

The Bangladesh-India friendship dilemma



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India is Bangladesh's biggest neighbour. We are connected through our shared border, history, cultural traits, and language, among other things. Various threads bind us, including Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971. Considering all this, having a friendly, healthy relationship with India is as important for us as it is for them.

However, India's current leaders along with big business oligarchy have been pursuing a one-sided foreign policy. Their dominant mindset to extend their influence in the neighbourhood has created an unbalanced relationship in South Asia. This has raised questions and created reservations among the people in other countries. Therefore, it is not surprising that, except for Bangladesh, India is not on the best terms with the South Asian governments.

As our current government has said on a number of occasions, the relationship between Bangladesh and India has reached new heights since it came to power. That is true for the government, but not for the people. And there is a common perception that this relationship benefits India much more than it does Bangladesh. Our prime minister recently went on a formal visit to India, and all the memorandums of understandings and agreements made there seem to re-establish that notion. Bangladesh's interests seem to have been downplayed considerably, and objective critical questions of our citizens have once again been ignored.

Consider the fact that Bangladesh shares the border with India on three sides, and India is putting up a barbed wire fence on this entire border. This is not an example of friendship. Surrounding an entire country is akin to holding it captive. While the Bangladesh government has not spoken against this issue, our citizens are concerned. India's reasoning behind putting up the barbed wire fence is to prevent criminals from Bangladesh from entering India. If India's understanding is that criminals are going to enter its territory from Bangladesh, how can it ask for a transit through Bangladesh? If they believe ours is a country filled with criminals who must be contained with a barbed wire fence around our entire border, how can they ensure the security of their goods while using our roads and rivers for transit? Last month, the countries agreed on railway transit through Bangladesh as well.

We have been hearing about transit benefits even before our current government



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came to power, with promises of billions of dollars in earnings for Bangladesh. But in reality, now that the transit is being formalised during this government's time, we are not seeing the financial benefits for us—not even one percent of what was promised. On the contrary, Dr Mashiur Rahman, the economic affairs adviser to the prime minister, once regarded demanding any such financial benefits or gains as “uncivilised.” This means India will get transit benefits through Bangladesh, which gives them

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Also, in terms of business, thousands of Indian products find a place in Bangladesh's markets. But when it comes to exporting goods from Bangladesh to India, there are many barriers, tariffs, and non-tariffs, so we don't get the same business benefits in India as it does in Bangladesh. India is also gaining access to our seas. I can't help but ask: how

can we ensure our country's national security in this state of affairs?

Then there is the water-sharing issue. Many of Bangladesh's rivers originate in India. Being upstream, India has constructed dams and other structures to control the water flow in the rivers, preventing us from getting the water we need. Instead of giving us the water, India now wants management

visit to India, our prime minister mentioned the European Union as an example. But in reality, our bilateral relationship with India and the transit deal do not compare with the agreements in the EU in any way. The EU is a comprehensive economic and political system, where every country has rights over every other country, and they give the same rights to each other. Economic

While India will be able to transit through Bangladesh, the latter still cannot have the same access for a mere 30-40 kilometres to establish business ties with Nepal or Bhutan. Our government says that ties with Nepal and Bhutan will be established, but nothing has been formalised yet. There are many direct and indirect barriers to this, caused by India.

and communication benefits are ensured for all the countries in the EU. There is the European Central Bank, the euro currency, and an institutional structure.

A union of South Asia is truly important for our future, and that is something in which I firmly believe. But it is probably not going to be possible with India's current mindset of extending influence and the one-sided relationship-building approach. If we have a South Asian Union, we can utilise the massive amount of wealth and opportunities that lies here. Doing so can put a stop to communalism, corruption and the massive waste of wealth. It can create a multi language, multinational, multi ethnic community. This is only possible if the rights, wants, and needs of all the nations are ensured, and one country is not given priority over another. It should be a political demand of all the South Asian countries: a South Asian solidarity. It is for the sake of the citizens of South Asia that this should be prioritised.

The current leaders in India, and the business stakeholders, are not doing this to the rest of South Asian nations only. In truth, they are doing it to the majority of the Indian citizens as well, prioritising their own interests. So it is also for the sake of Indian citizens that a multilateral, multicultural union needs to be planned, finalised, and brought to reality. It should be clear to everyone that subordination and friendship are not the same. We want friendship, and that can only be achieved when we are treated as equals.

FIRST 2024 US PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Biden needs to go, but he won't



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Watching the first US presidential debate between Donald Trump, a convicted felon and fascist, and incumbent President Joe Biden for 90 minutes felt as painful as getting through a wisdom tooth removal. The debate, rather a debacle, has led the nation to a panic stream about its future leadership and the future in general. We have been familiar with the fears about Donald Trump throughout, that he is not a legitimate choice; he spews conspiracy theories and lies like a machine gun. The debate was the earliest in electoral history—both are presumed party nominees—and in fact, the Biden campaign pushed for it to remind the public of the former president's chaotic nature. The Biden campaign prepared for weeks in Camp David, but the result of that was a disoriented, alarmingly incoherent Joe Biden who, more than once, could not complete a sentence.

The media coverage since has been rampant with discussions about Biden's embarrassing underperformance that has crystallised fears about his age—though he's only four years older than Trump—and raised questions about his cognitive fitness to run the most powerful country in the world. It takes a lot to overshadow Donald Trump in a negative way. For an hour and a half, Biden stood on the stage, unable to answer questions, and unable to remember things he's done himself. Expected to make a strong case for why he should be re-elected, Biden did exactly the opposite. He could not respond to Trump's jabs, and just spewed a few insults, calling him “a loser and a sucker.” Biden was so incredibly sluggish that it makes one wonder whether this man even makes the decisions that come out of the White House, or whether he just sits there with a group of others in the Oval Office, while his secretary of state or vice-president gives him papers to

sign with his executive pen.

The New York Times' editorial board has already called for Biden to step aside; his supporters are saying that as a patriot, he should put the country before himself. The US media is already analysing what would happen if Democrats open up the convention on August 19 in Chicago, and considering potential candidates like California Governor Gavin Newsom and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, among others. But the question is: where were these candidates during the primaries? Why did none of them run rigorous presidential campaigns? Does Joe Biden run such a formidable lobby within the Democratic Party that no sane person could tell him that his time is up? While the media and reportedly some Democrats have “quietly” considered some replacement options, support from the members of the Democratic Party for Biden remains steady even after the disastrous debate.

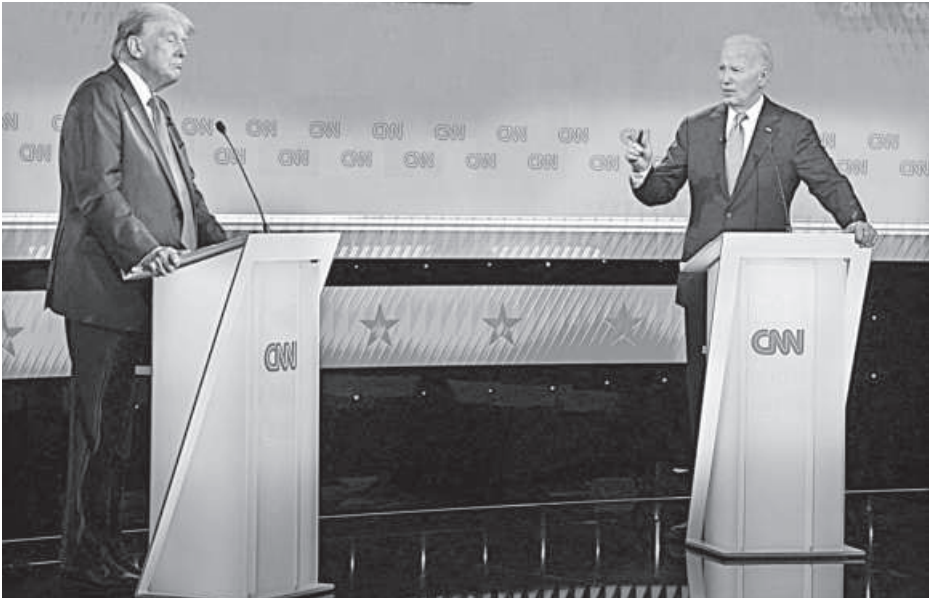
Biden won the primaries essentially unchallenged. California Governor Gavin Newsom was seen as a front-runner for the

The mental foginess that Biden displayed on that debate stage in Atlanta surely didn't happen overnight. One can say he is not like this every day, that he had a bad night, but he must be this out of it some days, and that itself is a huge issue for a commander-in-chief at such a critical time for the US—and the world.

2024 presidential race, but he put that to bed quickly last September, saying he had “great respect and reverence for Joe Biden as a person.” After Biden's underperformance, media outlets continue to name Newsom as a potential replacement, while he himself told MSNBC, “You don't turn your back because of one performance. What kind of party does that?”

The mental foginess that Biden displayed

release all the delegates he has accumulated, which would open the field for dozens of candidates. It would be chaotic and tough; a new candidate would lack Biden's established branding as a universal household name and need heavy advertising in a short span of time. The move could reveal factionalism and cracks in the Democratic Party, but all that chaos would serve the US better than four years of Donald Trump, who has vowed to be



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PHOTO: REUTERS

on that debate stage in Atlanta surely didn't happen overnight. One can say he is not like this every day, that he had a bad night, but he must be this out of it some days, and that itself is a huge issue for a commander-in-chief at such a critical time for the US—and the world. CNN's Anderson Cooper asked Vice-President Kamala Harris, “Is this the Biden you work with every day?” She responded rather defensively, reiterating the president's superior performance in contrast to Trump, which the former failed to communicate at a worrying level during the debate.

The huge game changer that the media is pushing for would realistically require Joe Biden to say, “I can't do this job,” and

a “dictator” from day one.

By the looks of it, however, Biden has not indicated a desire to gracefully step down. After the debate, he appeared in North Carolina, and did what he does best: honestly address his own shortcomings, seem relatable, and say, “I know how to do this job.” He started by stating, loudly, squinching his forehead, “Folks, I know I'm not a young man... I don't walk as smoothly as I used to. I don't debate as well as I used to.” But he made it clear that the “stakes are too high,” and invoked familiar tactics, saying like millions of Americans, “when you get knocked down, you get back up.”

What's clear for now is that the Biden

campaign is rushing behind the scenes to control the spiralling speculations of “the beginning of the end.” But that is a short-term solution. If Biden is this rusty today, how will he be after four years, if re-elected? There are many, many questions to ask and consider for the Democratic Party. Reportedly, influential donors have pressured Biden to step aside. The hope among Democrats that this round of panic can fizzle out is not impossible, and it is unclear how much this will affect voter decision. But the possibility that this could get worse, and Biden could lose to Trump, is just as real too.

The main factor favouring the sitting president is the sentiment that a vote for Biden is a vote against Trump. When Biden says the stakes are too high, it is because he, along with many members of the Democratic Party, genuinely believe that only Joe Biden can defeat Donald Trump, because he did it in 2020. But things have changed since then; Biden is not the same person anymore. Though the US economy has done well under his administration, Biden isn't currently assertive enough to reap a winning electoral strategy out of it. His foreign policy missteps, especially in regard to the genocide perpetrated by Israel in Gaza, will likely sway some young voters, as well as Arab voters in swing states like Michigan.

Donald Trump used “Palestinian” as a slur and said Israel should “finish the job,” and spouted nonsense theories about Putin's invasion of Ukraine. He said ridiculous things about abortions, and Roe v Wade, but all of that has blended into the background. Instead, pro-Dem media outlets are remembering and even agreeing with Trump's words, “I don't know what he said at the end of that sentence and I don't think he knows either.” If Biden continues this way—in debates, on live television—the attention on his weakness can cost him and his party the election. There is still time to introduce a new face and a charged, exciting voice, but it's hard to imagine Biden and the Democrats doing that. It hasn't happened since 1884, and the idea that he will step down after just one debate is a dream that won't come true. After all, the course of US politics recently has dwelled much more on illogical party loyalty and lust for power, than the right thing to do.