

‘The proposed 2+2 dialogue mechanism should not be overinterpreted’

Mohammad Sufiur Rahman, senior research fellow at the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance in North South University and a former diplomat, speaks with Porimol Palma of The Daily Star about the outcomes of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman’s just-concluded visit to China.

How do you assess Prime Minister Tarique Rahman’s recent visit to China?

The visit should be viewed as part of a broader and continuing process of engagement between Bangladesh and China. Relations between the two countries have steadily deepened over the years; in that context, the visit marks another positive milestone. While there were also important visits in 2024 and 2025, this one appears to have a greater depth. The significance lies not merely in the number of agreements signed but in the quality of understanding and trust as reflected in the discussions and outcomes.

The depth of this visit appears to be reflected in the understanding of the future direction of bilateral relations and implementation. Not everything should be measured by quantity, especially that of investment commitments, business deals and financial aid. Looking at the language and structure of the joint communiqué, I presume that the negotiations were held with greater convergence, the desire to advance interdependence and the spirit of mutuality of interests. Its language indicates that the negotiation was relatively smooth.

Those experienced in drafting such documents can often sense whether difficult negotiations took place. In this case, there are hardly any visible signs of disjointed paragraphs and internal inconsistencies. In the last two outcome documents, there were a few disconnected elements and out-of-place sentences. That suggests good understanding of the priorities and positions of the other side, lesser demands from both sides, a strong desire towards accommodation and collaboration, and close coordination between the sides during the drafting process.

What does the communiqué indicate about the future relationship?

It refers to traditional friendship, (a growing) political trust, and pragmatic cooperation. The emphasis on pragmatic cooperation suggests that both sides are moving away from ideological considerations and instead focusing on practical areas of mutual benefits and complementarities.

The phrase “China-Bangladesh

community with a shared future” is also significant. Although China has used similar terminology with other friendly countries such as the Maldives and Sri Lanka, this reflects a broader relationship than a conventional “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.” The concept of a “community” goes beyond government-level interaction. It potentially involves political parties, legislatures, and people-to-people exchanges. This indicates utilisation of a broader and more institutionalised engagement framework.

What is the significance of Bangladesh signing an MoU under China’s Global Development Initiative (GDI)?

Although the broader statement expressed support for China’s initiatives, the only specific initiative for which an MOU was signed was the Global Development Initiative (GDI). The exact text of the GDI agreement has not yet been made public, but signing an MoU indicates Bangladesh has moved beyond simply appreciating it or being a “friend of GDI,” which many countries already are. Bangladesh has effectively taken a step forward in relation to the GDI.

The GDI itself does not appear to impose strategic considerations or constraints on Bangladesh. Rather, it can potentially integrate various development initiatives already underway in areas such as education, healthcare, and human resource development. If the GDI serves as an umbrella framework connecting these sectoral efforts on development, their effectiveness may improve while reducing costs and duplication.

In contrast, support for China’s other initiatives appears more general and does not create immediate obligations or commitments. There is no mention of implementation at this stage. Constructive ambiguity has been maintained in those areas, preserving Bangladesh’s strategic space.

How do you view discussions on the Bangladesh-Myanmar-China economic corridor?

Discussions on the proposed Bangladesh-Myanmar-China economic corridor should

be understood in the broader context of exploring new regional frameworks for enhanced economic engagement and connectivity options. Traditional connectivity frameworks such as Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor (BCIM) required India’s participation. With India not showing interest, discussions now seem to focus on alternative routes.

Practically speaking, land connectivity through Myanmar currently remains difficult through Sagaing or the Rakhine state because of the ongoing civil conflict there,



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as well as in the Shan state. Therefore, the most realistic option at present appears to be maritime connectivity between Chattogram and Myanmar’s Kyaukpyu port. This concept has sometimes been described as a Chinese proposal, but Bangladesh has also actively considered similar ideas. The specific points of transshipment perhaps remain absent from the joint communiqué because Myanmar is the most important stakeholder and decisions cannot be made bilaterally by Bangladesh and China.

There is no reason for external concerns regarding such connectivity arrangements.

These routes would not replace existing routes but would simply create additional options for trade, transport and energy security for the participating countries. This could rather increase transparency by involving more actors in areas previously considered exclusive.

Some observers are concerned about the proposed “2+2” dialogue mechanism involving foreign and defence ministries. How do you interpret it?

The proposed “2+2” dialogue mechanism should not be overinterpreted. The communiqué states that both sides agreed to “explore” such a mechanism. This means it remains at an exploratory stage rather than being a finalised arrangement. This has become a common institutional arrangement among countries, and all neighbouring countries have such mechanisms with super powers and major powers. Those are not creating any unease.

Bangladesh can establish similar dialogue frameworks with multiple countries if it wishes to do so. Such arrangements help bring convergences among participating countries and remove irritants. They help preserve strategic flexibility and foreign policy autonomy. The direction itself appears positive because greater engagement can increase Bangladesh’s foreign policy options.

Singapore offers an example of how smaller states use extensive networks and partnerships to improve information-sharing and strengthen security. Security increasingly depends not just on military capability but also on advance information on potential challenges and threats, which contribute to preparedness. This development should, therefore, not be interpreted as Bangladesh moving closer exclusively towards China. Rather than representing a geopolitical tilt, it appears to reflect a desire to follow a balancing strategy.

Bangladesh’s foreign policy should expand options rather than narrow them. Strengthening engagement with China does not require reducing engagement with other countries. In recent months, Bangladesh and the US have considered many mechanisms

and instruments in the domain of defence and security. If Bangladesh can simultaneously deepen engagement with China, maintain relations with the US, and eventually improve ties with India, that would reflect its maturity and strengthen its overall position.

What is your assessment of the Mongla port project and the related infrastructure cooperation?

The modernisation of Mongla port should not be viewed through a strategic competition lens only. Mongla, with much less draft, is different from projects such as Matarbari or Sonadia. Comparison with Hambantota is also misplaced. This is not a case of handing over ownership to China. The arrangement involves joint development and management, meaning Bangladesh retains control. The project could improve connectivity for western and northern Bangladesh while having the prospect of creating access for countries such as Nepal and Bhutan and even India. Building infrastructure and using infrastructure are separate issues, and Bangladesh can decide on its usage for various regional stakeholders and negotiate future arrangements independently.

Do you see any areas of inadequacy or shortcomings in the outcome of this visit?

Bangladesh’s firm support to efforts of the Chinese government in “achieving national reunification” may make the resident powers and stakeholders in the Pacific unhappy. This might require some explaining.

Bangladesh could have pursued further ways and means to reduce the trade imbalance, and the two partners could have considered an institutional mechanism to address this. Reducing trade costs and removing non-tariff barriers and measures merit priority.

Bangladesh has not succeeded in generating greater Chinese interests in the stabilisation of Rakhine and in creating a conducive atmosphere in north Rakhine. Merely facilitating the Bangladesh-Myanmar engagement has not produced anything concrete in the last eight years. The protracted situation demands creative engagement of regional countries, in particular China.

The flaw in the debate over free education for girls



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If you step out to the streets of Dhaka, you will see a far lower presence of women and girls compared to men. The situation is similar in other parts of Bangladesh. Despite that, they make most of the headlines when it comes to violence within families, workplaces, communities and society at large. The existing laws and regulations can barely contain gender-based social menaces when they are woven into our way of living, passed down for generations in the name of traditions. It requires us to change the fabric of our way of life to improve the lives of both men and women, because one half of a society cannot live well by treating the other half as inferior beings. Democracy, which promises to serve everyone, is thus obligated to devise policy tools to make the invisible visible and to give the voiceless a voice to challenge deep-rooted norms and transform them for the better. One of the most effective tools to this end is education.

This is the backdrop against which an MP—a woman, elected to a reserved seat in parliament—has recently questioned the disparity in educational opportunities for

boys and girls over the last three decades. Free tuition for girls attending secondary school (Classes 6-10) is one such example she took issue with. It is one thing to express concern over impoverished boys not having enough access to education; it is quite another to accuse the government of being biased towards girls in policymaking.

Improving the living standards across all social strata through economic growth is usually the motto of a democratic government. If that is the goal, the government has to forge the path needed to reach it. Similarly, if every citizen is supposed to have equal opportunities to thrive and help the economy flourish, those starting from a position of disadvantage must first be brought to the same starting line before they can benefit from the opportunities. This is where the need for equity measures arises: the need for quotas, the need for targeted benefits that the woman lawmaker mistook for girls receiving something extra, for being privileged.

An example may better illustrate the challenges girls must overcome on the path to literacy. Suppose the road to school is

desolate and girls fear being ambushed. The public school or the government arranges transport to ensure girls’ attendance. We may consider this a special benefit, but it is simply what girls need to be at school. The same logic applies to the support that enabled the female lawmaker to reach parliament to represent women. It also applies to girl students getting the support to attend school instead of being married off, confined to unpaid care

It would indeed be better if all children were given free access to education so they could reach their highest potential. But the government has limited funds, and girls are being encouraged to come to the front and stand on par with their counterparts.

work, or consigned to household chores, all of which imprison them in the shadows and render them invisible to political, social and economic discourse.

The policies the MP considered biased towards women have made great strides towards achieving equality. Over the last three decades, the female literacy rate in Bangladesh—for those above the age of 15 years—improved from a mere 26 percent to 77 percent. During the same period, the male literacy rate advanced from 44 percent to 81 percent, according to Unesco. The

gender gap in literacy narrowed, driven in large part by economic incentives designed to promote girls’ education. However, male literacy was elevated even without such incentives, because men are traditionally seen by families and by society at large as the financial backbone who need better skills to earn more. Without targeted support, women would have fallen further behind or remained where they were. Equal benefits for all citizens is an ideal scenario, but when resources are limited, the government must prioritise those who need them the most.

By elevating the female literacy rate, Bangladesh has improved other social indicators, including the child marriage rate (which remains the highest in Asia), child mortality, and child malnutrition. Other factors have, of course, played a role, but education and educated mothers have been major contributors to improvements in children’s health, education, and nutrition. When girls are given incentives to study, their families are less likely to marry them off during adolescence, and the chances of them giving birth before attaining physical maturity are reduced.

Some indicators, however, have not shifted much over the last three decades. Social violence, including rape and dowry-related abuse, remains persistently high. At the same time, women’s labour force participation rate is still very low at 40.89 percent, compared to over 80 percent for men, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). This means that access to education has yet to translate into economic empowerment for a large proportion of women. In fact, the

BBS Labour Force Survey 2024 reveals that the labour force shrank by 17 lakh between 2023 and 2024, with women accounting for most of the decline. Women, therefore, need sustained and additional policy support to contribute to the economy and gain the financial strength to push back against repressive norms and violence.

Women’s economic empowerment is also imperative for the nation’s overall economic growth. Their productivity will drive consumption, generate assets, and improve national well-being. South Korea offers a compelling example. It focused on technical and professional education for women, and that investment helped take the nation to where it stands today—one of the largest economies in the world, with a GDP per capita of \$31,000 and a literacy rate of 98 percent.

Among the many steps that could be taken to advance Bangladesh’s economic goals, the incumbent BNP government has announced free education for girls up to the undergraduate level. This prompted the argument in parliament about why boys should not receive the same opportunities. It would indeed be better if all children were given free access to education so they could reach their highest potential. But the government has limited funds, and girls are being encouraged to come to the front and stand on par with their counterparts.

The day will come when girls will no longer require policies targeting them, when they will compete for the same opportunities on equal footing. However, Bangladesh is not there yet.

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BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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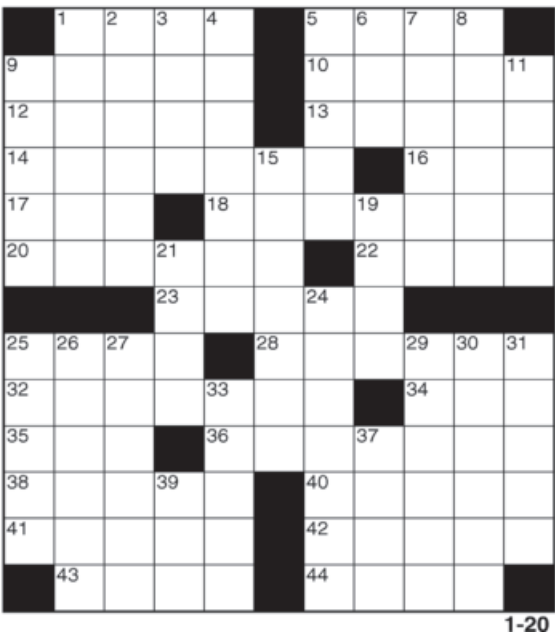
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