



Palestinians wait for food at a donation site in a Rafah camp in the southern Gaza Strip on Dec. 23, 2023.

PHOTO: AFP

## The paradoxes of US aid in Gaza



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US President Joe Biden's much-lauded State of the Union address on March 7, and his heart-filled dialogue for Gaza, was tainted with too many paradoxes for Palestinians to believe his words sincerely. During his big speech, the US President said that "saving innocent lives has to be a priority." He announced the plan for a new floating pier off Gaza to bring in food and supplies on ships via Cyprus. Pentagon officials have noted that the creation of such a port would require at least 60 days—so it's safe to assume that this aid won't help the deliberately, inhumanly starved civilians in Gaza soon. The process of "air-dropping aid" into Gaza prior to the US President's address resembled a Hollywood film derived from scenes produced during World War II. The renewed show of humanity towards Palestinians which the US is now projecting is lip service, at best.

Since the beginning of the war, the world has been more interested in providing humanitarian aid rather than stopping the war. They have justified this "war," and refrained from recognising the atrocities perpetrated by Israeli Occupying Forces endlessly carpet-bombing thousands and thousands of civilians. The innocents are seemingly collateral damage. As a result, Palestine has evolved into a testing ground for international capabilities, which over many months showed a resounding failure in providing even the bare minimum requirements for the survival of 2.5 million human beings.

Part of Israel's inhuman operation has included establishing barriers without gaps to prevent the entry of the aid that has piled up behind the border crossings. Thousands of trucks have been waiting for a signal from the hand of an Israeli soldier to enter, where the inspection takes hours, sometimes days, which led neighbouring countries Egypt and Jordan to send their aid through aircraft. The US followed suit and sent "sandwich carriers," dropping them on starving people waiting on the ground—the ground that Israel has burned with bomb-filled planes that the US sent to it. Not only is this new effort of "air-dropping" aid into Gaza theatrical, but it is ineffective, as several starved people in Gaza have been killed and injured by these boxes falling from the sky.

Unlike the previous times when he excused every bit of inhumanity from Israel, President Biden acknowledged that far too many civilians have been killed and he did note that Israel must do its part. So now, instead of the giant aircraft carriers that arrived to support Israel and protect it from the possibilities of the expansion of the war after October 7, 2023, the US has suddenly become

the struggling saviour, here to protect and reduce the ruins of the genocide it has actively helped Israel wage. While delivering aid and speaking of lavish plans to save Palestinians, the US has quietly approved and delivered more than 100 military sales since October 7, along with the approved \$107 million worth of tanks and \$147.5 million worth of deadly munitions such as the 150mm shells which have killed Palestinians. The paradox is crystal clear.

The underlying policies and strategies in the US' new position seem to be driven less by humanitarian or

serves as a temporary lifeline for those trapped inside, resembling more of a floating city on the sea surface than an emergency port. It underscores that Israel maintains its land blockade on Gaza and retains absolute control over what enters the Strip.

The temporary port is in fact a form of US presence in the region in a post-war scenario, and in military language, it is a base for landings, though not necessarily of soldiers, tanks and cannons. And if we recognise the fact that it is a joint war for the sole purpose of "exterminating Hamas," with its immediate goal being to end its rule and destroy all its weapons, everything that will come after the war and beyond will be jointly coordinated with the Israelis and its allies such as the US. The US is perceived not only as a mediator for truce and negotiations but as the overarching architect of influence in the region and globally.

We, Palestinians, actively seek the retreat of US forces from the conflict,



US President Joe Biden, on February 27, tells reporters he hopes for a ceasefire by Monday, March 4.

PHOTO: AFP

charitable motivations and more by strategic objectives. The use of terms like "humanitarian crisis" makes it seem like this crisis was not created by them; that thousands of children in Gaza are starving because of some sorry situation, and not a brutal genocide unfolding in front of the world's eyes. The US president's address regarding Gaza appears to conveniently serve the purposes of public relations ahead of an election campaign.

In this new narrative, the United States has positioned itself as a seemingly powerless player—one that's keen on delivering aid but is encountering insurmountable obstacles. Faced with the impossibility of obtaining permission for the passing of even a single truck, the US opted to address the issue from the sea through a temporary port. Striving not to disrupt Israel, the aid boxes are subject to Israeli inspections, and the naval opening aligns with the parameters set by Israel before the conflict. This solution

especially since it is a key player in orchestrating efforts to end Hamas' rule in Gaza and annihilate Palestinians. The US, which talks about the post-war scenario more than it talks about the war itself, does not need to send troops to Gaza, especially since Israeli soldiers or dual nationals are enough.

The existing US bases throughout the Middle East require strategic reinforcement in light of the rising security risks in the region, and Gaza is seen as a crucial addition in line with the understanding that the influence of nations, particularly major ones, transcends boundaries. Whether termed occupation, aggression, or conspiracy, these designations are merely distinctions, with their essence boiling down to the pursuit of influence. So, how can we tackle this? This is the most important question. The answer is in the hands of those carrying weapons on the ground, not in the hands of diplomats or journalists.

### BANGLADESH-VIETNAM RELATIONS

## Reject competition, embrace collaboration

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If we take a small step back from our usual negative understanding of competition between countries which are targeting a similar market, we can find a point where competition can be churned into something positive, benefiting both countries equally. For instance, what if Bangladesh and Vietnam—two close competitors in the current global manufacturing landscape—looked for a path towards mutual prosperity through strategic collaborations instead of competition alone? There is indeed untapped potential for Bangladesh to leverage Vietnam's strengths and accelerate its economic development. As Bangladesh and Vietnam edge towards celebrating 51 years of diplomatic relations, the two countries can benefit from strategic partnerships that transcend competition, thus leveraging each other's strengths for the prosperity of both.

The economic landscapes of Bangladesh and Vietnam at the moment reflect contrasting trajectories against a global backdrop of economic uncertainty post Covid and recovery from the pandemic's impacts. Here, Bangladesh's economic growth on paper and in figures remains strong. For instance, Bangladesh's poverty rate dropped as low as 12.9 percent in 2021 from 80 percent in 1971; the annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate has been, on average, 6.4 percent between 2016 and 2021. On the other hand, Vietnam's economic growth on paper is also decent. For example, poverty has declined significantly from 14 percent in 2010 to 3.8 percent in 2020; and GDP grew by eight percent in 2022 alone. Bangladesh's GDP for 2023 was \$1.131

trillion, whereas Vietnam's was \$426 billion. Regarding per capita income (PCI) in 2022, Bangladesh counted \$1,853, while Vietnam saw a PCI of \$4,164. Despite having a larger GDP, Bangladesh's low PCI is best explained by its higher population. In 2022, Bangladesh had a population of 165.16 million, whereas Vietnam had 99.5 million people. For a nuanced understanding of these statistics and figures, it should be noted that they are not always representative of the whole picture, as they do not account for inequality, commodity price hikes, environmental well-being, and so on—although in many cases, these numbers help to understand the overall size and potential capacity of a country's economy.

Both Bangladesh and Vietnam share some similarities and have some differences in terms of their respective major industries. For Bangladesh, the major industries are ready-made garments (RMG), textiles, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals, whereas for Vietnam they are RMG, agriculture, manufacturing (electronics and automobiles), and tourism. Against this backdrop, then, there are a few nuances that are inferable.

RMG reigns supreme in both countries, serving as their economic crown jewels. Both countries are close competitors and have been in the top five positions globally for many years. However, key differences lie in their approaches. Bangladesh focuses on cost-effectiveness, attracting buyers thanks to competitive wages and high production volumes. Conversely, Vietnam is increasingly shifting towards higher-value garments, capitalising on its skilled workforce and embracing technological integration in the RMG industry.

Although both countries have a robust agricultural backbone, the focus for each is different. Bangladesh shines when it comes to rice and jute production, while Vietnam excels in cultivating coffee, fruits, and aquaculture. These variations reflect their contrasting geographies—Bangladesh's fertile plains versus Vietnam's diverse topography. But both countries are actively pursuing agricultural modernisation and diversification to ensure future sustainability.

In manufacturing, Vietnam boasts burgeoning electronics and automobile industries, attracting substantial foreign investment. Its focus on high-tech goods signifies Vietnam's aspirations to climb the value chain and diversify its export basket. In contrast, Bangladesh's manufacturing sector remains nascent, primarily concentrated in light engineering and essential goods. This gap reflects varying levels of infrastructure development, technological know-how, and foreign investment attraction.

The economic landscapes of Bangladesh and Vietnam present a promising avenue for collaboration, especially considering the significant milestone both countries aim to achieve: a bilateral trade target of \$2 billion in 2023, after achieving \$1.5 billion the year prior. The optimism surrounding this target is based on the healthy economic relations which have already seen the bilateral trade turnover increase, reaching \$1.1 billion in the first nine months of 2022 alone. Therefore, the shared ambition for economic expansion has pushed both of these countries to aim to achieve upper-middle income status by 2030, followed by a transition to developed, high-income status in the early 2040s.

The potential free trade agreement (FTA) between Bangladesh and Vietnam strategically leverages their synergistic strengths for mutual benefit. The proposed areas of consideration include areas of collaboration that span beyond mere trade, such as investments in special economic zones, ICT sector cooperation, textile and garment industry collaboration, and more. Both countries have young, sizable populations (with Bangladesh having an edge with a much

larger population) and geographical advantages that facilitate trade, with Bangladesh positioned strategically between China, India, and Vietnam on a long coastline along the East Asian trade corridor.

The major export items from Vietnam to Bangladesh include cliner, cement, mobile phones, and steel billet, whereas Bangladesh exports textiles, leather, medicine, shoe materials, and sesame to Vietnam. Vietnam's investment in Bangladesh further bolstered this dynamic trade relationship, highlighting a diversified and mutually beneficial economic engagement.

Strategic initiatives and high-level engagements are crucial for achieving the full potential of a Bangladesh-Vietnam collaboration. As it stands, both countries are keen on exploring a free trade agreement to improve their economic ties, with discussions focusing on areas relating to trade and commerce, investment, energy, halal trade, tourism, culture, education, health, defence, and security. In particular, the proposal for a bilateral FTA is vital to ensuring competitive advantages in the global market, especially as Bangladesh prepares to graduate from its least developed country status in 2026. This also extends to Vietnam, which officially achieved lower middle-income status in 2011 but is now cutting it close in the timeline of achieving its aim of gaining upper middle-income status by 2030.

The path forward for Bangladesh and Vietnam is clear—collaboration, not competition. By focusing on strategic partnerships, leveraging comparative advantages, and addressing common challenges, these two nations can set a precedent for how developing countries can achieve mutual prosperity. The journey requires commitment, flexibility, and a willingness to explore new avenues for cooperation. The rewards—economic diversification, innovation, and sustainable development—are immense and worth the effort. As Bangladesh and Vietnam continue to explore the possibilities of their partnership, the international community will undoubtedly watch with interest, perhaps seeing in their example a template for future cooperation among nations.



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