

VICTORY DAY

Bangladesh's journey beyond Cold War realpolitik

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is a professor of English at
Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Today marks the first Victory Day of Bangladesh being celebrated without the existence of Henry Kissinger. Despite the seemingly provocative nature of this statement, Kissinger's passing in early November signified the end of an era characterised by the spectre of Cold War realpolitik. In a changed world, our V-Day opens up new avenues for retrospectively examining our past and understanding our victories in a contingent manner. It prompts us to engage with the narratives that conditioned our victory, try to understand the conditions of our victory, and both identify and outline the emerging necessities.

In an obituary in *The New York Times*, the author stated, "... He [Kissinger] was by turns hailed as an ultrarealist who reshaped diplomacy to reflect American interests and denounced as having abandoned American values, particularly in the arena of human rights, if he thought it served the nation's purposes."

On our last Independence Day, US President Joe Biden sent a message to remind us "of the deep value both of our nations' people place on democracy, equality, respect for human rights, and free and fair elections." The message ended with a "Joy Bangla" slogan, and charted a long list of items: "The United States and Bangladesh have achieved a lot together—advancing economic development, strengthening people-to-people ties, addressing global health and climate issues, partnering on the humanitarian response to Rohingya refugees, and committing to

Russia's can indeed be a significant player in the region, given its strategic geopolitical location atop the Bay of Bengal and demographic advantage in supplying human capital.

The divergence of US public policies from the general empathy of the American people during our Liberation War offers instructive insights. Independent politicians like Senator Edward Kennedy, events such as the Concert for Bangladesh

Dhaka. Archer Blood dispatched a series of messages to warn Washington that Bangladesh's independence was inevitable, urging the US to cease support for West Pakistan. Kissinger dismissed these telegrams, remarking, "That consul in Dacca doesn't have the strongest nerves." Nixon and Kissinger devised plans to supply arms to Pakistan through Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries to prevent India

inhabitants of West Pakistan were the descendants of conquerors." Pakistan's domination of its eastern wing was steeped in racial prejudice and pre-partition communal rhetoric.

It took someone like US Beat poet Allen Ginsberg to walk through the refugee camp in Kolkata and witness the trail of tears on Jashore Road to point out, "Millions of souls—nineteen seventy-one homeless on Jessore Road under grey sun// A

Aly Zaker had said, "The voice that was raised about Bangladesh and the sufferings of humanity reached all corners of the world."

George Harrison's response to his friend Ravi Shankar's humanitarian appeal resonated profoundly in the counterculture of the 1960s, marked by the lingering memories of the Atom Bomb and the Vietnam War.

In the West, people became awakened to our just demands for victory. Their financial, spiritual, and political support added another dimension to our ongoing war. The amalgamation of Western and Eastern music in the concert moved the US American people to perceive the broader face of humanity. Our victory encompassed their evolving mood, influenced by both political and military elites, and extended to US associates at home and abroad.

Ironically, the concert also etched an image of a malnourished child, featured on the record cover, as a symbol distant from the golden Bengal promised. For a long time, we had to fight off being imaged as an aid-dependent country before reaping the benefits of independence and becoming self-sufficient.

Victory Day provides an opportunity for contemplation on the consequences and aspirations of victory. The secular, democratic aspirations with which the country commenced had to encounter numerous challenges. Five decades later, we can celebrate Bangabandhu's words on his homecoming day: "Together we will build a new and prosperous Bengal. The people of Bengal will rejoice, live life in joy, and breathe freely in the open air. The people of Bengal will have two square meals a day. All my endeavours are aimed at achieving this goal. In fact, establishing the country on a firm financial footing is the motto of my life."

We can declare that one outcome of our victory has been achieved only when we can correspond with the stated aspirations.



At the start of the all-out war, Yahya Khan infamously said, "Kill three million Bengalis, and the rest will eat out of our hands."

PHOTO: LIBERATION WAR MUSEUM ARCHIVE

in Madison Square, or the poetic protest against the horrors of war by Allen Ginsberg all influence the endorsement of US-American values, which are not solely shaped by political actors.

The US largely ignored the genocide unleashed by the junta they supported in West Pakistan. Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser to then US President Nixon, disregarded repeated appeals sent by their consul general stationed in

from overpowering them.

Archer Blood was disgusted by his government's "moral bankruptcy" as Yahya Khan unleashed "the most incredible calculated thing since the days of the Nazis in Poland." At the start of the all-out war—militarily codenamed Operation Searchlight—Yahya Khan infamously said, "Kill three million Bengalis, and the rest will eat out of our hands."

His predecessor, Ayub Khan, characterised Bangalees as "conquered peoples, while the

million are dead." And he urged the US American public: "Ring O ye tongues of the world for their woe/ Ring out ye voices for Love we don't know// Ring out ye bells of electrical pain/ Ring in the conscious of America brain."

It took artists like Ravi Shankar, George Harrison, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Eric Clapton, and others to vocalise the identity of an unborn nation, accentuating its birth pangs. Freedom fighter and actor-director

New directions for human development

Stefan Liller
is resident representative of UNDP
Bangladesh.

STEFAN LILLER

In an era marked by a decisive shift in global geopolitics, with Asia emerging as a dominant economic force, Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture.

Scheduled to graduate from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) group in just three years, Bangladesh exemplifies remarkable achievements in economic growth and human development. Yet, it is also a nation grappling with unrest, significant development challenges, prevailing deprivations, and persistent disparities. Today's Bangladesh is a country under speedy transformation and with a national election just around the corner.

What better time to ponder its past and future development paths? The newly published UNDP Regional Human Development Report for Asia and the Pacific has arrived, offering a balanced analysis of the progress made in the region, outlining the remaining and emerging challenges, and providing guidance for a new direction.

Under the motto of "A story of progress, disparity and disruption," the report places Asia as one of the regions at the forefront of past economic transformation, as well as a pioneer in innovative human development approaches. Here, Bangladesh features as a key reference in microfinance, illustrating how the region has made outstanding progress in economic growth, human development, and poverty reduction.

However, the benefits of this progress have not been evenly shared. Absolute deprivations remain a key concern, as does structural exclusion with respect to gender, the informal sector, and the digital divide.

Women's rights in some countries have seen setbacks, most workers are in the informal sector, and the region is increasingly contributing to planetary pressures, worsening climate-related threats.

Moreover, the radicalisation of the

political discourse and the weakening of democratic institutions, as well as the advent of Industry 4.0, artificial intelligence, and the digital revolution are also elements of our current and emerging uncertainties.

Unfortunately, Asia and the Pacific is not on track to achieve any of the 17

the country's progress heralds added responsibilities. Just as the rest of the world, Bangladesh is facing what some define as the polycrisis: the interconnected and reinforcing threats from the Covid pandemic to geopolitical instability and climate shocks, which have a compounded effect that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Despite being on track to halving poverty in all its dimensions by 2030, around 40 million people still live in multidimensional poverty in Bangladesh. Inadequate housing, cooking fuel, and years of schooling are the three biggest deprivations among the poor as per the global Multidimensional Poverty Index.

While some indicators are better for women than for men, such as life expectancy at birth and expected years of education, the economic empowerment of women is still quite lacking. The estimated GNI per capita is almost three times larger for men than for women in Bangladesh, (\$8,176 versus \$2,911), while maternal mortality is prevalent and adolescent pregnancy is the second-highest in the region only after Afghanistan.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, despite leading in digital innovations and green solutions.

A call for change

Asia and the Pacific has observed the fastest Human Development Index (HDI) progress in the world—with Bangladesh being one of the best performers, moving from an HDI of 0.397 in 1990, the fourth lowest in the region, to a HDI of 0.661 in 2021. Only China had greater improvements in the region over this period. As for other social and economic indicators in Bangladesh, from 1990 to 2021, life expectancy at birth rose to 72 years from 56; expected years of schooling more than doubled from 5.8 to 12.4 years; the GNI per capita more than tripled from \$1,554 to \$5,472; and maternal mortality fell 70 percent, from 595 to 173 per 100,000 live births.

It is still too soon for fanfare though. With the upcoming LDC graduation,

education, the economic empowerment of women is still quite lacking. The estimated GNI per capita is almost three times larger for men than for women in Bangladesh, (\$8,176 versus \$2,911), while maternal mortality is prevalent and adolescent pregnancy is the second-highest in the region only after Afghanistan.

Moreover, 95 percent of total employment is in the informal sector, which means workers in Bangladesh lack proper legal protection and entitlements, and are left vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Most respondents in the World Values Survey reported having concerns about losing their jobs or not being able to find one. Furthermore, while the country has undertaken commendable efforts to upgrade the Standard Orders on Disaster Management, invested in climate resilience and disaster preparedness, its incidence of natural disasters is one of the highest in the region, while rising planetary pressures

anticipate increasing frequency and intensity of climate shocks.

Existential threats of climate change, amplified by urbanisation, are also one of the three converging "risk clusters" faced by the Asia Pacific. When disasters led to 32.6 million internal displacements worldwide in 2022, of which most were climate-related hazards, Asia and the Pacific accounted for 70 percent of this total. Rapid urbanisation is also a stark reality for Bangladesh, as half of the total population is expected to live in urban areas by 2050.

The road ahead

Luckily, the report does not leave us with the sensation that we are lost in the dense fog of the unknown. It also offers some guidance for new directions in human development, many of which can apply well against the context of Bangladesh. We can start with the mainstreaming of human development, expanding people's choices and capabilities, with more and better health and education; tackling structural exclusion, by closing gender gaps; upholding human dignity, by strengthening social protection and reducing informality; and protecting future generations by accelerating energy transition and embracing green, circular, and purple economies.

In the same line of thought, rethinking economic growth, shifting from the export-led, low-wage low-productivity model to a more diversified economy, upskilling and reskilling the labour force, tapping into upper levels of the global value chain, generating incentives for investment into key development areas, and gradually increasing the relevance of the domestic market should all be part of the Smooth Transition Strategy for Bangladesh's LDC graduation.

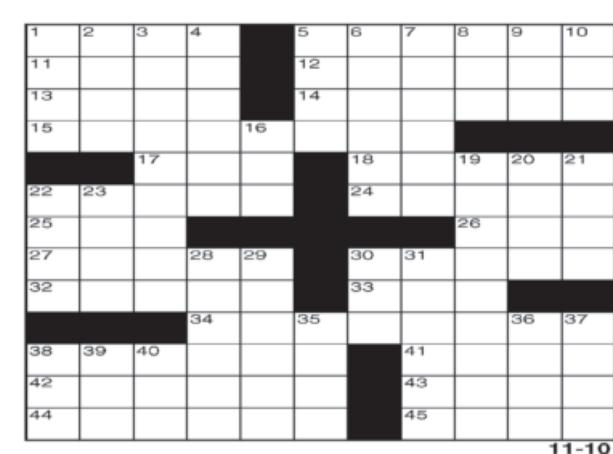
With the youth making up 30 percent of its population, Bangladesh faces the critical need to bridge the gap between education and employer demands by equipping its young population with the appropriate skills.

And finally, to make change happen, the UNDP report makes a call to improve governance, make policies more effective, strengthen accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. Tools and methodologies like foresight thinking and horizon scanning can also help us consider potential scenarios, anticipate shocks, adapt to a changing context, and respond more nimbly and efficiently to them.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	33	Gallery fill	color
1	City on the	34	Fellow player
2	Tiber	38	Mountain
3	5	One of Santa's	shrub
4	team	41	Heaps
5	11	Pinnacle	Show up
6	12	To take to the	43
7	sky	44	Out of play
8	13	Give a new	Pert girls
9	look to	45	45 Append
10	14	Tenacious	Appendix
11	15	Environmental	part
12	woe	16	Loathe
13	17	Pool need	23
14	18	Like some	Regular array
15	19	cough drops	29
16	20	Deep ravine	Shirt part
17	21	24	30
18	22	26	Deli choice
19	23	31	31 Spanish fleet
20	24	33	35 Brighton
21	25	34	brews
22	26	35	36 Adult
23	27	36	polliwog
24	28	37	37 Cuts off
25	29	38	38 Hurried
26	30	39	flight
27	31	40	39 "Exodus"
28	32	41	hero
29	33	42	40 Ornate vase
30	34	43	
31	35	44	
32	36	45	
33	37		
34	38		
35	39		
36	40		
37	41		
38	42		
39	43		
40	44		



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US, SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dsoinopin@gmail.com.