

# How Russian warships in Chattogram port reflects great power competition



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Last month, three Russian warships docked at Chittagong port for three days. According to Russian state media, it was the first such visit in nearly 50 years. Russian naval officers held meetings with their Bangladesh counterparts, and they participated in joint exercises.

This episode underscores how Bangladesh has become a prime battleground for great power competition. With so much attention focused on Bangladesh's upcoming election, it's easy to overlook the growing challenges that nonaligned Dhaka will confront in navigating sharpening geopolitical rivalry—regardless of the election outcome.

The story of the Russian warships far predates their arrival in Chittagong. Nearly a year ago, following US pressure, Dhaka refused to grant entry to a Russian ship bearing parts for a nuclear power plant because it was under US sanctions. Soon thereafter, Dhaka announced bans on 69 additional Russian commercial vessels under US sanctions, preventing them from entering Bangladesh.

Against this backdrop, Dhaka's hosting of the Russian warships should be seen as a balancing tactic that one would expect from a nonaligned state: after making those earlier concessions to Washington on Russia, Dhaka pivoted to reassert its longstanding friendship with Moscow. Dhaka's decision should pay off: Beijing likely welcomes its Russian friend projecting power in a maritime space where China is increasingly present. And New Delhi, an even closer friend of Moscow's, will hope Russia's show of strength can help balance out Chinese naval power in

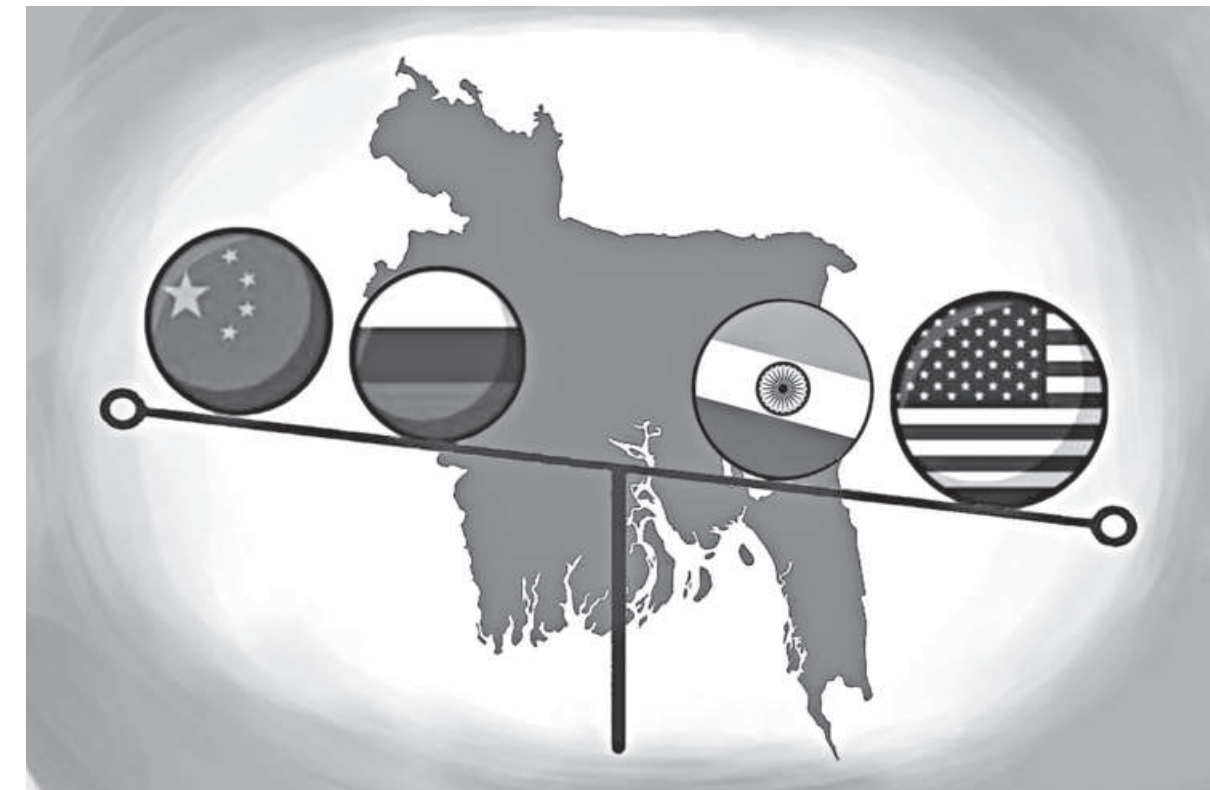


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

the Indian Ocean, making it less of a threat to New Delhi—so long as it doesn't lead to formal China-Russia naval partnership in the region.

Yet, balancing relations with these powers won't always be so easy. Indeed, it's becoming increasingly difficult to manage geopolitical competition. Unlike during the Cold War, it's not a bipolar world. Increasing multipolarity has created more space for the emergence of multiple competitive actors and theatres. But multilateralism, and

broader global cooperation, aren't robust enough to push back on all these proliferating poles of competition and contestation.

Unsurprisingly, geopolitical competition is both expanding and intensifying, with direct implications for Bangladesh. There are increasing numbers of rival pairings. Those that impact Bangladesh the most are the US and China, India and China, and

These rival powers have increasingly compelling reasons to compete in Bangladesh. Chinese infrastructure and defence investments—including backing for Bangladesh's first submarine base—have picked up in recent years, which drives heightened Indian focus on Bangladesh. This same deepening Chinese footprint in Bangladesh, and China's increasing naval clout

invasion of Ukraine. Washington wants to build a coalition of countries to take a strong stand against Russia. Just weeks after the invasion, Victoria Nuland—a top State Department official viewed as especially hawkish on Russia—visited Dhaka. But Russia is keen to project power globally and signal to Washington that its war in Ukraine hasn't weakened or isolated it. Because of its longstanding friendship with Bangladesh (and India), the Bay of Bengal area is a desirable destination to do so—as evidenced by the visit of Russian warships. It's also worth noting that in September, Sergey Lavrov became the first Russian foreign minister to visit Bangladesh.

One might point to India's experiences as an example of how nonaligned states can successfully manage complex great-power competition. But in fact, Bangladesh has a tougher job. India, unlike Bangladesh, is an avowed competitor of Beijing's. US-China competition has brought New Delhi closer to Washington and strengthened its own capacity to counter China, through more arms sales and intelligence sharing. Bangladesh, by contrast, with its evergreen mantra of "friendship to all, malice toward none," must balance its relations with everyone. But Dhaka, down the road, could find itself under unprecedented pressure to get off the fence in the event of a worst-case scenario—such as tensions flaring up in the China-Taiwan dispute, or Russia expanding its war beyond Ukraine into a NATO country.

How might the upcoming election impact great power competition in Bangladesh? There's no outcome that can deter or rein it in. But the most likely outcome—the Awami League retaining power—could disadvantage Washington relative to China and Russia, and cause friction with its partner India.

Washington's policy of pressuring Dhaka to hold free and fair elections has not gone down well with the AL leadership, despite US-Bangladesh relations otherwise enjoying ample forward movement in recent years. By contrast, Beijing, Moscow, and

especially New Delhi—thanks to the mutually supportive relations between the AL and India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party—all enjoy warm relations with the AL. This isn't to suggest China—or Russia—wouldn't find willing partners in a hypothetical non-AL government. Still, a comment last year by Beijing's ambassador, Yao Wen, which appeared to reject the restoration of the caretaker clause—the opposition's core demand—reflects China's strong comfort level with the AL.

Consequently, an AL victory would position China, India, and Russia well for post-election engagement with Bangladesh, while Washington—which has likely burned some bridges in Dhaka with its visa restrictions policy and periodic public criticism about democratic backsliding—would be in a tougher spot.

Post-polls, the US may choose to review its relations with Dhaka if it concludes an election—that the opposition boycotts because of rigging fears—doesn't qualify as a "free and fair election." But if Washington downgrades ties with Dhaka, or implements additional punitive policies, that could set it back further in its competition with China and Russia for influence in Bangladesh. Beijing and Moscow could score additional points by accusing the US of meddling in Bangladesh's politics and failing spectacularly. Meanwhile, New Delhi—which doesn't want Washington to do anything that emboldens an opposition that India regards as a dangerous Islamist force with the potential to imperil its own interests—wouldn't support a harsher US policy toward Dhaka.

Given the complexity of intensifying great power competition in Bangladesh, it would be imprudent to ask which power is winning. But this much is true: electoral politics in Bangladesh don't appear to work in Washington's favour as it looks to push back against Chinese and Russian influence, and to find more policy convergence with India in a country where the two don't see eye to eye.

# Modern 'Roads to Rome': From BRI and IMEC to Israel



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"All roads lead to Rome" was historically popularised as an imperial and religious phrase. Emperor Caesar Augustus (Octavian) set the imperial tone by measuring the distance of conquered capitals from Rome's *Milliarium Aureum*. That was more than two millennia ago. One millennium ago, French poet Alain de Lille's apt comment, "thousand roads lead man forever toward Rome," targeted the Roman Catholic Church. Does the term's surging popularity in recent times reflect an imperial or theological return? Or does it echo the formation of a new frontier?

Contexts clarify. A recent case reverses both phrases. In March 2024, Italy decided to leave China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI). As the first G7 country to do so, it shook China's global search for a personified "Rome." China's once fabled Great Silk Road ended very close to Rome, making Venice one of the greatest *entrepôts* between three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—and three 13th Century empires—Byzantine, Holy Roman, and Mongol, extending to

(AIIB). In return, they have escalated de-risking policies and financial strategies with other countries, with the exodus of Western multinational corporations from China. The net effect darkens an already bleak global picture.

The British Gas (BG) Group discovered fossil fuels off the Gaza and Levant coastline between 1999 and 2013, opening up another global context, while the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) adopted by the G20 Summit in New Delhi this year represents a third. While Britain and BG face global rebuke for the slaughter of Gaza residents, IMEC elevates a different 21st century rivalry, between China and India. Both these countries boast one of the world's largest bilateral trade relationships. Yet when India displaced China as the world's most populous country this year, scholars and policy-makers scrambled to their drawing boards to paint expected outcomes.

On the other hand, Hamas' October 7 attacks demand methodical attention.

gas-processing community? Possessing one of the world's most efficacious intelligence services, Israel correctly detects (and bombs) nuclear breakthroughs. Take for example, the Israeli Air Force destroying an unfinished Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981. Yet, in 2023, Israel miserably failed to notice Hamas' preparations along the heavily fenced border. Next door, Egypt also ignored Gaza both before and after October 7. It would not be far-fetched to assume that

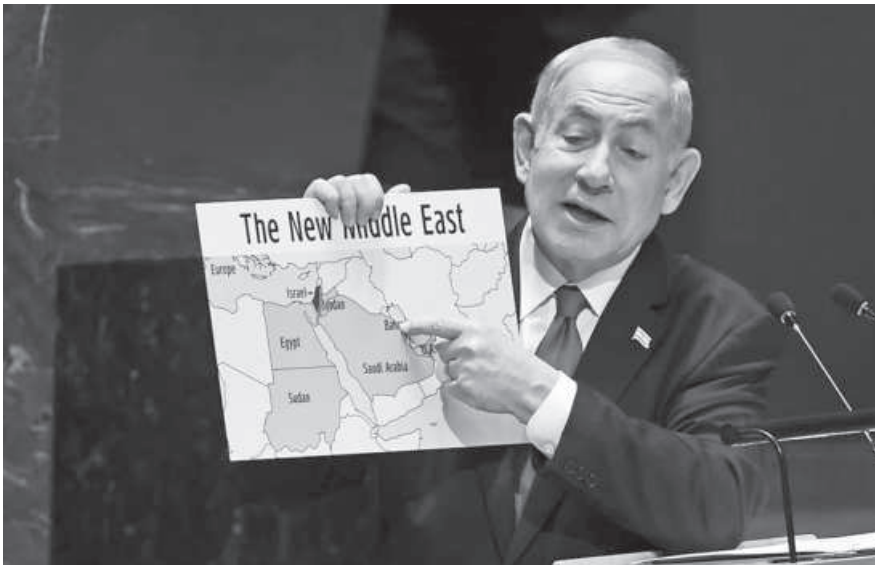
such as the Conservatives and Republicans in the UK and US, have penetrated pro-worker counterparts—like in the Labour Party in the UK and the Democratic Party in the US—splitting them over the Gaza issue. Both US President Joe Biden and UK Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer are facing their electoral rubicon in 2024; the latter is already bartering his own electoral advantages to join Sunak's "no ceasefire" campaign. This begs the question: is democracy irrevocably

feeds Israel's and the West's interests, and business from African/Arab dependence.

Anglo-French collaboration had earlier secretly produced the Sykes-Picot Agreement in May 1916, allocating Palestine to Great Britain (among other territorial distributions). Next year Lord Arthur Balfour proposed a "homeland" in Palestine to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland through Lord Rothschild. Jews fleeing persecution across Europe from the 19th century, particularly from Tsarist Russia, were directed to target Palestine by the First Zionist Organization in 1897, meeting in Basel under Austro-Hungarian Jewish activist, Theodor Herzl. An increasingly radicalised movement snatched Jewish history, and invented a road to their own "Rome" long before Adolf Hitler, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz forced Europe to find a *sine qua non* outlet for persecuted Jews.

Economically restructuring the Suez area entails enormous political consequences: African/Arabian interests subsided across Europe for not supporting European countries over Ukraine, but they spiralled elsewhere through an emerging Global South identity and by the membership-expanding BRICS. Even by inviting Saudi and UAE as members this year, BRICS must monitor India's alignments warily, owing to China's rivalry. Angling in western waters while inducting the African Union into G20 membership this year, India has taken on the role of a global broker. It can be argued that the way it has balanced economic trajectories and different ideological identities have muted global cries for a Gaza ceasefire.

Yet India's bridgehead Mideast role could also inflame future global relations. Implementing its IMEC G20 proposal would in all likelihood distance China further, rock the boat carrying over 150 extant BRI members, and though far from being a BRI competitor globally, it would give India that strategic global salience that the ideological nonaligned leadership from 1955 did not. Today's overtures in the Global South are even less likely to do such. As it happened in Israel's case, the Indian diaspora can also forge an Indian "Rome" anywhere (London is one, with pivotal leaders being of Indian ethnicity, just as Washington DC has long been Israel's). Alas, the actual Rome: in IMEC's planned pathway, it is only a footnote in business scrambles, and bears lower relevance in today's rapidly evolving global setting.



Benjamin Netanyahu holds a map of 'The New Middle East' without Palestine during his address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 22, 2023.

PHOTO: AFP

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Arabia, India, and Persia too.

Italy's BRI exit grimly parallels growing western uneasiness with China. The West is unhappy with China propping Russia in the Ukraine war while challenging the World Bank development plans through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

Though such reprehensible actions must be strongly reprimanded, punishing Gaza residents indiscriminately for them (instead of Hamas) and equating those events with 9/11, is concerning. Could Israel's ethnic cleansing operations in Gaza, now targeting the South, be the precursor of a trillion-dollar

Egypt secretly discussed oil discoveries with Israel in 2021. And why should it not? The United States also knew about them: more than a decade ago, the US Geological Survey (USGS) estimated that 120 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas reserves lie beneath Levant Basin Province in the Eastern Mediterranean. Is the lone-wolf US support for Israel—initially thriving with support from Canada, France, United Kingdom, and India—accenting the value of material gains over human lives?

Business deals enrapture geopolitical interests. Infosys, an IT firm owned by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's father-in-law in India, first teamed with British Petroleum (BP) and Israeli companies to explore North Sea gas fields (upsetting local environmentalists), then proceeded onto the Mediterranean Sea. Traditional alignments between businesses and political parties,

changing its course geopolitically?

If India's IMEC proposal opens another "road to Rome" it may also explain why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) downplay the Gaza crisis (as, too, a bulk of the 57 Muslim countries in the world). Business means more than Muslim *ummahs* (alliance). Both these Middle East countries were set to recognise Israel before this Gaza crisis erupted, perhaps driven by yet another Gaza development plan: to build a Suez Canal alternative. French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps constructed it between 1856 and 1869 with a 99-year lease. When Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised it in 1956 (with Indian support)—13 years before the lease was over—as the largest Suez Canal shareholders, France and the UK declared war upon Egypt, and were joined by Israel. A second canal in the Suez peninsula only