

VICTORY DAY

# Bangladesh’s journey beyond Cold War realpolitik



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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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

a prosperous, secure, democratic, and independent Bangladesh.”

This shift represents a moral triumph for a nation whose suffering was largely overlooked by numerous world leaders during its inception. Both the US and China perceived our struggle for freedom—which claimed millions of lives—merely as a civil war. Even India, while responding to the humanitarian crisis sparked by Pakistan’s genocidal onslaught, initially considered it the third India-Pakistan war and strategised to secure its eastern border. However, we express gratitude to India for its military and diplomatic assistance, supported by the Soviet Union. Without their support, the envisioned path of victory, initiated by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, would have been longer and more uncertain.

Overcoming enemy forces isn’t the sole definition of victory. If that were the case, the surrender of 90,000 Pakistani soldiers at the Ramna Race Course ground would have unequivocally sealed our triumph. For us to claim victory, Bangabandhu’s return was crucial as it bridged the gap between his articulated aspirations in the March 7 speech and the war’s outcomes. It was essential to demonstrate to the world that the pre-war civil disobedience had been our assertion of rights—our rights to safeguard our language, ways of life, jobs, and future as Bangalees. Following our victory, the world retrospectively recognised that these “brown Muslims” are more than a “basket case.” A country the size of Illinois and a population surpassing

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.

## New directions for human development



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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

**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,

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.

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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.



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

### CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

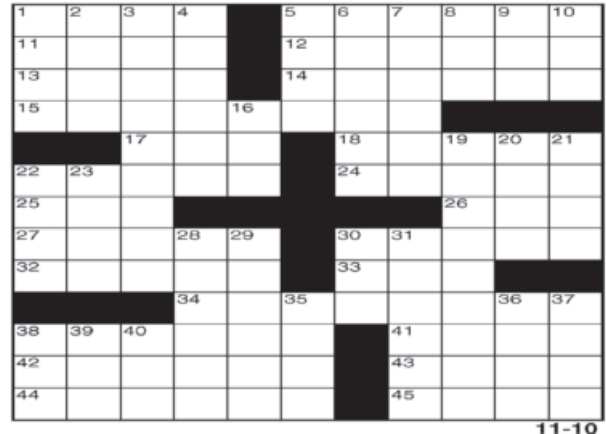
1 City on the  
Tiber  
5 One of Santa’s  
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11 Pinnacle  
12 Take to the  
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13 Give a new  
look to  
14 Tenacious  
15 Environ-  
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17 Pool need  
18 Evil spirit  
22 Deep ravine  
24 Carell of  
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25 Pillbox, for  
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26 Grass coater  
27 Articles  
30 Lock parts  
32 Brake, for  
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33 Gallery fill  
34 Fellow player  
38 Mountain  
shrub  
41 Heaps  
42 Show up  
43 Out of play  
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16 “Losing My  
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19 Used a Zen  
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20 Finished  
21 Anchor’s  
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22 Computer  
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28 Regular array  
29 Shirt part  
30 Deli choice  
31 Spanish fleet  
35 Brighton  
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36 Adult  
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37 Cuts off  
38 Hurried  
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39 “Exodus”  
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40 Ornate vase

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3 Like some  
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4 Leon Uris  
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5 Ernst’s  
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6 Steers clear of  
7 Official seal  
8 Crone  
9 Summer in  
Lyon  
10 Valentine



### YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



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