

# There’s a lot at stake for Bangladesh on the global stage

*In light of Bangladesh’s student protests and the government’s response that has brought the nation to a standstill—with violence, mounting death toll, and a brutal crackdown—***Michael Kugelman***, the director of South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, talks to* **Ramisa Rob** *of* **The Daily Star** *about the implications for the country on the international front.*



Michael Kugelman.

*As an observer from outside, but one specialising in South Asia, did you expect the student protests for quota reform to escalate to one of the biggest challenges that the Awami League government has faced?*

It was surprising. There have been plenty of protests during Awami League’s regime over the last 15 years, but nothing as large, long, and violent as this one. That’s likely because there was a perfect storm this time around: an unpopular court decision, an especially ferocious government response—incendiary rhetoric along with violent actions of great scale—a deep repository of pent-up public anger and grievances against the state, and growing economic stress that accentuated the public’s grievances.

*Can you describe the international response towards the spiralling situation and particularly the government’s handling of student protests from the beginning?*

There have been expressions of concern from the UN, some lawmakers, and some leaders around the world, especially in the West. And there have of course been strong condemnations from the international media and human rights groups. But on the whole, the international response, especially from foreign governments, has been rather muted. Some may find this relatively restrained international response to be puzzling, given the scale and egregiousness of the violence. There are several reasons for it. One is quite simple: the world is on fire, and with multiple major wars playing out, an internal crisis in Bangladesh won’t register high on many radars. Another reason is very practical: many governments prefer to keep a low profile and say little publicly at such a dangerous and volatile moment in Bangladesh, to avoid any risks to their nationals and interests in the country.

But let’s be clear: many governments, including in the US, are concerned. Bangladesh may not be a major power, but it’s a consequential and strategically significant player, especially in an era of intense great power competition. It’s also a top global economic player. From the international

community’s perspective, there’s a lot at stake with Bangladesh, and when it’s convulsed by unrest and uncertainty, that doesn’t serve anyone’s interests.

*What do you make of the government’s narrative that the protests were orchestrated by the opposition parties from the beginning, and is it of concern internationally?*

I know this is the narrative the government is trying to project, but aside from the hardcore Awami League support base and certain constituencies in India, I don’t think anyone

*In January, after the US deemed the election was not “free and fair,” you had written that Bangladesh remains a “test case” for US value-based foreign policy in a world where realpolitik often prevails. Do you think the current situation will have an impact on the US approach?*

This crisis will, I think, validate those in the US government that believe that rights and democracy should remain a focus of the policy towards Bangladesh. And it presents a challenge for those in Washington charged with focusing more on the interests-based part of the relationship—scaling up

unlikely that those sanctions will be removed anytime soon. Additionally, we’ve seen over the last year some US visa restrictions that targeted those that undermined the election process. So, we can’t rule out additional visa restrictions that target those linked to the illegal uses of force during the protests.

*What would you think are the general concerns of this ongoing unrest and instability for nations that have economic and political ties with Bangladesh?*

Stability risks are a major problem for countries with both economic and political

to extended security concerns. That would make diplomatic relations more difficult. And that would be quite disappointing for a government—and a ruling party—that has long prided itself on its ability to conduct relations with countries across the board, and navigate fierce geopolitical competition, come what may. Let’s be clear: it’s hard to show “friendship to all, malice towards none” if many of your friends are taking a step back due to security concerns.

*What do you believe are the geopolitical implications for Bangladesh’s reputation from this current movement? Is there any way to turn back the clock at this stage?*

Bangladesh’s global reputation and image have taken serious hits. But I wouldn’t overstate the geopolitical implications of this. The Chinas, Russias and Indias of the world, and much of the Global South, won’t let the internal policies of the Bangladesh government—including and especially the use of repression—impact their relations with it. I envisage a fair degree of continuity in policy.

Whether Bangladesh’s relations with the West will face any consequences remains to be seen. These relations will largely be impacted by how long this crisis plays out. A prolonged crisis, and especially one that involves more state repression, could pose a challenge to Dhaka’s relations with the West—from its efforts to earn more trade privileges from the EU to prospects for arms sales with the US and others. At the end of the day, the West—including the US—won’t be stopped from engaging with Bangladesh if strategic interests warrant that engagement. But this has been an especially serious crisis, with especially grave concerns about the actions of the Bangladesh government and state actors.

*If the situation were to calm down, do you expect a major shift in the strategic significance of Bangladesh, especially in regard to the nation’s position as a key battleground for great power competition?*

That strategic significance will remain entrenched, regardless of whether and when the situation calms down. Bangladesh’s location, size, economic status, and relations with great powers are constants that won’t be impacted by prolonged instability.

But there’s a cautionary tale here. India has been successful in leveraging its own strategic significance, ensuring that the West remains closely engaged with it despite concerns about its domestic policies. Bangladesh is also strategically significant, but not so much that the US was willing to hold back from pursuing tough policies—including sanctions—that risk aggravating relations. In effect, Dhaka can’t use its strategic significance as a shield, in the way that New Delhi can.



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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

is buying it. The protests were organised and spearheaded by members of the public, not political parties. They were led by students, not political partisans. This isn’t to say opposition forces didn’t exploit and infiltrate the protests—I’m sure they did, given the opportunity it provided. But these were public protests led by student leaders.

It’s a painful truth for the Awami League that there were mass displays of public anger against the government. That’s a big reason why it has put out the narrative that it has: by blaming it all on the opposition, you try to hide the reality that many Bangladeshis—common people, not political partisans—seem to be fed up with the government.

economic cooperation, furthering strategic collaborations, and so on. If the crisis recedes and instability subsides relatively soon, it will be easier to get back to that balance of values and interests that the Biden administration has sought to strike post-Bangladesh election, with the letter that was issued in February. But prolonged unrest and crisis will make that much tougher to pull off.

This crisis could have a big impact on one particular key US policy: sanctions on Rab. The US has said in recent weeks that it has no plans to remove those sanctions. But events of recent days, especially if the US concludes Rab was involved in the unlawful use of force during the protests, will make it even more

ties with Bangladesh. Countries and investors operating commercially in Bangladesh have already been spooked by the scale of the violence, and they’ll be nervous about the possibility of additional flare-ups down the road. And the sense of uncertainty about what could be coming next will add to that sense of anxiety. This isn’t good for Bangladesh, especially as it’s already dealing with growing economic stress and badly needs course corrections that include more FDI flows.

Bangladesh’s diplomatic ties could also be hampered, and especially in a worst case scenario where foreign governments scale down their diplomatic presence due

## Who would be better for Palestine: Trump or Harris?



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RAMISA ROB

The Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, against whom there exists an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court, delivered a controversial address to Congress, just days after incumbent Joe Biden dropped out of the high-stakes presidential race. Thousands and thousands of protesters gathered outside, and Netanyahu called them “Iran’s useful idiots,” as bipartisan—though mostly Republican lawmakers—clapped theatrically.

Joe Biden has been the face to blame for abetting the genocide of over 40,000 Gazans, and rightly so, as he’s deferred to Netanyahu, providing his extremist government with billions of military aid and lethal weapons to annihilate a whole population. Ahead of the 2024 elections, Biden’s role in Gaza genocide had birthed a sinister question: would Donald Trump have been better for Palestinians? Now that Vice President Harris is poised to replace Biden on the Democratic ticket, the question still remains: Will Donald Trump be better for Palestinians than Kamala Harris?

First, an undeniable fact must be addressed: the US political establishment itself is Zionist, and it is in no position to pivot from favouring Israel over Palestinian lives. Harris, as a presidential candidate in the US, cannot win by being “anti-Israel,” but the conundrum she faces is that young voters will not tolerate further US-backed brutality in

Gaza. Her first foreign policy challenge, in her newly launched presidential campaign was the way she dealt with Netanyahu’s visit, as left-leaning Democrats insisted that she must clean up Biden’s Gaza policy mess—which has actually harmed Democrats much more than Biden’s debate performance. A recent Century Foundation poll, conducted before Biden dropped out, showed that nearly four in 10 voters (38 percent) said they were less likely to vote for Biden due to his handling of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

Harris did not attend Netanyahu’s address, which she would normally preside over, but she met him privately, after which she, expectedly, harped on the harmful rhetoric, “Israel’s right to defend itself.” But she also expressed concern, more vocally than Biden, regarding innocent Palestinians in Gaza. “We cannot allow ourselves to be numb to the sufferings and I will not be silent,” she said. It’s far from enough, but she did carve a microscopic space for Palestinians in the conversation, which is a shift from Joe Biden, who has, for the most part, glossed over the large number of civilian casualties of Palestinians in Gaza, and even questioned them.

In an interview with the *Nation*, during the historic US student protests against the genocide in Gaza, Harris seemed to show sympathy with students, though restrained, stating that, “They are showing exactly what the human emotion should be, as a response

to Gaza.” Kamala Harris has irritated Israeli ministers, including the President Isaac Herzog who said in a recent interview, that “she has made quite a few problematic statements in the context of the war in Gaza,” which he added, “might have been influenced by the more progressive camp in the Democratic Party.” While Biden is more of an old-school Zionist in his personal views, Harris’ own personal views are unclear. She has internally advocated for more pressure on Netanyahu to agree to a ceasefire. But she keeps showing double standards with her staunch support for Ukraine against Russian invasion, while reiterating that the Israeli persecution of Palestinians “is not a binary issue.” Bernie Sanders was one of the very few US politicians, other than Rashida Tlaib—the only Palestinian American in Congress—to contextualise the Hamas attacks and lightly address the root of the conflict. He has been condemned by many, including Democrats for it. So, to expect Harris to act like Sanders or Tlaib, who was censured for her pro-Palestinian comments, and win the nomination and election, is utopian.

As for Donald Trump, he shares a close relationship with Netanyahu. When addressing Congress, Netanyahu thanked former President Trump for the historic “Abraham Accords,” which sought to normalise diplomatic relations between Israel and other nations in the Middle East. Trump was coaxed to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal during his presidency, secured by Obama, and almost went head-to-head with Iran—a long-time dream that Netanyahu has had. The Abraham Accords only emboldened Netanyahu’s plans to annex the West Bank, and greenlit illegal settlements on Palestinian Territories—which Biden tepidly sanctioned during the ongoing genocide. Trump’s actions in Netanyahu’s Israel were far from advancing the cause of “peace,” but rather

reflected a coordination between two corrupt politicians. Trump warmly hosted Netanyahu in Washington, and told reporters, “No President has done what I’ve done for Israel.” He then went on to lambaste Harris for voicing her concerns for Palestinian civilians, saying, “I think her remarks were disrespectful.”

Right after the October 7 Hamas attacks, Trump criticised Israel’s security failure, condemning Biden, and then went on to say that he would expand a freeze on refugees that he enacted during his presidency to cover people from the Palestinian territory of Gaza. He has now vowed to set new restrictions on immigration crackdowns, saying, “If you want to abolish the state of Israel, you’re disqualified.”

Israeli Ministers like the extremist Ben Gvir have openly expressed they prefer Trump and Republicans, saying, “Instead of giving his full backing, Biden is busy with humanitarian aid. If Trump was in power, it would be different.” And that should itself be the answer to the question on a lot of progressives’ minds.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Palestinians expressed their belief that Trump would exacerbate their suffering, and he’s also made it clear in the presidential debate, that Israel needs to “finish the job.” It’s also remarkable though, that residents expressed scepticism regarding Harris’ presidency due to her cozy history with pro-Israel lobbying groups. Fathmi Nimr, a Palestinian political analyst, told Al Jazeera that a “major shift” in US policy in the Middle East under Harris is unlikely. Some believed the only change would be that she could be tougher on Netanyahu, whom many accuse of prolonging the war to remain in power in a nation where he is copiously disliked.

The fact that the “will Trump be better” question is even being asked stems from a concept that’s been going around for quite some time: Donald Trump is “anti-war,” and

it’s also become the new MAGA pitch. In January, Senator JD Vance—now Trump’s running mate—had claimed that Trump’s legacy was that he “started no wars.” And it’s working, as the anti-war left and just anti-war people who’ve been seeing thousands and thousands murdered have said the same on social media. But Trump’s chaotic presidency and xenophobic foreign policy seems to have been memory-holed. Under Trump, the civilian deaths in Afghanistan skyrocketed. He widely supported the Saudi Arabian war against Yemen, started the trade war with China among many other inflammatory incidents he created himself. During the Black Lives Matter movement after the killing of George Floyd, as police fired tear gas onto the protesters, Trump deployed National Guard troops on the streets of Washington DC. If he had reacted with military force during the BLM movement, then would he have not done the same—if not worse—during the pro-Palestine student encampments that shook the nation this year?

One thing is for sure, Trump has never hidden behind the facade of “human rights,” and maybe he deserves credit for that. But he will not be championing any kind of peace for Palestinians—whose lives reflect a slur to him. To think that he will be simply asinine. Progressives in the US, advocating for an end to the worst military campaign in modern history, need to unfortunately settle for a stable candidate who will not repress public pressure, but who has more chances of reacting to it. If pressured, Harris has a higher likelihood of deviating from the unilateralist and militarist US foreign policy, where the US weapons industry proliferates at the cost of the violence unleashed onto the rest of the world. There could be a starting point with Harris at least, whereas with Trump there definitely won’t be.