

‘Bangladesh should prioritise its national interests above all’

Maj Gen (retd) ANM Muniruzzaman, president of the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), discusses the ongoing diplomatic activities of the country in an exclusive interview with Naimul Alam Alvi of The Daily Star.

How would you assess the recent diplomatic activities in Bangladesh, starting with the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, then the G20 Summit, and finally the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron?

The visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Bangladesh, the first by a Russian foreign minister in many years, was a difficult one, as Russia has been isolated by many countries following its invasion of Ukraine. Lavrov made a number of controversial statements during his visit, but Bangladesh managed to navigate these challenges relatively well.

Then Bangladesh attended the G20 Summit in New Delhi as an invited guest. It was an opportunity for us to participate in a high-profile global agenda, and to have direct bilateral meetings with a number of heads of states. However, in the meetings that were held, besides hoping for increased cooperation for regional stability, nothing important regarding Bangladesh was discussed – that we know of. So, I would consider that the bilateral engagements at the G20 Summit were fairly routine.

Besides that, Bangladesh was invited and joined the new Global Biofuel Alliance. However, no details on how this alliance will work and how Bangladesh can benefit from it have so far been available. The G20 Summit covered a wide range of issues and agenda, such as climate change, multilateralism, infrastructure development, and macroeconomic risks and measures. It also covered quite a lot on digital infrastructure. These are important to us because many points in the G20 declaration are issues that Bangladesh has interest in.

There was a lot of euphoria in Bangladesh about the photographs that emerged, showing US President Joe Biden taking a selfie with our prime minister. I consider this to be a regular gesture of diplomatic nicety. It does show that it was a happy occasion. But I would not give it any political mileage.

However, there was a big deviation from the 2022 G20 Bali Summit, where Russia's invasion of Ukraine was directly mentioned and condemned. This aspect was completely omitted in this year's declaration. The other major factor in the 2023 G20 New Delhi Summit is that the African Union has been declared as the new permanent member of G20. This inclusion brought in a wide number of countries' interests into the G20 process. So, we can hope that Africa will be adequately represented in the next G20 Summit in Brazil.

On the sidelines of the G20 Summit, there was a declaration of an economic corridor named India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). What would be the implications of such a corridor, particularly for Bangladesh?

This is a fairly extensive multimodal connectivity initiative to link railways, ports, energy lines, digital linkages, and green connectivity. It's estimated that if this is implemented, trade distance between India and Europe will be reduced by 40 percent. However, the concept paper they released isn't very detailed. This seems to be a multi-trillion-dollar project, but we don't yet know how it will be financed or implemented. So this is still a fairly aspirational concept. However, they declared that there was a working committee and within two months they would reveal a working paper with detailed information. We should not assume how it will affect Bangladesh at this point.

Although it's not stated, we can assume that the IMEC is being developed as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). We know that all South Asian countries except India are signatory to the BRI. So, India has enthusiastically joined the IMEC initiative. If IMEC is completely implemented, it can emerge as a big challenge to the BRI. It can potentially bring significant

geostrategic and geo-economic shifts in the region and the global order.

How important do you think the French president's visit was to Bangladesh?

Macron's visit was fairly significant. First of all, this is the first Bangladesh visit by a French president in 33 years. This seems to be in response to the invitation from our prime minister when she visited France in 2021. However, France also has significant strategic, economic and trade interests in Bangladesh.

If we analyse the joint statement by Bangladesh and France, there are a number of strategic indications. France has been showing increased interest in this region since they declared their Indo-Pacific strategy in 2020. France is advocating to consider them as not just a foreign player in the Indo-Pacific region, but as a resident power as they have four sovereign territories in the Indian Ocean. With two major global powers competing for influence in South Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, France is indicating that they want to emerge as a third power to create an alternative space in the region. This visit is a part of their Indo-Pacific push.

France has direct trade interests in Bangladesh as well. Our first-ever satellite, Bangabandhu-1, was manufactured by a French company. Now they want to manufacture our second satellite. Bangladesh has agreed to buy 10 Airbus planes from France, which is a big purchase. France also wants to sell Rafale fighter aircraft to Bangladesh. Perhaps this was also considered during the visit. Overall, trade between Bangladesh and France was an important agenda for the French president's visit.

What do you think is the reason behind Bangladesh's growing geopolitical importance?

Bangladesh is a key maritime nation. We are a Bay of Bengal country and an



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Indian Ocean country. Our geological location is significant in today's geopolitics. Bangladesh has been growing its ties with two emerging global powers – India and China. China has already proven themselves as a major power in the world. And our neighbour India has become a major power in Asia. So, through our colocation with these two major powers, our geopolitical importance has increased.

Besides, we have been on a path of great economic development over the last decade. So, we are also attractive as an emerging big market. However, currently our economy is greatly faltering. We have gone to the IMF for a loan. I'm afraid our economic leverage has diminished.

What should be Bangladesh's stance in this situation?

Bangladesh should prioritise its national interests above all, and try to maintain geostrategic neutrality as much as possible. It is important for us to navigate a complex geopolitical landscape. The international system is in a flux, and we need to take note of the rapid changes that are taking place around us. Although limited in scope, Bangladesh has declared its Indo-Pacific Outlook. We should further deepen our understanding of the Indo-Pacific and incorporate it in our strategy.



For some fans of Bangladesh cricket, the team's harrowing defeats in international matches do cause emotional exhaustion and a feeling of helplessness.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

Dealing with a consistently inconsistent Bangladesh



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In the Asia Cup, Bangladesh started off by losing poorly to Sri Lanka, but came back strongly and convincingly against Afghanistan to proceed to the Super Fours. While Afghanistan have less experience than most in the Asia Cup, they are certainly not a team to be taken lightly, as they further exhibited by nearly knocking Sri Lanka out of the tournament by chasing 292 in 37.1 overs. Bangladesh followed up the big win by succumbing to yet another harrowing defeat – this time against Pakistan – where they did not manage to score even 200 runs for the second time in this tournament. Still, the most optimistic among us relied on the consistent inconsistency of Bangladesh and hoped to see them make a comeback against Sri Lanka. That was not to be the case as Bangladesh fell 21 runs short of the target.

To put things into perspective, Iran data from Cricinfo Statsguru to visualise Bangladesh's win percentage by year since 2007. This dizzying image could also represent how Bangladesh plays in a given match. On Saturday against Sri Lanka, after the first innings, 258 seemed like an achievable target. Bangladesh started the chase well, scoring 55 runs in 11 overs without losing a wicket. From there, they fell to 84-4. Some stability was provided by the middle order as the youngster, Towhid Hridoy (who averages 40.18 in 13 matches, at a strike rate of 89.29, and has four 50s) scored 82 and seemed

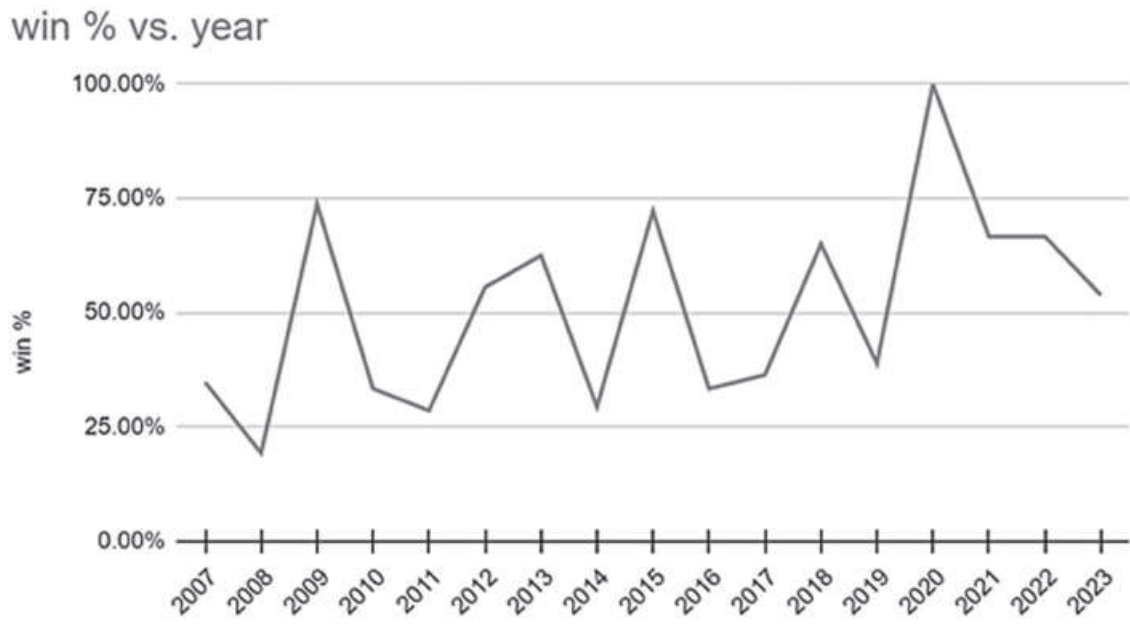


Figure 1: Bangladesh's ODI win every years since 2007. In 2020, Bangladesh played only three ODIs and won all three of them.

Bangladesh's cricket journey seemed impossible and the numbers validated my feelings. It seems like the fate of the Bangladesh team's performance is determined by a pendulum swinging at free fall. It echoes many of our feelings as we are dumbfounded by some of the decisions taken by the team and management. While a sport is not a hard science – a level of unpredictability is inherent and contributes to the beauty of the game – things should not be so confusing or mysterious.

If we follow the examples of our neighbouring cricket nations, it is easier to find the strategies

crucial member of the coaching staff. Nevertheless, there are other areas that could use a lot of improvement. Even when our batters are batting well, we woefully struggle to increase the run rate or hit sixes. Our batters' attempts to attack usually result in wickets falling. Sometimes we struggle to continue momentum: an entire batting unit will collapse when one wicket falls. We are also not the best at shifting momentum back in our favour.

Another important thing to note is the number of ODI matches Bangladesh have played every year. It is no secret that you

An important thing to note is the number of ODI matches Bangladesh have played every year. It is no secret that you want to play as much as possible, to get better at the game. Here, too, there is no consistency. Ideally, Bangladesh should aim to play at least 15-20 matches every year.

victories against top nations and a convincing ODI series win against India as recently as in December 2022. But the harrowing defeats in between prove to be too much disappointment for many Bangladesh fans. For some people, it causes emotional exhaustion and a feeling of helplessness. There are those who stop watching cricket altogether because the highs and lows become unbearable. For others, watching cricket feels like a part of their identities. They remind themselves that wins and losses are inherent parts of the game, and it's actually enduring optimism that helps them deal with the heartbreaks.

For most people, the love for the sport does not disappear simply due to poor or inconsistent performance. For the players too, I imagine, it's hard to shake off the previous day and start on a clean slate, because there isn't one. We are all impacted and moulded by the journey we have been through. Things need to change, and there are better people out there to say what those changes should be. Then there's the rest of us, strapped to our couches, remote at the ready, unsure of what to expect. We can only rely on the lack of consistency and watch the story unfold.

played vs. year

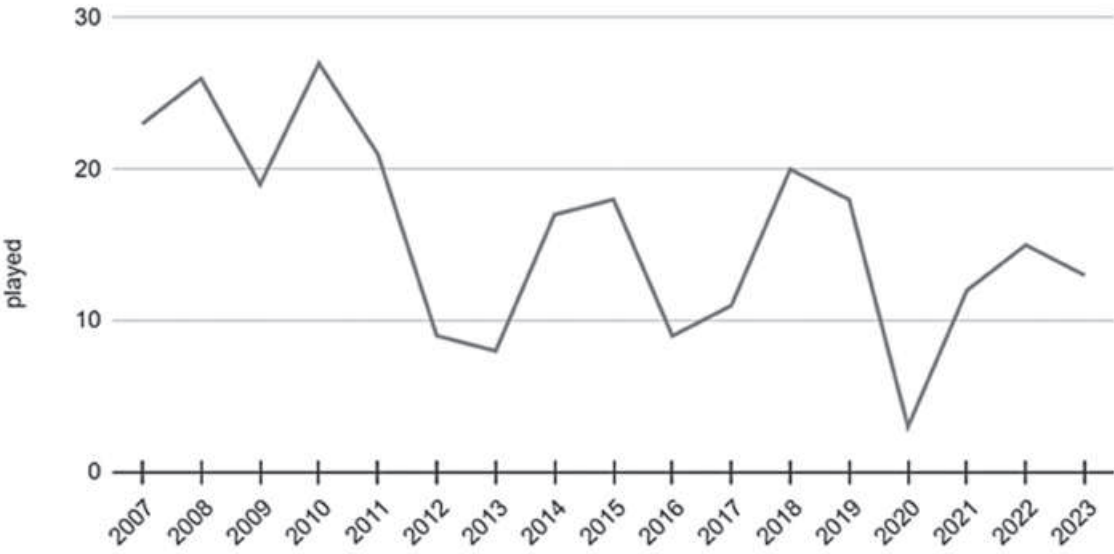


Figure 2: A visual representation of how many ODIs Bangladesh have played every years since 2007.

to have found the rhythm of the pitch. An important partnership was formed with Mushfiqur Rahim at the other end, but he failed to increase the run rate as he got out just as he seemed to want to go after the bowler. There were glimmers of hope till the end as the tailenders showed some courage, but it was really just a matter of time till Bangladesh were bowled out.

Finding a pattern in

that define their approach to the game. It is difficult and certainly beyond my capacity to predict what can induce more stability in Bangladesh's trajectory. There are many complex factors at play, such as infrastructure, strong focus on and competitiveness of school-level and domestic competitions, making data-informed decisions, and sports psychology. Most people will say that talent is not the issue.

want to play as much as possible, to get better at the game. Here, too, there is no consistency. Ideally, Bangladesh should aim to play at least 15-20 matches every year. It is also worth mentioning that this is the format we have gained the most success in. The best year in the last decade, 2015 (72.2 percent match wins), saw us playing 18 matches.

In a nation as cricket crazy as Bangladesh, there is inevitably