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We should deepen relations with Malaysia

Now is the moment to add new dimensions to our collaboration

The visit of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar bin Ibrahim to Bangladesh was a significant event, as it marked the first visit by a head of state to Bangladesh since the interim government took office. This visit was especially meaningful given the personal friendship between the Malaysian prime minister and Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus. During their discussions, both leaders expressed a commitment to elevating bilateral relations between the two countries—something that, arguably, should have happened much earlier. Nonetheless, with the recent change in government in Bangladesh and the Malaysian prime minister's visit, a new chapter in our relationship has hopefully begun.

Prime Minister Ibrahim pledged to consider allowing the entry of 18,000 Bangladeshi workers who were unable to enter Malaysia in May, which is already a positive step forward. Given the current state of the two countries, there is great potential for mutually beneficial cooperation, starting with the issue of labour migration. The prime minister acknowledged that Malaysia needs workers, a need that Bangladesh is well positioned to meet. And now is the ideal time for both countries to address the flaws and exploitation that have negatively affected this issue, particularly for Bangladeshi migrant workers. As the prime minister rightly noted, although Malaysia needs workers, they must not be treated as modern day slaves. Therefore, it is crucial to eliminate the corruption caused by recruitment syndicates involving Bangladeshi and Malaysian nationals and loopholes in the system that allow for the mistreatment of workers, causing harm and losses for both nations. The two countries should deeply examine how labour migration can be made safer and more beneficial for both, and perhaps, set a standard for global labour migration as a whole.

Apart from being an important labour destination, Malaysia is also a popular choice for many Bangladeshi students pursuing higher education. And this is another area where the two countries should enhance collaboration. Additionally, Malaysia could become a destination for Bangladeshis seeking medical treatment if travel visa procedures are simplified between the two countries. We believe that Bangladesh should seek greater economic integration with Malaysia, and pursue technology and knowledge transfer from it to accelerate our country's development—similar to what Malaysia has previously achieved. We also hope that our Malaysian partners will be open to providing such assistance to Bangladesh.

Finally, as Prof Yunus has pointed out, Malaysia is well-positioned to appeal to Asean to increase efforts in helping Bangladesh resolve the Rohingya crisis, which poses a risk to the region's overall stability. Given Malaysia's chairmanship of Asean in January 2025, we hope the country will bring this issue to the other members' attention, as well as the matter of Bangladesh's inclusion as a sectoral dialogue partner within the union.

Latest floods is yet another wake-up call

Can we be better prepared next time?

The flood situation in Sherpur, Netrokona and parts of Mymensingh is worsening, with gushing water submerging roads and entering establishments so fast that people have little to no time to escape. At least three deaths have already been reported. Images of people's desperation in trying to save themselves from the ferocity of the water highlight the immediate need to evacuate people faster. Flash floods, as their name indicates, happen suddenly, but continuous heavy rainfall can also predict them. We have been well aware that heavy rainfall was expected throughout the week in most parts of the country and the Meghalaya mountains. Could the government have been better prepared?

Water from melting ice in the mountains in Meghalaya keeps entering the lowlands, leaving thousands of people stranded. The army, along with volunteers and the fire service, is evacuating people. They have opened schools as shelters and arranged life-saving equipment such as speedboats and life jackets. However, thousands of people are still waiting to be rescued.

More rain will mean rising water levels, causing further suffering. Already, the floods have destroyed crops, livestock, poultry, and homes. It is, of course, after the floods that the devastation will be clearer and when people will need the most help. The interim government should take lessons from the last few floods, which have been particularly severe. In Feni, particularly, reaching relief to people stranded in remote areas proved to be extremely challenging, leaving them with little food and other necessities.

This year, Bangladesh has witnessed debilitating floods throughout the monsoon season, affecting numerous districts. Unusual heavy rainfall and filled up canals and other water bodies resulted in the water rising faster, making it more difficult for people to evacuate or save their livestock or crops.

In addition to the immediate steps needed to evacuate people and provide relief, the government must focus on treating post-flood diseases and rebuilding people's lives and homes. The financial losses incurred by individuals are immense, and the government must provide financial and logistical support. Climate change guarantees that floods will be more frequent and more severe in the near future. The efficiency of disaster management must be improved, with proper involvement from civil administration to work alongside NGOs and charitable groups. We must free up water bodies and work together to help flood victims rebuild their lives.

Cleanse then reform



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

The most common refrain currently is for reforming the major democratic and security institutions of the country, of which reforming of the police is the most vociferous. Reform is not only overdue, but it has also become urgent given the rot that has engulfed the security sector, particularly over the last 15 years of misrule, marked by the most seemingly irredeemable politicisation of the nation's institutions.

I shall, however, use this column to offer some suggestions regarding the military, the army in particular, because it seems that of the three branches, army according to many, has been the worst affected by Hasina's contemptible act of politicisation.

Before we can even contemplate on the reforms of the army, I believe that assessing the enormity and complexity of the task should precede reform. The image of incompetence, ability, and qualification cannot be overlooked. No wonder we had the misfortune of watching officers in the past holding ranks not behaving professionally in dealing with senior political leaders.

Special focus should be on the DGFI, NSI, and RAB. Those responsible for the wicked "Aynaghar," enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings like the killing of Cox's Bazaar ward commissioner and Ilyas Ali, and illegal confinements, must not only be discarded—if not already done—but they must also be held to account. Merely sending them on forced retirement is too lenient a consequence for their acts against humanity. In fact, it is doing them a big favour.

As for reform, officers' recruitment is the issue that should be addressed first. Reportedly, the Inter Services Selection Board (ISSB), or the selection board for the tri-service, has not lived up to its expectation and was influenced too much by political consideration. Thus, many questions have arisen anew in the last 15 years. The short-term consequence is very apparent. In the long run the army would be left with mediocrity in military uniform.

The trainers at the military academy must also be selected through a



Members of Bangladesh Army arrive at a temporary camp after being deployed across the country to help civil administration during general election in Dhaka, Bangladesh, January 3, 2024.

PHOTO: REUTERS

foolproof process, and not at the pleasure of the chief. Reportedly, the selection process of the potential platoon commanders, at least in the Bangladesh Military Academy, has been discontinued. This must be restarted forthwith.

Promotion and appointment procedures should be streamlined and codified. It must be ensured that no political influence plays any part in armed forces recruitment. There are only three considerations that should come into reckoning. Firstly, merit and efficiency, secondly, merit and efficiency, and thirdly, merit and efficiency.

I strongly believe that the secondment of army officers to RAB must be discontinued. I have propagated this point in the past in my

columns. No military officer, having performed police job for three years, can readjust himself or herself in the military after reversion. The officer loses all the qualities of a military commander after chasing thieves and robbers and occasionally participating in killing missions at the orders of the higher ups.

Needless to say, our defence

from immediate neighbours.

The abhorrent practice of declaring retired military officers as persona non-grata or PNG on political grounds must be stopped immediately. This very despicable practice was being followed by every administration cutting through various regimes. No one has the right to forfeit my rights as a retired

procurement is plagued by corruption, opacity, and shortcuts. Unfortunately, many acquisitions are vendor driven rather than the result of following a laid down procurement process, starting from the need of the user and ending with the procurement of the kit. It would be nice to know how many procurement procedures of weapon systems or other equipment, have been actuated by the General Staff Requirements (GSR) and how much of the General Staff Target's (GST)—if at all—system or equipment, have been met.

While our weapon sources should be diversified for obvious reasons, too much diversification can lead to logistic nightmare. We should also reconsider how much of our weapon and equipment should be sourced

military person to the benefits given by the state on any ground except if I am convicted of felonious crimes or treason or sedition. Unfortunately, a look at the long list of people declared PNG would show that the practice has been used against officers belonging to "the other" political party of the time.

Our new crop of officers is comparable to the best of the best armies. They are professional, educated, extremely well-informed, and infused with the love for their country. Unfortunately, there have been leadership questions, in a previous case, at the very top. How could such a person adorn the post of army chief remains a sad question. However, every effort must be undertaken so that it is never repeated.

The challenges Sri Lanka's new government faces



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SELIM JAHAN

Sri Lanka has recently elected Anura Kumara Disanayaka as its new president. The election was critical for Sri Lanka for three reasons—first, it was the first presidential election since the country's 2022 economic meltdown; second, the election served as a referendum on the difficult austerity measures imposed on the country's road to recovery; and third, the economy was the key issue for the voters.

While Sri Lanka's transition from an interim to an elected government is a welcome news and needs to be celebrated, the path ahead for it is far from smooth. The past two years have been quite tumultuous for Sri Lanka on political and economic fronts. Even though there has been good turn around in many aspects, the recovery is still fragile and significant socio-economic challenges remain for the new president. In a way, the new president has inherited a series of past problems, over and above of which new challenges have emerged.

In April 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on \$51 billion of external debt. By July, with the country facing shortages of essential goods and power blackouts, inflation was hovering at 60 percent. Sri Lanka underwent a sovereign default in April 2022, as its foreign exchange reserves ran out and public debt stood at more than \$83 billion, half of which was owed to foreign creditors. Soaring inflation at close to 70 percent and commodity shortages triggered large-scale unrest. Anger over the government's handling of

the crisis led to mass street protests, forcing Rajapaksa to flee the country and resign.

In 2023, as President Rajapaksa's successor, interim President Ranil Wickremesinghe, was tasked with reversing Sri Lanka's economic crisis. With few options on the table, it turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In 2023, Sri Lanka secured a \$2.9 billion bailout from the IMF. It was a 48-month emergency loan, and as with all IMF deals, it came with strict conditions. In exchange for funds, the government of President Wickremesinghe was forced to remove electricity subsidies and double the rate of the value-added-tax (VAT). Wide-ranging austerity also included a sovereign debt restructuring. Following a \$4.2 billion debt restructuring with China's Ex-Im Bank in October last year, Sri Lanka completed a \$5.8 billion restructuring with a number of countries, including India and Japan, in June this year. In a last-minute agreement before the election, on September 19, the country clinched a deal with private investors to restructure \$12.5 billion of international bonds, clearing the way for the release of its fourth tranche of IMF bailout funds.

As Sri Lanka moves forward, buttressed by the IMF deal, the country's economy has managed a tentative recovery. It is expected to grow this year for the first time in three years and inflation has moderated

to 0.5 percent from a crisis peak of 70 percent. The rupee has stabilised and inflation has come down sharply from its 2022 peak. The World Bank forecasts the economy to expand 2.2 percent in 2024, following two straight years of negative growth. The country's debt-to-GDP (gross domestic product) ratio is expected to fall from 128 percent of GDP in 2022 to just above 100 percent by 2028, according to IMF forecasts. Debt servicing costs—the percentage of tax revenues needed to pay creditors—will also remain elevated. Sri Lanka's fiscal balance went from a deficit of about 4 percent in 2022 to a surplus of 0.6 percent in 2023. Yet, as the new Sri Lankan president takes office, he will have to tackle five major challenges facing the country.

First, the new president has pledged to have a new deal with the IMF. For example, he wants to change the IMF's insistence on treating external and domestic debt equally. He has also indicated that his government would try and push the IMF to shift the burden away from ordinary Sri Lankans onto external creditors. But given the fragile state of the tentative recovery of the Sri Lankan economy, trying to alter the terms of the IMF package may cause short-term pain.

Second, during the campaign President Disanayake presented himself as the candidate of the change for those reeling under the austerity measures. Poverty in Sri Lanka is on the rise and the World Bank has estimated that between 2019 and 2023, poverty levels in the country more than doubled with over a quarter of the population living below the poverty line. The costs-of-living are still high and real wages remain significantly below pre-crisis levels. The new president has pledged to increase Sri Lanka's income tax-free threshold and exempt some health and food items from the 18 percent value-added tax to make

them more affordable. These will not be easy tasks.

Third, wide-ranging austerity also included sovereign debt restructuring, which are meant to lower debt costs and free up public resources for things like education and healthcare. That is not happening in Sri Lanka. Recent financing deals did not provide enough debt relief, and it requires debt to be paid down through high budget surpluses, meaning less spending on public services. Sri Lanka's fiscal position is also hindered by a low tax base. The tax-GDP ratio in Sri Lanka is about 8 percent—among the lowest in the world. Sri Lanka also holds the world's highest interest payments to government revenue ratio and the grace period on bilateral loan repayment will expire in 2028. On the current trajectory, Sri Lanka may end up in repeated defaults in the future.

Fourth, the geo-political issues surrounding Sri Lanka are also a challenge. The country, like many other nations across South Asia, tend to oscillate between the pro-India and pro-China rhetoric, and it cannot afford to alienate either country. China and India are also not the only major powers with interests in Sri Lanka. In 2023, the US International Development Finance Corporation announced a commitment of half a billion dollars to support the development of a deep-water shipping container terminal at the Port of Colombo. Such projects aim to dilute China's economic influence and reaffirm Sri Lanka's geostrategic importance along vital maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean.

Finally, leading Sri Lanka out of its economic woes will require policy consistency. Over time, damage done by economic mismanagement and unwise policies put in place by successive Sri Lankan governments have weakened the Sri Lankan economy. Sustained implementation of structural reforms is also necessary.