

# Do we need branches of foreign universities?



## BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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When the Tigers roared against the three lions, there was another surprise waiting for us on the cricket ground; a brand positioning of a foreign university. The emblem on the field declared that a second-tier university had opened its branch in Bangladesh. According to the university's website, it is ranked in the QS "most improved" category, which probably suggests its future potential. Its position among the top 10 Malaysian universities is no guarantee that it is a world-class one.

In recent years, Malaysia has become a preferred academic destination for many Bangladeshi students for several reasons. Their tuition fees are comparatively lower than in Anglophone countries. Many parents prefer sending their children to an Asian country because of its geographical proximity and cultural similarity. The local interest in the regional universities has probably teased them to extend their catchment area of overseas students. They have ventured to come to source countries to secure their business interests. According to a press report, another Chinese university is all set to launch its branch in Bangladesh.

Those who permitted these overseas educational institutions must have thought these universities would give the local universities a run for their money, forcing them to improve quality, at least in theory. I am trying to rationalise their decisions for my

**We have allowed our local universities to struggle to make room for these imported ones. Just like we allowed our goods to suffer in an open market system. We don't have manufacturers, but MBA graduates to sell someone else's products. Did we need to have 150-plus universities to cater to our students, out of which probably 20 universities are offering some semblance of education that is of any value?**

outputs are published in the portals of a selected few data management agencies, their fate becomes those of desert roses: they bloom without any audience to appreciate them.

Any patriotic policymaker will prioritise improving the health of local institutions by first trying to understand the nature of the ills affecting the system before bringing in a foreign remedy. The introduction of foreign universities follows the same principle of various premium cricket leagues, I believe. In the Indian Premier

graduates today are expected to be multitaskers. It's not enough for doctors to be good surgeons, for instance; they need to know the law to protect themselves, IT skills to work remotely, counselling skills to make customers happy, and presentation skills for idea sharing.

Do you think a foreign university with a monetary interest will come to your country to make a significant contribution to your national interest? I doubt it. We need to figure out what we want from our education sector.

If the purpose is to stop our young ones from going abroad, by giving them an international degree while staying at home, before they could migrate abroad when they are a bit more mature, then the opening of study centres makes some sense. But if you reread my last sentence, then you will begin to see the embedded nonsense. These international outlets are likely to recruit local teachers and ask them to follow their prepared template while charging international tuition fees. There could be one or two visiting faculty members or some online components to validate the international label of education. If you think deeply, this is just one more way to launder money.

We have allowed our local universities to struggle to make room for these imported ones. Just like we allowed our goods to suffer in an open market system. We don't have manufacturers, but MBA graduates to sell someone else's products. Did we need to have 150-plus universities to cater to our students, out of which probably 20 universities are offering some semblance of education that is of any value? The question needs to be asked, why did we allow so many malnourished universities to grow in a resource-scarce country? Why did we allow the weaklings to thrive? The answer is often cosmetic.



VISUAL: STAR YOUTH

consumption. The logic, however, prompts me to a parental coaxing that my generation grew up with. There was always this cousin or dad's boss's child in the office who was better than us in every way. "You need to drink the water from his/her washed feet," our parents would occasionally poke.

Of course, competition is (un) healthy. After my hiatus at a private university, I have recently resumed my professorial post at the oldest public university. I can see how sincerely Dhaka University is trying to adapt to the demands of the time. They are focusing on in-house faculty and curricula development guided by the prescription of the University Grants Commission's (UGC) quality assurance framework. The outdated recording system and bureaucratic practices of public universities make them weak candidates in the ranking yardstick. In other words, it does not have the right system in place to present its activities. The universities do not have an automated resource management system to quantify their teaching-related services. Unless the research

League (IPL) or Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), local players get the opportunity to rub shoulders with big players, watch them play from proximity, and pick up ideas from sharing the dressing rooms. The stock of local players improves with foreign players in the vicinity. No wonder, the Malaysian university announced itself on the cricket ground as it knows its target audience.

Unfortunately, education is not a cricket game where you put up a show for a spectacle. Education belongs to a tradition, and it creates a tradition. Each nation has its priorities. True, we are faced with international pressure to standardise our education system by following some measurable units. We have been told by UGC to make education relevant to our industry. The focus should be on creating employable graduates. Since the fourth industrial revolution is changing the face of the job market, the new graduates are expected to master the machines so that they do not become our masters. Traditional subject-specific education will fast become redundant, as our

Having a university in a locality is considered to be a prestige symbol. And to boost the ego of some local leaders, we have allowed education to spread thin. Our insistence on quantity has made us compromise quality. It is no wonder that the country does not have academic leaders to become vice-chancellors. Many institutions do not have the bare minimum number of faculty members or the full set of PC-PVC Treasurer. And now foreign universities are coming as a saving grace (read, disgrace). If you want us to learn from the foreigners, bring in the best. Look at what Qatar has done with their academic city where they have brought in all the top schools of the world.

You must have noticed what happened to the last edition of BPL. We did not get good foreign players as there were too many matches happening simultaneously. Bangladesh is not a prize destination. We managed to attract unknown foreign players just for the sake of it.

Let's not turn our education into a similar commercial farce.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

# Global Firepower Ranking 2023: Implications for Bangladesh

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For a country to showcase its national strength, military capability and coercive endurance, power becomes an important denominator in international politics. Despite the renewed focus on ideational power exercised by countries be it in international forums, ideology and diplomacy, military power remains the core tool of any country to advance its security image in international relations. Global Firepower (GFP) is an internationally recognised ranking system to understand the military rankings, status and development of countries. In its recent issue, the Global Firepower 2023 ranks Bangladesh as the first paramilitary power and 12th "power on the rise" in the world, a milestone achievement for a South Asian country only after India and Pakistan.

However, what constitutes power itself, remains a contested definitional pursuit among scholars, academicians and practitioners in international relations. Joseph Nye, an influential scholar on American foreign policy, stated that power is not only about commanding others to do something rather it is also about persuading others to get what one wants. This suggests power can be both soft power or hard power, where soft power includes economic pursuit or diplomacy and hard power includes military strength, defence and warfare equipment. Such soft/hard power distinction may not always be a useful analytical tool to understand a country's influence in global politics, but certainly understanding a country's military capabilities in numbers can provide a brief overview of a country's position in the global armament landscape.

Global Firepower (GFP) Index illustrates a country's conventional fighting capability measured by eight categorical groups such as financials, geography, manpower, airpower, land forces, naval forces, natural resources, and logistics. Under these categorical groups, the index uses over 60 factors to calculate the comparative military strength of each country – standardised by the perfect Power

Index (PwrIndx) value of 0.0000. Currently, Global Firepower (GFP) comprises 145 nations in its list with an expanding range each year.

The USA, Russia and China top the first three positions of the 2023 GFP list with PwrIndx of 0.0712, 0.0714 and 0.0722, respectively. Comparatively, the USA excels in airpower, logistics and geography, whereas Russia excels in manpower, land power, naval power, natural resources and financials. Similarly, China excels in manpower, naval power, land power and financials over the USA. For South Asia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh tops the list with PwrIndx of 0.1025, 0.1694 and 0.5871 respectively. The ranks of India (4th), Pakistan (7th) and Bangladesh (40th) describe the stark power imbalance in the region.

In comparison, India and Pakistan both hold a stronger advantage over Bangladesh in almost all categories. However, one interesting finding is that Bangladesh, given its relatively small square land (143,998 km), shared border (4413 km), coastline (580 km) and waterways (8370 km), still holds the upper hand over India in its geographical position. The reason for this is that Bangladesh has significant shared borders and a critical coastline on the Bay of Bengal with strategic maritime advantage.

One of the main strengths of Bangladesh is its population counting over 165 million. This fact can be acutely observed in the manpower category of Bangladesh, where in all of the indicators (available manpower, paramilitary, fit-for-service, reaching military age annually, total military personnel, active personnel and air force/army/navy personnel) the country tops among the first 32. The country currently hosts the world's largest paramilitary force combining 6,800,000 personnel, making it first in the GFP list. Also, the country has one of the largest active military forces in the world with around 7 million personnel. This might be one of the finest examples of a country's security landscape bound with territorial limitation, that a heavy population can act as an asset if mobilised effectively.

Bangladesh's military modernisation has been facilitated by the increased defence expenditure of the government. Starting in 2009, Bangladesh Armed Forces

has focused on modernising its core forces including the Bangladesh Army, Bangladesh Navy and Bangladesh Air Forces often known as Force Goal 2030. The programme facilitated numerous upgradation programmes of tanks, tank missiles, light armoured vehicles, radar and aviation equipment, etc. Under this modernisation programme, Bangladesh currently stands 40th globally in terms of defence spending, amounting to USD 3.8 billion. In South Asia, the defence expenditure of Bangladesh ranks third only after India and Pakistan, which suggests in terms of strategic political calculation, the country is not limited only to soft power diplomacy.

However, the military landscape also suggests that Bangladesh is aptly equipped for conventional military warfare. On the contrary, the present global firepower landscape is increasingly shifting to the airspace and airborne military equipped with high-range missiles, advanced AI technology and data-enabled ge-precision. Adaptation to the global tech-military landscape will require heavy investment in military research and technology. Hence, Bangladesh needs to focus on increased R&D investment in the defence sector, instead of merely importing the logistics from other countries. This will enable the country to gather sufficient footing in the military research industry as well.

GFP 2023 signifies the fact that modern firepower capabilities depend not only on expenditure-reliant armed forces of a country's army, navy or air power, rather financialisation, logistics and geography also play a major role in determining a country's rank. Increased intra-state conflicts, growing polarisation, external allied pressure and existing security dilemmas all contributed to an increased securitisation and advancement of military power in recent decades. For South Asia, the implication will not only cover the uneasy tension between India and Pakistan, but also will extend to the other countries as well. Bangladesh's gradual climbing up in the ranks is the best example of this – that regional geopolitics has significant implications for a country's modernising military tendency.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Imam's place
- 7 Leg part
- 11 Kindle
- 12 Egg outline
- 13 Tennis star
- 14 Circle dance
- 15 Mixes
- 16 Raucous bird
- 17 Get news of
- 18 Generic
- 19 Bible twin
- 21 Performed
- 22 DiMaggio nickname
- 25 Birdie beater
- 26 Choir voice
- 27 Glowing coals
- 29 Complain

- 33 Too trusting
- 34 Comic's forte
- 35 Allude to
- 36 Flood
- 37 Bakery worker
- 38 Wipes out
- 39 Titled woman
- 40 French caps

### DOWN

- 1 Coot's home
- 2 Make an address
- 3 Bulgaria's capital
- 4 Argument
- 5 Calls on
- 6 Moray or conger
- 7 "Over There!" writer
- 8 Guacamole base

- 9 university of Wyoming site
- 10 Imperfect
- 16 Hop atop
- 18 Finger features
- 20 Long look
- 22 Reggae's birthplace
- 23 Went around
- 24 Funny
- 25 Schoolbag item
- 28 More than some
- 30 Tickle
- 31 Man of many words
- 32 Printer's need
- 34 On this spot
- 36 Cotillion girl



## FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

R	A	I	T	S		S	O	F	A	R
V	D	F	O	T		A	L	I	C	E
V	A	N	N	A		G	E	N	T	S
E	G	G		S	P	A		G	I	T
T	I	E		H	A	S		E	V	E
S	O	R	B	E	T		B	R	E	D
		P	A	S	T	E	U	P		
B	E	R	G		I	N	T	A	C	T
E	L	I		D	E	S		I	R	A
A	N	N		U	S		N			
T	I	T	U	S		A	S	T	I	N
I	N	E	P	T		R	E	E	S	E
T	O	D	A	Y		E	N	D	E	D

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