

Iran–Saudi detente can be a game–changer

Brokered by China, the deal can lead to wide-ranging consequences for the world

We would like to congratulate the Saudi and Iranian authorities for having the wisdom and far-sightedness to agree on restoring bilateral ties between the two nations. For helping to bring this about, China deserves a lot of credit. For Bangladesh, as a Muslim-majority country that has always pursued a policy of peaceful coexistence with all other countries, it is indeed very encouraging. At a time when the world is mired in increased uncertainties and chaos, the decision by Saudi Arabia and Iran to try and find ways of communication is an optimistic sign. It has the potential to benefit the whole world, and the region in particular. As such, we hope other countries, particularly Western countries, and especially the US, will see it in a positive light.

We understand that Iran and Saudi Arabia have many longstanding issues and historical disagreements. It would be naïve to think that they can sort out all their disputes overnight. The two countries will have to put in concerted efforts, over considerable periods of time, to build trust, which could eventually lead to the two finding solutions to many of their disagreements. But the fact that the agreement was signed after two years of difficult negotiations holds promise. And that officials from both sides have expressed their desire to find common ground on the basis of each side refraining from intervening in each other's internal affairs, and also from engaging in a costly arms race, further raises hope of a long-term rapprochement.

Tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as many of the decisions taken by both sides as a result of the mistrust that had developed over many decades, have proven to be disastrous for the people of the Middle East. The proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, for example, have led to some of the worst devastations in recent memory. Therefore, ending these wars, especially the one in Yemen – which has resulted in one of the largest humanitarian crises of modern times, as described by various UN agencies – should weigh heavily on their agendas.

Needless to say, the Shia-majority Iran and the Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia are seen as leaders of their respective sects by millions of people of the Islamic faith. Therefore, the rift that has developed between the two countries has obviously had a massive influence on these people. Should the two sides succeed in coming together in the interest of peaceful coexistence, it could have an extremely positive affect on overall regional peace and security.

The US, on the other hand, should not see the role played by China in mediating the agreement as a sign of dwindling US influence in the region. The US still has a massive role to play in the Middle East and, as such, should not look to derail the agreement in any way. With the world economy in dire straits, we hope Saudi Arabia and Iran will also look to work together to alleviate the anguish being felt by billions of people around the world.

We must protect Baul singers

Bauls live in constant fear as their attackers enjoy impunity

With its many ethnic groups, distinct cultures and dialects, as well as its hybridisation of different social traits and norms, Bangladesh is as diverse as it gets. It contains multitudes that have served it faithfully through the centuries. It is, therefore, disheartening to see how that diversity is being threatened through continuous assaults on Bauls in the country. As per a recent report by this daily, these people known for their distinctive music and way of life are living under threat of attacks and humiliation as their tormentors continue to enjoy impunity.

In western Bangladesh alone, there have been at least five attacks on Baul *akhras* (dens) in the last seven years. And not a single attacker has been brought to book as of now. Even this past Friday, there was an attack on a cultural event featuring Baul songs in Sirajganj. At least nine artistes were reportedly assaulted by religious zealots apparently enraged by the loud music, while musical instruments, chairs and other valuables were also vandalised. Organisers of the event said that this kind of incident had never happened before, even though they had been holding such programmes in Sirajganj for long.

What this shows is how unpredictable and spontaneous such attacks can be, and the culture of impunity that shields those behind the attacks. Even when a case is filed following an attack, it seldom leads to trial, let alone a conviction of the perpetrators. For example, on November 5, a group of attackers allegedly led by an imam of a local mosque attacked a Baul akhra in Laubaria, Kushtia. The following day, a case was filed with the Daulatpur police station, accusing 19 people. Of them, 18 were granted bail after they surrendered to the court.

In the absence of justice, victims often have to settle outside of the court with their attackers, or simply cease any legal pursuit to protect themselves. This has only emboldened the former. Besides attacks on *akhras*, assaults on Baul festivals have also become quite common in recent years. Even ordinary Baul enthusiasts have not been spared. One may recall that two teachers of Rajshahi University were allegedly murdered by extremists in 2014 and 2016. A physician was also attacked in Kushtia in 2014. In the age of the Digital Security Act, enemies of diversity have also been quite proactive in launching legal assaults on Baul singers and performers.

It must be reiterated that any attack on Baul events and *akhras* is an attack on the diversity of Bangladesh which it so proudly presents to the world. It's an attack on the Bauls' fundamental human rights which the constitution guarantees. Therefore, we urge the authorities to take stern action against the attackers. Baul music promotes harmony, tolerance and pluralism – a genre inspired by syncretic Islam. We should be proud of it, not allow it to be desecrated by fundamentalists.

Teesta: The Name of a Plundered River



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With the Teesta water-sharing deal between Bangladesh and India hanging in the balance for over a decade, West Bengal is planning to dig two new canals to divert more water from the river for irrigation and set up two hydropower projects on a tributary of the river, which will further worsen the sufferings of farmers in Bangladesh. According to these plans, as reported by The Telegraph, a 32km canal to draw water from the Teesta and the Jaldhaka rivers will be dug till Changrabandha of Cooch Behar district, and another 15km canal will be dug on the left bank of Teesta. And two dams named Teesta Low Dam Project (TLDP) I and II will be set up on the Bara Rangeet River to produce 71MW electricity.

This is clearly a violation of all international norms of transboundary river water management, as well as India's commitment given at the 37th meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), held in New Delhi in March 2010. During that meeting, India agreed that "the Indian side would not construct any major structure for diversion of water for consumptive uses upstream of (Gajoldoba) barrage except minor irrigation schemes, drinking water supply and Industrial use" (Article 8, Annexure V).

At the same meeting, Bangladesh proposed a draft water-sharing agreement, according to which the Teesta water would be equally divided between Bangladesh and India, leaving 20 percent in the river to maintain ecological requirements. Had that draft agreement been signed, Bangladesh and India would each get 40 percent of the actual flow available at Gajoldoba point. After much deliberation, the two sides agreed in June 2011 that India would get 42.5 percent and Bangladesh 37.5 percent. But that agreement could not be signed due to the opposition from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Though Mamata mentioned "shortage of water" as the reason for not signing the agreement, her government's latest move to withdraw more water from the river contests the validity of her argument.

Previously, Bangladesh and India signed an ad hoc agreement to share Teesta water at the 25th JRC meeting held in Dhaka in July 1983. According to the agreement, valid till 1985, 36 percent of the water from the Teesta would be allocated to Bangladesh, 39



The drying up of the Teesta River is threatening biodiversity, environment and ecology and hampering the livelihoods of thousands of farmers living in the northern region of Bangladesh.

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percent to India, and 25 percent would remain unallocated. These shares would be subject to reallocation upon the completion of scientific studies by the Joint Teesta/Tista Committee. That reallocation agreement never took place, and India continued to withdraw water from the Teesta River.

According to a report published by *The Daily Star* last year citing data from the JRC, between 1973 and 1985 when the barrage was yet to be built in West Bengal, the daily average flow of water in the river in the last 10 days of March was 6,710 cusec (cubic feet per second). After the barrage became operational, the water flow started to reduce in the dry season while increasing in the monsoon. The flow in the Teesta starts to dwindle in October, and by December the river dries up. To meet the irrigation needs, the flow should be over 5,000 cusecs, but Bangladesh has been getting only 1,200-1,500 cusecs during the dry season, which sometimes drops to as low as 200-300 cusecs.

As a result, the drying up of the Teesta riverbed is threatening biodiversity, environment and ecology, hampering the livelihoods of thousands of farmers living in the northern region of Bangladesh. According to the

Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), about 60 percent of an estimated 90,000 hectares of land in the river basin areas are left unutilised in the dry season. Many farmers in the Lalmonirhat district, who cultivate crops on the sandy char lands, are compelled to use diesel-run shallow machines to irrigate their croplands, which increases their costs of farming.

Teesta River, which is 4,500 cusecs. Bangladesh should put pressure on India during bilateral discussions and raise Teesta and other transboundary river water-sharing issues as a mandatory condition for the continuity of India's access to Bangladeshi rivers, inland waterways and seaports. We also need to ratify the UN watercourses convention of

In this circumstance, if two new canals are dug and two new dams are built by the West Bengal government, the situation will become unbearable for Bangladesh during the dry season. Along with the Teesta, the Dharla River will also dry up because of water withdrawal from the Jaldhaka River. That's why Bangladesh needs to engage with India immediately in order to stop the new canals and put pressure to sign equitable water-sharing treaties.

Some Bangladeshi experts are concerned that sharing water based on the available water at the Gajoldoba point will not be fair nor optimal for Bangladesh, as the water flow is reduced by the hydropower projects even before it reaches Gajoldoba. Although the dams are termed "run-of-the-river" dams, which are not supposed to affect the river flow, the requirement of water storage for a long time to generate electricity and also the evaporation loss from the reservoirs reduce the downstream flows substantially, especially during the dry season. That's why the experts opine that Bangladesh should demand the minimum historical flow in the

1997, which can be a great tool for a lower riparian country like Bangladesh to get its fair share of water from its big neighbour. According to Article 7.1 of the convention, "Watercourse States shall, in utilising an international watercourse in their territories, take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm to other Watercourse States." Article 7.2 says, "Where significant harm nevertheless is caused to another Watercourse State, the States whose use causes such harm shall, in the absence of agreement to such use, take all appropriate measures, having due regard for the provisions of Articles 5 and 6, in consultation with the affected State, to eliminate or mitigate such harm and, where appropriate, to discuss the question of compensation."

It remains a mystery why Bangladesh, being a lower riparian country that suffers from unilateral water withdrawal from a big neighbour, still has not ratified the convention. It's high time Bangladesh ratified the convention and took the disputed water-sharing issues to international platforms to get a fair share of Teesta water from India.

Navigating a world of uncertainties



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The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the deepening energy and food crises, high inflation, deteriorating climate, and disruptive technology are all warning of a dreadful year ahead. The international scene looks extremely volatile, with numerous potential flashpoints across different security arenas.

A new major Russian offensive has already started. Ukraine is actively calling for Nato and EU support, claiming Russian attacks on Ukraine is an attack on collective European security. In spring, there is a high possibility of a heavy counteroffensive in the war zone as Ukraine will receive increased weapon support from the West. The German government has declared that it will send 14 Leopard-2 tanks, while the US will deliver 31 Abrams in the coming months. The UK has agreed to provide 14 Challenger-2 tanks to Ukraine. Ninety combat vehicles would soon be dispatched from the US for Ukraine. Air defence systems would be provided to Ukraine from US, Germany, and Netherlands. Volodymyr Zelenskyy has also completed a whistle-stop war-time trip to secure more arms, especially jets from the West.

Increased military support raises the potential for accidental conflict escalation. If Russia finds itself cornered in the fight, the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons cannot be

ruled out. Intensification of conflict in Ukraine will also have a spillover effect on Europe, with the possibility of the war expanding in the West.

The global economy is going through challenges, and the future is looking grey. The economic repercussions of Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine have initiated a steep rise in inflation and started an era of low growth and low investment. The IMF has projected that global growth will fall from an estimated 3.4 percent in 2022 to 2.9 percent in 2023, with the possibility of further decrease if tensions around the world increase. High-interest rates will take a toll, and inflation will remain a threat. As a result, lower-income countries are at risk. According to the World Economic Forum, the "cost of living" issue will dominate global risks in 2023. There will be increased economic stagnation, divergence, and distress in countries. Geopolitical fragmentation will drive geo-economic warfare with increasing clashes among the global powers. Economic policies will be used both offensively and defensively.

Food and energy crises will continue to be major threats in 2023. As the war in Ukraine and climate change continue to wreak havoc, experts are bracing for another year of dire consequences for global food security. The possibility of major famines around the world

cannot be disregarded. According to the Global Report on Food Crisis 2022, 222 million people in 53 countries, including Bangladesh, are expected to face acute food crisis and will need urgent assistance. Energy security will also aggravate this year. According to The Economist, global energy consumption will grow by just 1.3 percent in 2023 amid a slow economy and rising energy prices. Waning gas supplies and extreme weather events might force countries to fall back on fossil fuels, deferring the green energy transition.

There are some high-risk flashpoints around the world where the potential for conflicts loom large in 2023. The most noticeable among them are the Taiwan Strait crisis and the Sino-Indian border conflict in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The year 2022 was turbulent for the Taiwan Strait, as China increased military pressure on Taipei following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit in August. Taiwan will continue to remain high on China's agenda in 2023. The increased military presence will only increase the tension in the region and the probability of the Chinese and Taiwanese militaries encountering each other. Such encounters have a substantial risk of turning into larger conflicts. There is also little reason for optimism in China-India ties for the new year.

On December 9, 2022, the Indian and Chinese military forces fought along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Fight along their disputed borders will continue to shape the relation between these two countries in 2023, and the possibility of accidental escalation remains. US-China rivalry will be a shaping factor in 2023. Unfortunately,

the tension between them is less likely to ease. The relationship between China and US is deteriorating. The Chinese spy balloon spotted twice in US airspace has again heated the diplomatic relation between these two countries. US intelligence is certain that the balloon was a spy balloon, but China has denied that. The US dramatically shot down the balloon with a fighter jet, to which China reacted that the US response was extreme.

Concerns about the deteriorating climate will continue in 2023. According to the Global Risk Report 2023, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse is one of the fastest deteriorating global risks. The lack of profound and rigorous progress on climate action targets has revealed the lack of bold political commitment needed to make a green transition to achieve net zero. Growing demands on public and private sector resources from other crises like food and energy will reduce the speed and scale of mitigation efforts. There will be insufficient progress towards the adaptation support required for those countries increasingly affected by the impacts of climate change.

The development of disruptive technologies and negative AI use is predicted to increase in 2023. Technology will intensify inequalities, while risks from cybersecurity will remain a constant concern. The technology sector will be a vital target of stronger industrial policies and heightened state intervention.

This will be a challenging year for countries worldwide. Bangladesh should brace for the upcoming complex challenges and take precautions accordingly. Without sincere and urgent actions, the upcoming disasters would be inevitable.