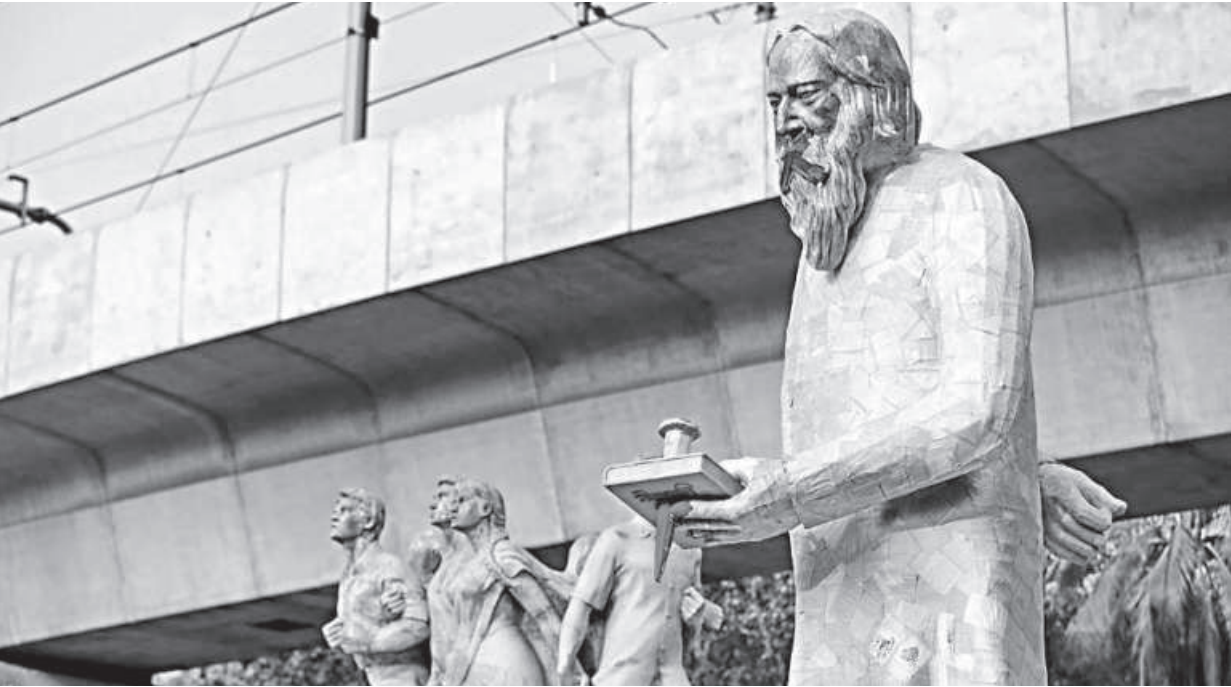
are so many ads that promote a sense of inadequacy and insecurity in us. The depiction of perfect human figures with their perfect lives in ads constantly reminds us of our shortcomings. Isn’t that an infringement of my right to be who I am? What about those graffiti that simply act as a pissing competition?

Just like artists have the right to express themselves, the university authorities also have the right to protect the beauty and sanctity of its property. But the rational thing to do was to ask the responsible parties to remove the sculpture, poster, graffiti and the like. The power of democracy lies in its ability to accommodate the voices of dissent. In a free society, every individual has the right to decide what art or entertainment they want. The Tagore sculpture could have become banal without being banned.

They say censorship is like poison gas – it can harm you once the wind shifts. Those clamping bans on the voices and views of others may be subject to their own game of censorship in the future. Freedom of expression is a two-way street. Securing freedom of expression for ourselves requires freedom of expression for others. The idea is at the core of democracy.

Dhaka University has a proud legacy of forging the consciousness and conscience of the nation. Censorship at a public university curtails our right to be exposed to

and enriched by art. Dhaka University then must come up with a detailed policy of curating images and voices by the public, of the public, and for the public. While it can very well remove the graffiti presented as territorial markers, it can allow space for public art that creates public awareness. The response of the audience will tell us which art matters the most. For instance, even after the removal of the wall painting of “Shubodh has escaped,” the image of a dishevelled, distraught figure with a caged sun strikes a chord with us. The word play on *Shubodh* (good sense or a possible proper name for a Hindu minority) stirs our imagination. A taped Tagore does not. Its placement before the Raju Memorial does not help either. But the handling of the sculpture has given it meaning that it did not originally have. Its expression was denied, proving that freedom of expression is indeed in jeopardy.



The installation near Raju Memorial Sculpture in Dhaka University, which was removed by the university authorities.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Gitanjali as an emblem of free thinking was a non-starter. The status of Tagore in Bangladesh is stronger than ever. We have universities and institutions named after him as well as national-level celebrations of his anniversaries. *Gitanjali* (*Song of Offerings*) champions love as its principal subject, with the recurrent espousal of the internal conflict between spiritual longings and earthly desires. Modelled after the medieval Indian tradition, the spiritual (i.e. apolitical) nature of the collection even helped Tagore, a British subject in colonial India, win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

Tagore was deemed a problematic figure by the rulers in the erstwhile West Pakistan. Tagore’s song “*Aaji Bangladesher Hridoy Hotey*” (From the heart of Bangladesh), among others, acted as an impetus for Bangalee nationhood in the 1940s. Those who felt Urdu and Arabic should be the building blocks for the

sculpture was intended to highlight the publisher that was initially denied entry to the fair for publishing books that challenge the official development discourse, Tagore’s *Gitanjali* is a wrong choice. But the hasty removal of the protest art by the authorities has simply turned it into the right choice.

The DU authorities’ action has given the sculpture its desired public attention with an added agenda of “forced disappearance.” They could have simply served a 24-hour notice to the student body for vandalising public property with the unauthorised installation of a sculpture that apparently compromises the sanctity of the nearby Raju Memorial Sculpture.

Then the bigger question arises: what is the graffiti policy of Dhaka University, or any public institution, for that matter? Why are public spaces adorned with advertisements that we don’t want to see? There

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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5 Rancor

10 Crack up

12 Danger

13 Ordered display

14 Bakery come-on

15 Start for pitch or mo

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18 Dramatist

19 Jonson

19 Iran, once

21 Blue cheese feature

22 Motherhood

24 Reversed

25 Contemporary quality

29 Fluctuate

30 Barefoot

32 Pigged out

33 Cherbourg chum

34 Reuben bread

35 Tea additive

37 “Adam Bede” author

39 Wear down

40 King march site

41 Transmits

42 Louver piece

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3 Dawn goddess

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6 For every

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8 Opportune

9 Oryx’s cousin

11 Health class topic

17 Tympanic membrane

20 Clue room

21 Some skirts

23 Fools

25 Grow up

26 Portland setting

27 Excitation

28 Famed cellist

29 Bud holders

31 Coup –

33 Son of Zeus

36 Throw in

38 French article

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