

FIFTH ANNUAL INDIA-US 2+2 MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE

Decoding India-US disagreements over Bangladesh’s election



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The Fifth Annual India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue was held in New Delhi on November 10. Although this was a routine engagement between the two big powers, it drew significant attention, particularly from Bangladesh. This heightened interest stemmed from the anticipation that the matter of the upcoming election in Bangladesh would receive substantial consideration during the dialogue.

While the joint statement on the dialogue made no reference to the election, the Indian foreign secretary, Vinay Kwatra, disclosed that the issue had indeed been discussed between US and India. He stated during a post-dialogue press briefing, “The election in Bangladesh is their internal matter, and it is for the people of Bangladesh to decide their future.” He went on to emphasise, “As a close friend and partner of Bangladesh, we respect the domestic process there and will continue to support the country’s vision of a stable, peaceful, and progressive nation.”

This represents the most explicit Indian stance on Bangladesh’s election thus far. It contrasts sharply with their position in 2014 when the then Indian foreign secretary, Sujatha Singh, actively intervened to persuade opposition political parties, particularly Ershad’s Jatiya Party, to participate in an election that had been boycotted by BNP. But India may be refraining from active involvement this time due to considerable engagement of the US in Bangladesh’s ongoing electoral process.

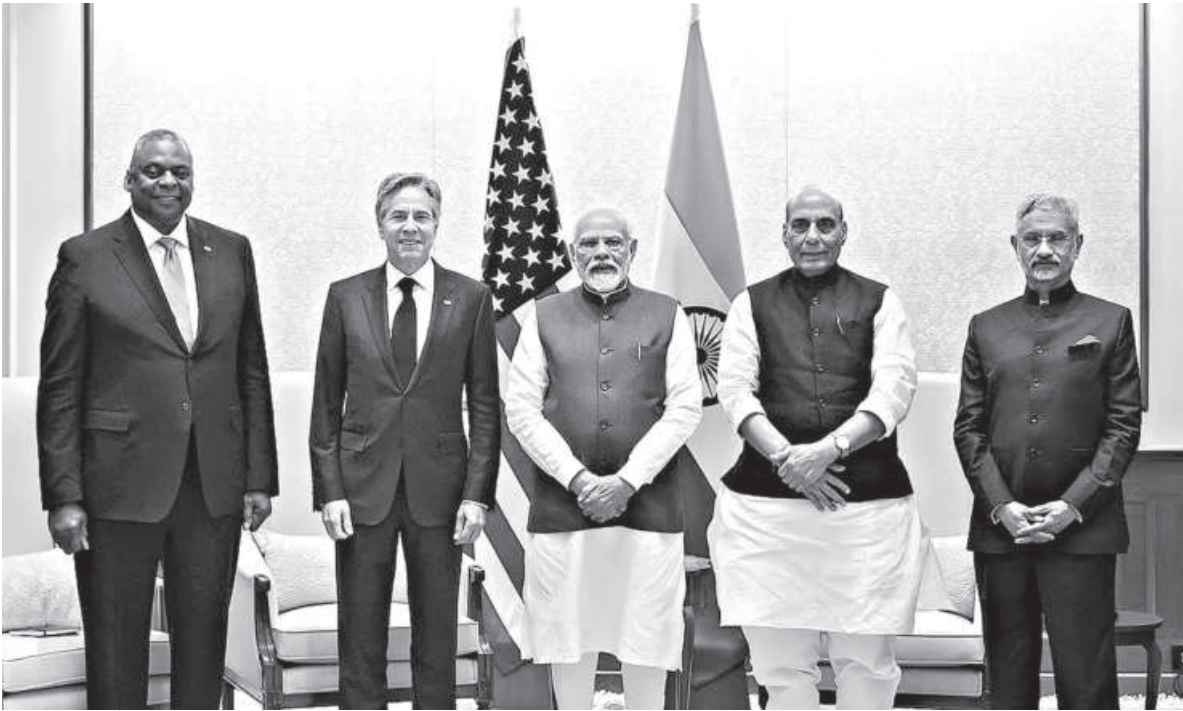
Remarkably, India’s archival, China, shares a similar perspective

on the Bangladesh election. On November 9, Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen, reiterated his country’s position, stating, “Election is completely an internal issue of Bangladesh. Any decision regarding this shall be taken by the Bangladeshis.”

This alignment between India and China on the matter is quite unique in the context of South Asia, where the two nations have traditionally held opposing positions regarding the elections in countries of the region. A recent example is the Maldives election, widely framed as a showdown between China and India. The triumph of the pro-Chinese

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candidate, Mohamed Muizzu, over the pro-Indian Ibrahim Solih was interpreted as a victory for China. As anticipated, Muizzu promptly addressed the removal of Indian troops from the island nation’s soil.



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Although there have been several hiccups, credit must be given to the Awami League regime for successfully maintaining a delicate balance between the opposing interests of China and India. It has provided substantial support to both countries, leading them to believe that their interests will be best served by the continuation of the current regime, even while ignoring the considerable risk of making their position unpopular to a wide section of the Bangladeshi people due to overlooking the democratic backsliding in the country.

It can reasonably be inferred from the comments made by the Indian foreign secretary that the ministerial dialogue did not succeed in bridging the gap between the divergent positions of the US and India regarding Bangladesh’s upcoming election. The prospect of reconciling these conflicting positions in the near future seems unlikely, given that our

general election is merely two months away, and there is currently no plan for a high-level dialogue between the two countries before the election. The ruling party in Bangladesh may find this development frustrating, as it had anticipated that India would assist it in alleviating pressure from the US. Conversely, BNP might be disheartened witnessing the US’ inability to persuade India to adopt an impartial stance regarding the election.

Adding to BNP’s frustration is India’s sustained support for the AL-led government, despite its increasing crackdown on opposition activists. In response to a question about the widespread crackdown on BNP leaders and supporters, with around 10,000 individuals detained across Bangladesh, spokesperson for India’s Ministry of External Affairs, Arindam Bagchi, stated a day before the dialogue, “Crackdown, jailed opposition leader, etc, are your

interpretation. Please don’t ascribe them to me. We do not want to comment on the policy of any third country. Elections in Bangladesh, as I have said, are a domestic matter for them. It is for the people of Bangladesh to decide their own future.”

Nevertheless, there are significant voices of opposition, particularly within the civil society of India, urging the country not to put all its eggs in one basket in Dhaka. They caution that “a surprise return of the BNP could upset the appellation.” Avinash Paliwal, a distinguished Indian columnist and SOAS scholar, suggested, “The best way to ensure that India preserves some positive equities, and is not compelled to explore high-cost coercive options, is to craft an impartial position that leaves the door open to reconciliation with the numerous India critics in Bangladesh after the storm passes.”

To date, there is no indication that

the US will reduce pressure on the AL government concerning a free, fair, and participatory election. In their most recent press briefing on November 6, 2023, a spokesperson from the US State Department reiterated, “We continue to closely monitor the electoral environment in Bangladesh leading up to this January’s election, and we take any incidents of violence incredibly seriously. We are engaging and will continue to engage with the government, opposition parties, civil society, and other stakeholders to encourage collaboration for the benefit of the Bangladeshi people.”

The Biden administration seeks to showcase Bangladesh as an exemplary case of its global initiative to revitalise democracy and human rights, considering these as crucial elements to counter China’s growing influence—given its perceived deficiency in these areas. Employing a two-pronged strategy, the administration offers Bangladesh an alternative source of development aid while simultaneously urging the nation to adopt a democratic trajectory. Unless there is a shift in the US strategy to contain China, or unless the US identifies alternative approaches to regain influence in Bangladesh, it is unlikely that the pressure on the current regime regarding an election meeting international standards will diminish.

Following the US-India ministerial dialogue, the persistent difference between their stances leaves the questions open: will India stay on the sidelines as the US pressures the AL government? Or will the US ease its pressure in response to India’s unwavering support for the ruling regime in Bangladesh?

One undeniable reality is that the absence of synergy between these two major powers concerning the Bangladesh issue will serve as a stumbling block in their strategic partnership aimed at safeguarding a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific—where Bangladesh holds a key role.

The tragedy of Afghan families facing forced deportation in Pakistan

Faisal Rahman
is a Pakistani journalist.

FAISAL RAHMAN

Sweaty, stomachs empty, and eyes heavy with exhaustion, Abdul Majid searches for his wife, Afsun Bibi, and their two-month-old infant in the city’s police stations and Afghan detention centre at Sultanabad.

“At 3am on the night of October 3, my family and I were sleeping when suddenly a heavy police force entered my house. For a moment, I could not understand what was happening,” says Abdul Majid.

According to the 27-year-old, the police (all men) woke up his wife by grabbing her head, and started asking for their Proof of Registration (POR) cards—cards denoting Afghan origin issued by the UNHCR, under permission from the Government of Pakistan.

Abdul Majid had his card, but his wife’s one was at her parents’ house. The police detained Afsun Bibi and their two-month-old son.

“I have been looking for my wife and two-month-old baby since then. When I go to the police station, the police say that my wife has been transferred to the detention centre [at Sultanabad], but when I came here, the official [of the detention centre] told me that my wife and child are not here.”

Like many other Afghan refugees who have lived in the country for nearly four decades, Abdul Majid is asking how Pakistan can force them out within 30 days—the deadline given by Caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti.

“It was no less than a shock for me. I was born in Pakistan. My father came to Karachi from Kabul in 1992. We have been living in Karachi for 31 years.”

The caretaker government in Pakistan claims that the recent surge in violence has been caused by undocumented Afghan refugees. In response, the caretaker government on October 2 gave foreigners without any legal paperwork until November 1 to leave the country.

However, many politicians and civil society and human rights organisations



Afghan nationals, who according to police were undocumented, are handcuffed as they are detained and shifted to a holding centre, after Pakistan gave the last warning to undocumented migrants to leave by November 1. PHOTO: REUTERS

have condemned the caretaker government’s decision, saying it is rounding up vulnerable Afghan citizens. Many, like Abdul Majid, have been threatened with deportation despite having government-issued identity documentation.

Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees since the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The last major wave of refugees came in August 2021 when the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, forcing another 600,000-800,000 Afghan citizens to flee to Pakistan, seeking asylum.

However, the caretaker government of Pakistan has denied targeting the citizens of any country. Members of the caretaker government believe that this decision has been made for the welfare and security of the citizens of Pakistan.

Abdul Majid, who has worked as a labourer in Karachi for more than 17 years, alleges that the caretaker government and the interior minister were renegeing on promises to deport

undocumented migrants.

The caretaker government issued a notification on October 10, which said that Afghan refugees who have POR or Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) can stay in Pakistan temporarily.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees issued a report on October 3 expressing deep concern for the safety and well-being of children and families affected by the illegal alien repatriation plan. Afghanistan is in the grip of a humanitarian crisis, with ongoing human rights challenges and a severe winter on the horizon. About 30 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and 3.3 million are internally displaced.

According to one estimate, more than 160,000 Afghans have left Pakistan since September 15. Of these, 86 percent of families cited fear of arrest as the most common reason for leaving in a hurry and without help.

“How many times will I have to go

from one country to another for the protection of my family? I could not educate my children properly and now, when I want to go back, my 15-year-old innocent child cannot be found,” asks Sher Azam Khan, another Afghan refugee.

The 39-year-old said that he had been searching for his child for the past 24 hours. When he did not come home from school, Sher Azam found out from the school management that the police had come and taken his son away.

“When I went to the police station, they said that they had sent him to the detention centre. Instead of listening to me, they are threatening to arrest me,” Sher Azam says.

Sher Azam was born in Mazar-e-Sharif and, three decades ago, came empty-handed to Pakistan during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Now, he says that he is leaving empty-handed again. He is afraid of the future his children may face in Afghanistan.

Moniza Kakar, a human rights and refugee advocate in Karachi, says, “In the recent large-scale forced deportation policy, they are especially targeting the children of Afghan refugees. Sindh Police has collected data of Afghan students in government schools and colleges. This is alarming as they are also arresting migrant children from schools and madrasas.”

Saeed Husain, an anthropologist and human rights activist from Karachi, argues, “Law enforcement seems to be following a strategy of detaining some family members in a bid to pressure other family members to also surrender themselves.”

He adds that unaccompanied children are being detained and put on buses destined for Afghanistan, while their parents and the rest of their family are in Karachi.

Several Afghan refugees like Abdul Majid and Sher Azam are currently looking for their families and children after police raids in different areas of Karachi. But the police and administration are not telling them where their loved ones are. The series of arrests continues, creating a dire situation of basic human rights in Pakistan.

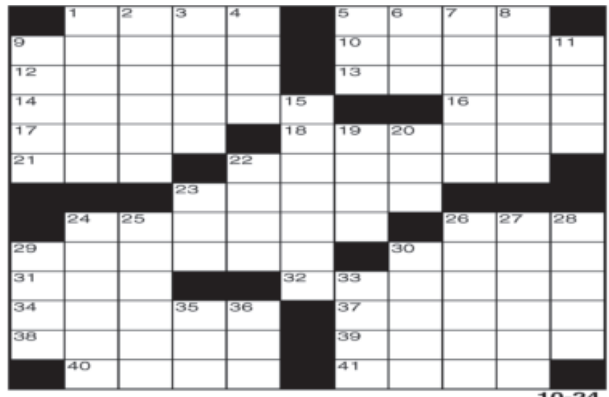
CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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1 Ventilation tube
5 Petty argument
9 Paris subway
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8 Rewarded for good service
9 Labyrinth
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15 Needed fixing, as a faucet
19 Pub brews
20 “— a deal!”
22 Hammer or hacksaw
23 Corn core
24 Drank daintily
25 Ness nemesis
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28 Manners
29 Mascara target
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