

‘US trade sanctions likely off the table’

When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina emerged victorious in the national polls on January 7, the US concluded that the elections were not free and fair. Almost a month after, US President Biden has written a letter to PM Sheikh Hasina, expressing willingness to work together. In light of this recent development, Michael Kugelman, director of Wilson Center’s South Asia Institute, speaks to Porimol Palma of The Daily Star, decoding the possible implications.

Does the letter indicate that strains in the relations between the two nations are now being repaired?

I’m not actually that surprised about this letter from Biden. The relationship was trending in this direction, one defined more by interests than values. The US had reined in its rhetoric on rights and democracy in the weeks prior to the election. The previous statement characterising the elections as not free and fair didn’t have a sharp tone, and it emphasised the importance of cooperating on geopolitical issues.

It would be premature to cite this letter as evidence that the US has decided to end its experiment of using Bangladesh as a test case for its values-based foreign policy—an experiment that has introduced frictions into an otherwise healthy and growing relationship. US officials have made clear that human rights will continue to be a part of the relationship.

But let’s be clear: for Biden to write a letter to Hasina that speaks of a new chapter in relations emphasising economic and geopolitical cooperation constitutes a strong indication that Washington wants



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it’s safe to say that the harshest possible measures—such as trade sanctions—are likely off the table. One can’t rule out some new visa restrictions or targeted human rights sanctions, depending on the outcomes of the US assessment of the election. But it’s been nearly a month since the election, and every day that goes by makes those types of measures seem increasingly unlikely as well.

certainly has concerns about the Myanmar crisis—albeit through a democracy-focused lens that wouldn’t align with Dhaka’s approach to Myanmar. But the conflict in Myanmar had been intensifying for months, and we didn’t see any outreach like this from Biden earlier on. Also, the Myanmar issue does not play a strong enough role in the US–Bangladesh relationship to provoke a major bilateral development like this letter.

Since the Indo-Pacific issue was also mentioned in Biden’s letter, similar to the State Department’s statement on January 8, do you think it’s a major factor driving the US’ increased attention to Bangladesh?

I’d actually cast this in broader terms: yes, the Indo-Pacific issue is mentioned in both, but we should see this in the wider context of great power competition, because the Indo-Pacific issue is about US–China competition, after all. One of the main reasons why the US wants to deepen engagement in Bangladesh, and in South Asia more broadly, is to try to counter growing Chinese and (to a lesser extent) Russian influence in the region.

And yet, the US democracy promotion policy worked against this strategic interest. It emboldened Beijing and Moscow, giving them opportunities to make Washington look bad by accusing it of meddling in Bangladesh’s internal affairs. And the policy caused friction with New Delhi, Washington’s top partner in South Asia. There have been times when US officials have linked rights and democracy and free and fair elections in Bangladesh to a free and open Indo-Pacific. But that’s a questionable position to take, given that India is a critical US partner in the Indo-Pacific, and its democracy has taken major hits—a development that Washington, for strategic reasons, says relatively little about publicly.

One of the most compelling arguments against pursuing the Biden administration’s values-based

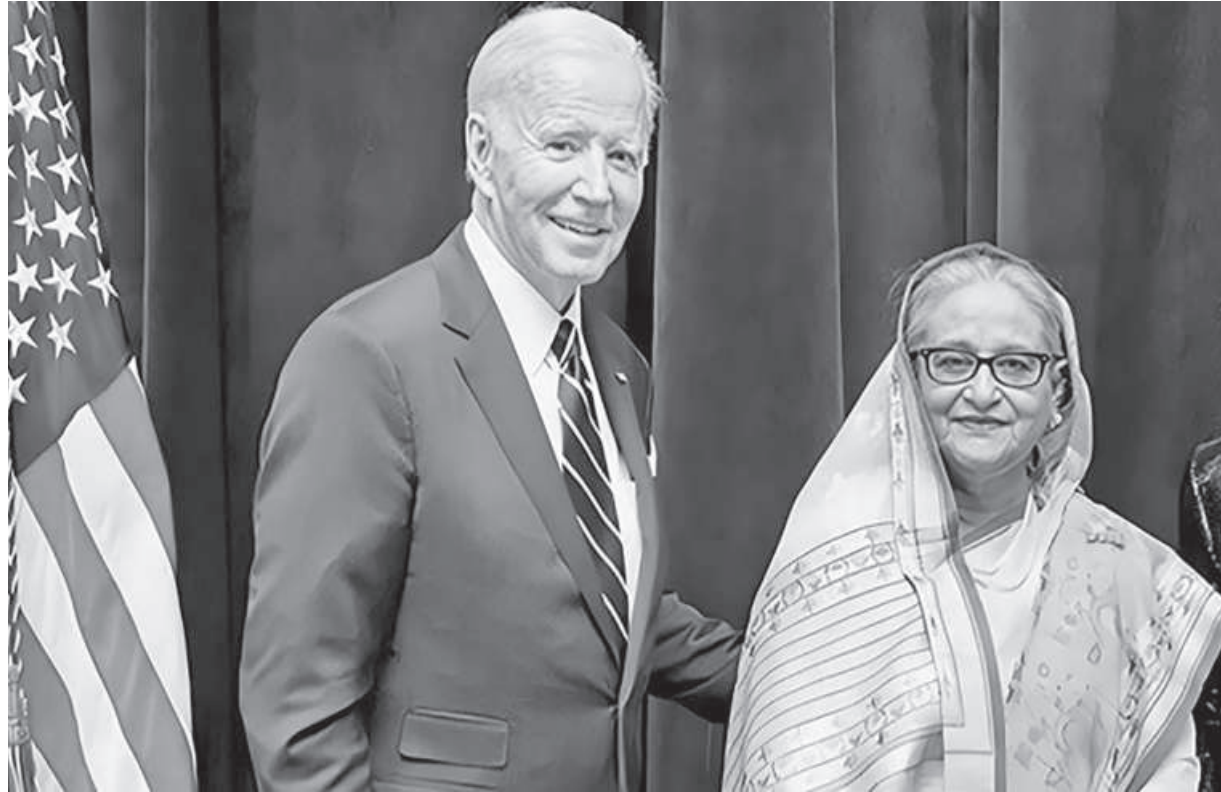


PHOTO: FOCUS BANGLA

Biden’s letter to Hasina speaks of a new chapter, that Washington wants to make this relationship work.

foreign policy in Bangladesh has been that it works against the US’ strategic interests, by boosting its strategic rivals and upsetting a key strategic partner. It looks like the Biden administration has now decided to give in to this argument.

The ruling party views that such a letter from the Biden Administration means the US is now normalising relations with Bangladesh. What is your take on that?

I don’t think this is right at all. US–Bangladesh relations didn’t need to be normalised. Let’s keep in mind that the relationship has actually been growing significantly in recent years—on economic, humanitarian, military, and strategic levels. The tensions over rights and democracy may have taken centre stage in policy debates and media coverage, but they’re a side show in the broader

relationship that has performed quite well.

To me, the letter reflects that the administration has concluded it’s time to make interests-based considerations a bigger part of a relationship that has flourished in recent years aside from frictions over the values-based elements.

Would you say the crisis in the Middle East or the US elections—later this year—are playing into Biden’s approach towards Bangladesh?

Several of Biden’s foreign policy positions—especially his position on Israel’s war in Gaza—could well impact the US election, but US policy toward Bangladesh is not one of them. So, I don’t think that’s at play here.

I also don’t see any direct link between the crisis in the Middle East and Biden’s letter. There’s no

shortage of US allies and partners helping Washington wage its military campaign on the Houthis. There’s no reason whatsoever to believe Bangladesh would take part in any US military activities in the Middle East. So it’s not like the US would want to smooth over tensions with Dhaka to seek its cooperation in that region.

Is the US backing away from its democracy promotion efforts in Bangladesh because it’s received so much heat for its unrelenting support of Israel’s aggression in Gaza?

Perhaps, from the context of diplomatic damage control. But my sense is the biggest driver accounting for this new phase in US–Bangladesh relations is strategic considerations linked to great power competition, as Bangladesh rapidly becomes a battleground for geopolitical rivalry.

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to make this relationship work, and that it wants to do so by focusing on the partnership’s main drivers of cooperation.

Is the possibility of sanctions over? One can’t rule anything out, though

Do you think the escalation of the Myanmar crisis played any role behind this letter?

I don’t think so. Yes, the Rohingya issue was mentioned specifically in the letter, and the administration

Pakistan elections 2024: Recurring rigging



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National elections are supposed to rejuvenate nations every four to five years as competing political parties sell their ideas to the masses and the winners form a government with a fresh and strong mandate to take the country forward. But as Pakistan’s election date of February 8, 2024 comes closer, a new controversy every other day is casting the dark spectre of massive election rigging by Pakistan’s all-powerful security establishment over them.

Pakistan’s electoral history unfortunately is replete with such rigging by its security establishment. None of its national elections held till date have been fully free and fair. Pakistan has spent over a decade under direct army rule. Even when national elections were held subsequently, they were usually rigged in one way or the other. During the first 25 years of its existence from 1947 to 1972, election delays, manipulation of the electoral college and dubious appointments and removals of prime ministers and heads of state were the main modes of election rigging. The main impetus for rigging in this era was the fear of the numerical majority of Bangalees in then East Pakistan.

The 1970 elections with universal adult franchise marked an end to this era of indirect elections. These elections were its freest ones in terms of pre-election and election-day processes. However, their legitimacy was lost when power was not handed over to Awami League. Since 1970, the parliamentary system has become entrenched and 10 more parliamentary elections have been held until 2018. But almost all of them were rigged to some extent by the security establishment according to the European Union and other credible sources. The only exceptions were the 1988, 2008 and 2013 elections—the last one representing the only free and fair civilian transfer of power from one fairly elected party to another in its history. This was partially due to the constitutional adoption in 2010 of a neutral caretaker system for holding elections.

However, the momentum and hope of free elections generated by the 2008 and 2013 elections were dashed in 2018 when the security establishment rigged elections again following increasing tensions with the incumbent Nawaz Sharif’s party because of the latter’s desire to pursue peace with India and end the establishment’s policy of supporting jihadi groups regionally. This led to the installation of Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) into power, leading to a hybrid regime where strategic power largely resided with the establishment. It was only a matter of time before the security establishment fell out with Imran Khan too, who lost power through a non-trust move



Supporters and activists of PTI party protest in Peshawar, demanding former PM Imran Khan’s release, on January 28, 2024.

PHOTO: AFP

by the opposition in April, 2022. The main reasons for the fall-out with Imran Khan were his poor governance, his bad ties with all major foreign allies and tensions with the army chief. This means that no prime minister in Pakistan’s history has ever

completed a full five years of rule—most being removed through palace intrigues by the establishment.

Following his loss in the no-trust move, Imran Khan launched a tirade against the new government, the army leadership and the US, blaming them for conspiring to remove him from power, leading to further tensions with the army. Things came to a boiling point when his supporters attacked army installations in many cities in May 2023,

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A banner featuring an image of Nawaz Sharif, in Lahore, on January 9, 2024.

PHOTO: AFP

middle-cadre leaders and workers have been forced or induced to desert PTI, often after their incarceration or disappearance and subsequent freedom. There are obstructions in the way of PTI’s free electioneering as reported regularly by media and social media. In a first, PTI has even been deprived of its election symbol (the iconic bat keeping in line with Imran Khan’s cricket career) unfairly which may open the doors for forced desertion of its independently running candidates to other parties. Imran Khan himself has been convicted and jailed in two dubious cases for a total of 24 years.

The 2024 elections look set to be more rigged than 2018 and 1990s ones and at par with the 2002 and 1985 elections, which were held under army rule. The establishment has honed its rigging skills so much that it can now carry out the same level of rigging even under constitutional rule. Opinion polls show that no party is likely to get a majority in the national assembly and a weak coalition government led by Nawaz Sharif’s party may rule without a strong and credible mandate. Its thin majority and dubious mandate will hobble and render it unable to deal with huge economic, security

and foreign challenges that Pakistan faces. This will just strengthen the hands of the army and its ability to control policy from behind the scenes, whose policies earlier led to the 1971 partition, the spread of terrorism and extremism and continued tensions with neighbouring states.

The economy has been suffering from inflation and low growth for a long while; the security situation is deteriorating due to increased terrorism by the Afghanistan-based Pakistani Taliban and Baloch militants fighting for freedom. Pakistan is following behind even within South Asia, especially Bangladesh, even though before 1970, the western wing was ahead of the eastern wing due to Pakistan’s discrimination against the eastern wing.

Pakistan’s huge social, economic, foreign and security failures are linked to its political failures. These political failures are clearly linked to issues of lack of political legitimacy due to rampant election delays and rigging. The 2024 elections look set to perpetuate that cycle of political illegitimacy and massive problems in all other domains. For this sorry state, the blame largely goes to the security establishment.