

Is Bangladesh's 'nuclear prestige' an illusion?



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It came as an unexpected surprise in early April when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina asked Rosatom, the Russian state corporation that specialises in nuclear energy, to consider building another nuclear power station in Rooppur. The revelation came at a time when Bangladesh has already been struggling with depleting foreign exchange reserves, high inflation, load-shedding, poor human development, and an increasing debt burden. The country has already begun to seek new loans to repay its existing ones, as per a recent CPD analysis. In addition, Bangladesh is also taking fresh loans at high interest rates to buy oil and LNG from foreign sources. The country finds itself in an exceedingly precarious situation as both its external borrowings and debt-servicing obligations are increasing at a rapid pace. There is also uncertainty over securing a fresh source of foreign currency inflow to cover future debt.

In this circumstance, does Bangladesh really require another nuclear power plant? Or is the decision partly motivated by the pursuit of prestige?

"Nuclear prestige" refers to the high status that governments believe they can acquire by building nuclear weapons. Countries armed with nuclear weapons perceive it as a symbol of prestige because it represents the exclusive ability of employing an advanced technology, and the image of leadership it projects to the international community.

Research has shown that at key historical junctures, countries pursued nuclear weapons to gain prestige. Harvard political scientist Alastair Iain Johnston's research in 1995 showed that Mao's decision to construct a nuclear bomb was motivated in part by a desire to gain international prominence. American foreign policy and intelligence executive Gregory F Treverton used in his book, *Framing Compellent Strategies*, the example of Chandrasekhara Rao, whose

reason for India's first explosion in 1974 was that nuclear weapons would enhance the country's prestige. Similar observations were made about France's Charles De Gaulle by Princeton academic Wilfried Kohl in 1971, and by Yale professor Barry O'Neill in 2006 about Iraq's Saddam Hussein pondering the use of nuclear weapons to acquire prestige and regional leadership.

Only 32 of the world's 195 countries have nuclear power facilities. With the exception of two lower middle-income countries, Pakistan and India, the majority of these nations belong to the high- or higher- middle income category. These two nations' plans to build nuclear power facilities went hand in hand with their strategy to increase their nuclear weapons capabilities. India's nuclear programme began in the mid-1940s, when then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned the potential to cover the complete fuel cycle, and India purchased its first reactor from Canada in the 1950s.

Similarly, China's nuclear programme was established in 1955, led by Mao Zedong. Ultimately, Pakistan took a significant step towards nuclear armament under the guidance of Bhutto following the loss of East Pakistan in 1971. These countries exhibited a common pattern of nuclear adoption. They developed their nuclear weapon programmes due to concerns about national security and the need to assert their national identity in a tense geopolitical landscape. The potential of conflict drove these nations to construct and solidify their national and military identities.

Interestingly, when Bangladesh decided to construct a nuclear power plant, certain interest groups portrayed it as a symbol of prestige. What they overlooked is that the historical concept of prestige is associated with gaining technical competence to produce weapons and energy, rather than importing nuclear technology and expertise from overseas and remaining indefinitely

dependent on external power. The nuclear collaboration between Bangladesh and Russia is not a reflection of Bangladesh's financial capabilities, nor does it demonstrate its technical capacity to develop nuclear power plants on its own using domestic technology.

Russia is providing 90 percent of the funds in the form of loans. In other words, Russia is bankrolling this project so that Bangladesh can purchase Russian nuclear equipment and

resource training from India?

This leads us to the questions that are central to this discussion. Is this nuclear prestige false? Who benefits from this constructed sense of prestige?

Megaprojects are commonly recognised as effective means to demonstrate modernity and development. In numerous developing nations, dominant political parties frequently employ large-scale projects as a strategy to

countries with nuclear power plants produce less than 10 percent of their total electricity from nuclear energy. These countries include Japan, Germany, China, Brazil, South Africa, Argentina, Mexico, Netherlands, Iran, and India. If nuclear power is such an efficient and ecologically beneficial energy source, why aren't these countries building more nuclear power plants?

The answer is straightforward. Even nations with sophisticated capabilities refrain from relying on nuclear power due to the inherent risks, exorbitant costs, and the long-lasting damage caused by radioactive waste for thousands of years. Despite India's nuclear weapons capacity, why was the contribution of nuclear power in its energy generation only 3.1 percent by 2022, as reported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)? Once the RNPP commences operation, the share of nuclear power in Bangladesh's electricity output will be approximately seven percent, subject to future capacity increases. Constructing a second one will further increase the share.

Bangladesh has already borrowed \$1.38 billion from Russia to build the first 2,400MW RNPP. The 20-year repayment period will begin in 2027, with \$500 million per year for the first three years and then less in subsequent years. The first and second units were originally planned to be finished in 2023 and 2024, respectively. However, so far, 85 percent of the construction has been completed, with a revised completion date set for 2026.

How can a country consider building a second nuclear power plant when it doesn't know whether the first one will be able to operate successfully? We are not sure whether it will take two to three years or more for Bangladesh to be fully capable of operating RNPP on its own. With all of these uncertainties and risks, how can a country risk another one?

Since the days of Mao Zedong and Jawaharlal Nehru, the world has seen significant transformation. In the international arena, prestige is now defined as the ability to invest in research and development to exploit cutting-edge solar, wind, and green hydrogen technologies. Ironically, Bangladesh continues to adhere to a misleading definition of nuclear prestige. The country needs to realise its true potential, rather than relying on the illusion of nuclear prestige.



PHOTO: SANVI AHMED SAIM/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Do we really need, or can we really afford, to build another nuclear power plant?

employ Russian consultants, specialists, and personnel. This so-called financial capacity, in reality, is a future debt burden for our citizens. And then, once the nuclear power plant is built, Russia will operate it as long as Bangladesh does not develop the capacity to run the project itself. Furthermore, the tripartite agreement between Bangladesh, Russia, and India enabled India to develop Bangladesh's human resource capacity for Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (RNPP). It is reasonable if India is proud of its human resource development efforts in Bangladesh. But is it a matter of prestige for Bangladesh to receive human

push the prominence of development, despite the fact that the benefits derived from these projects hardly ever reach the people.

For a weak state, lacking the ability to manage inflation, guarantee public service provision, and enforce laws, it is easier to create a false impression of progress than to allow the citizens to reap the benefits of true development. Building a nuclear power plant gave politicians a chance to create an illusion of attaining technical prowess when, in reality, we are simply boasting about the abilities and expertise of others.

It is noteworthy that around one-third of

Good and bad ideas for managing a private development

If Bashundhara keeps getting less liveable, residents may take up a new tagline, 'Cholona onno kothao jai!'



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"Cholona Bashundhara jai!"—these words are impossible to get out of one's head. The jingle used to accompany images of idyllic green suburbs, with townhouses, gardens and a sparse population.

There aren't many private developments like the Bashundhara Residential Area in Dhaka. Usually they are decidedly concrete jungles with no spare inch for any sort of greenery. (Is there even such a thing as a tree in Niketan?) But for a family enterprise that tends to demonstrate plebeian aesthetic taste, there was an undeniable charm in the canopy of aged trees that shaded Bashundhara's main road. There were majestic rain trees, and Krishnachuras that would burst into bright orange every spring—just about this time of the year!

But now all that is history. Over the past two weeks, the Bashundhara authorities have felled almost all the trees along its main road. Sayem Sobhan Anvir Road is mostly bare, but there are other trees on other roads that remain marked for removal with an ominous X.

Let's be clear: this isn't an aesthetic problem. Each of the last 10 months have been the hottest on record. June 2023 was the hottest June on record. July 2023 was the hottest July. In February 2024, the 12-month average temperature was 1.52°C higher than pre-industrial levels. What this means, if you're struggling with the maths, is that it's BLOODY HOT.

It's hot enough to disrupt global weather patterns; to cause serious health problems; to induce a stroke; to kill stray animals. April is the hottest month of the year, and the difference between the temperature in Dhaka and surrounding areas has been known to be as much as 7°C. The difference is green spaces. Trees versus concrete. Trees keep temperatures down, not just by taking carbon from the air, but also by shielding the ground from the sun.

It should be criminal for trees to be felled at this rate in the year 2024. Many of the lost trees must have been over 50 years old—older than

Bashundhara; most were at least 20-30 years old. Unfortunately, there is no law governing the felling of trees on private property in Bangladesh. (Even if the said property is the size of a small city.) Elsewhere in Dhaka, the city corporation might intervene to stop such a move, and perhaps even press charges (when it isn't the city corporation itself doing



PHOTO: NAUSHAD ALI HUSEIN

Nice green canopy over the main road in Bashundhara R/A in 2014.

the cutting, that is). But the DNCC has no authority over Bashundhara.

Why did the trees have to go?

It's difficult to get an answer regarding this. Bashundhara is neither easy to contact, nor forthcoming with answers. Two reasons seem to be kicking around. The first is that the roots of these trees are weak, and prone to falling or shedding branches, therefore posing a security hazard to passing cars and people.

Trees falling is not unheard of. These incidents happen not just in Bashundhara,

but all around the world. There have been no fatalities due to falling trees in Bashundhara so far, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned.

But consider other fatal accidents in Dhaka: debris falling from construction sites; cranes keeling over and killing a family in their car; or road accidents, which kill thousands every year. The solution to road accidents is not to evacuate roads, and the solution to falling girders is not to stop building flyovers. Similarly, cutting down trees is no solution to the risk of falling trees.

Trees everywhere should be properly inspected and maintained, and besides the few infested or weakened trees which might have to be removed, the rest can be treated, if needed, to remain strong. The idea that hundreds of trees need to be chopped down

neighbourhood. Ghatpar was an excellent alternative route, and also a favourite hangout spot for students. If the authorities wanted to improve traffic conditions, there are several things that could be done before cutting down trees.

Who are we to tell them what to do?

But it's fair for the Bashundhara authorities to retort: this is their land, these are their trees; who are we or anybody else to tell them what to do? And they're right. Let's not pretend we live in a moral society, and that everybody, especially rich people in positions of power, do act in the interests of society at large. Why single out this particular act, especially when they're not even breaking the law?

Without getting into the dubious process by which low-lying areas and conservable

residents were moving into the area, i.e. during the past two decades, they saw a Bashundhara that was more beautiful and liveable. This was in line with Bashundhara's marketing. But now, after the plots have been sold and resold, the buildings constructed and apartments occupied, residents no longer have what they paid for.

Meanwhile, the new areas of Bashundhara are still relatively green. The new roads are still lined with trees. It might induce buyers looking for green spaces. But should anyone believe that the area will stay green? Once these blocks are occupied, and when the traffic intensifies, what's to keep the authorities from cutting down those trees? As a buyer or renter, I can't trust that this neighbourhood will be a liveable one in the future.



PHOTO: SHADAB SHAHROKH HAI

The main road of Bashundhara R/A in 2024.

flood-flow zones were acquired, filled and developed, this is probably a moment to reflect on the laws on cutting trees. In 2022, the cabinet approved a draft law that would require anyone to take permission before cutting down trees on a private property. That move was chaired by the prime minister herself. The law was never put into effect, but perhaps it's time to reconsider.

But more importantly, this is a moment for residents to consider what they've paid for. When most of Bashundhara's current

It's in the long-term interest of the Bashundhara authorities to invest in the liveability of the project. Bashundhara itself would be the biggest gainer, in the long run.

But who plays the long game anymore?

But who really cares what our future generations will see? And is it too late to care? I don't know. The question is whether Bashundhara dwellers will get tired of the authoritarian-style management and change their tune to "Cholona onno kothao jai!"