Four

Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: Diplomatic Challenges in Contemporary Times

Imtiaz Ahmed

In the history of politics, leaders are often remembered for their words as much as for their deeds. Three examples would suffice:

Mahatma Gandhi: “Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.”

Winston Churchill: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”


Subhas Chandra Bose: “You give me blood, I will give you freedom.”

Rhetoric though these may have been, the impact they had on the minds of people was overwhelming and, in many cases, real. So inspirational were the statements to their respective community of people that many had no problem in believing them and some even sacrificing their lives. The above three leaders knew very well that for the materiality of things to change they need to address the minds of humans as well. Without the mind getting transformed it would be difficult to transform the state of things. The field of diplomacy is no different. In fact, diplomacy is as much an exercise in political-economy as it is a psychological exercise and it is this complex manifold exercise that I will dwell upon, particularly with reference to the diplomatic challenges facing Bangladesh in contemporary times.

1. POST-DISCIPLINARY DIPLOMACY

Let me begin by focusing on the meaning of diplomacy. Diplomacy, as understood in the West, is qualitatively different from its South Asian conceptualisation. Although diplomacy is translated as kutaniti in many of the South Asian languages, the two are not the same, both etymologically and conceptually. Etymologically, the word ‘diplomacy’ comes from the Greek word ‘diploú,’ meaning ‘doubly folded,’ indeed, from a tradition where the ‘folded plates’ were handed over to the sovereign when travelling to another country on an official mission. Soon the word got stuck to those carrying the folded plates!

Kutaniti, on the other hand, comes from the Sanskrit word, kuta, kutila, Kautilya—the Laws of Kautilya. This refers to the wisdom of Chanakya Kautilya outlined in his book, Arthasastra (The Science of Wealth). Bengalis, however, would be more familiar with kutanami (‘back biting,’ carried out in the name of Kautilya!). But what is Chanakya Kautilya best known for when it comes to the production and

---

dissemination of knowledge? Indeed, his ingenuity lies in creating an abstraction epitomised in the dialectical system of *mandala* (the 'circle of spaces' and not the 'circle of states,' as erroneously depicted by the realists). But Kautilya’s dialectics or Indian dialectics is qualitatively different from the Hegelian dialectics, which, albeit quite wrongly, came to stand for the triadic formulation of thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis. Plekhanov, indeed, is on the record, among the earlier Marxists, of contradicting the naive expression:

> Not once in the eighteen volumes of Hegel’s works does the ‘*triad*’ play the part of an *argument*, and anyone in the least familiar with his philosophical doctrine understands that it *could not play such a part.*

It is quite an irony that even after refuting positivism and championing the cause of dialectics throughout his scholarly life Marx failed to free himself from the ghost of positivism. Sreedharan in his book on historiography, for instance, includes Marx under the chapter ‘Positivism in History’ alongside Auguste Comte and Henry Thomas Buckle, the forerunners of modern positivism. Sreedharan then unceremoniously mentions, “Marx raised positivistic outlook in history to a high philosophical level—historical materialism!” Such misconstrued notions probably could not be helped for reasons ranging from textual compulsions to the prevalence of *determinism* in the Western discourse.

Textual or written mode of communicative skill when compared to the oral mode is surely very limiting. There are certain strict rules that one must follow when communicating through writing. In fact, there is less scope for changes in written formulations. The same is not the case with orality. As Portelli remarks, “changes are the norm in speech, while regularity is the norm in writing (printing most of all) and the presumed norm of reading: variations are introduced by the reader, not

---


by the text itself.\textsuperscript{6} Regularity otherwise makes it difficult to write a page or two on dialectics because such regularity makes the latter fixed and rigid whereas dialectics is constantly changing, trying to capture the motion in contradiction. It is precisely for this reason that Gramsci pointed out that anyone trying to use dialectics must acquire the habit of writing monographically and not cryptically.\textsuperscript{7} Dialectics or the art of exposing contradictions is revealed best in monographs. Marx’s Capital would be a good example, but the list could also include works of people who had little formal knowledge on dialectics and ventured only in demystifying the appearance of things by way of exposing contradictions. Such a list will surely have Tolstoy’s War and Peace as it will have Tagore’s ঘরে বাইরে (Home and the World). But research works on social sciences, which remains overwhelmingly positivist, would hardly figure out in the list. But more importantly Western dialectics suffers from determinism, which not only robs its methodological potential to deal with contradictions and demystify the appearance of things but also limits its contribution to emancipatory discourses, particularly with reference to the task of transforming the state of things.

Indian dialectics, on the other hand, is based on prasanga or prasangika, a method of inquiry based on what could be best referred to as the method of ‘contemporariness.’ An example would suffice. In the Mahabharata, one gets varied responses to the same question. Drona when teaching the art of archery to the Pandava and Kuru brothers placed a vulture made of straw on the top of a tree and asked Yuddhisthira, “What do you see?” Yuddhisthira answered, “I see the tree. I see the bow and the arrow, I see my arm, I see my brothers, and I see you.” Not satisfied with the answer Drona then asked the same question to Arjuna, “What do you see?” Arjuna replied, “A vulture.” Drona then said, “Describe the vulture.”


Arjuna replied, “I can’t.” “Why?” Drona asked. Arjuna replied, “I can only see its head.” Drona then ended by saying, “Release your arrow. I’ll make you the finest archer in the world.” In putting forward the positions of both Yuddhisthira and Arjuna and Drona’s meriting the latter, Krishna Dvaipâyana Vyasa, the compiler of Mahabharata, is forcing the reader to consider the method of _prasangika_ or ‘contemporariness,’ particularly in the backdrop of Drona’s objective of nurturing or making the best archer in the kingdom. But then without Yuddhisthira’s comprehensive view point and Arjuna’s direct response the ‘contemporariness’ of what the narrative is all about can hardly be understood. The method otherwise rejects all kinds of _essentialist_ views. Let us explore this further.

Nagarjuna (c. 150-250 CE), the foremost Indian dialectician of his time, for instance, while advocating _prasangika_ or contemporariness, would say, ‘no concept reveals any intrinsic nature of its own and one can understand a concept only through another and that again through the former or through another, and so on.’ Chanakya Kautilya (371-283 BC) has consistently made use of this method in the _Arthasastra_. As Solomon describes, “First he states his own view. Then he mentions the different views and accounts for them by stating reasons. Finally, he re-states his own view which is meant to supersede the others as being the most comprehensive.” And this is precisely the reason why Kautilya comes up with manifold, often contradictory, strategies to secure the power of the _vijigisu_ (i.e. the expanding King). _Danda_ or coercion on the part of the latter _alone_ will not do. At the same time, and this is the dialectic in Kautilya that Solomon comes to appreciate, if the King “cannot wield power at all he gives rise to a situation in which Might is Right. He can command awe only by the discriminating use of power.” Similarly, when discussing the number of councillors

---

10 _Ibid_, p. 523.
11 _Ibid_, p. 792.
A King would require, Kautilya disagrees with Manavas who limits the number to twelve. Again, he disagrees with Barhaspatyas and Ausanasas who limit the number to sixteen and twenty respectively. According to Kautilya, it all “depends on the need and their efficiency.” One cannot help being reminded here of the rational interpretation of Indra’s being ‘sahasraksa’—a mantri-parisad of a thousand rsis, that is, even while having two eyes Indra is said to have a thousand eyes!

The matter is not so different with Patanjali (2nd century BC) and his dialectical criticism. When discoursing on dharma (good) and adharma (sinful) words, Patanjali makes it clear that the former would rise from the latter as they are dialectically connected. As Solomon paraphrases Patanjali’s argument: “though adharma may accrue from the knowledge of corrupt forms, yet since this leads to knowledge of correct forms, dharma would rise from this latter, and this dharma destroying the effect of the adharma would lead to much good.”

Indians, in fact, have traditionally shown a pre-occupation with dialectics—the prasangika method—in all their thinking, and philosopher Raghunatha Siromani (1477-1547) sums it up best, although bit egoistically, in a couplet:

We alone have minds of fine sensibility in respect of poetry, and no others; We alone have a rigorous intellect in dialectics and not others.

Diplomacy otherwise needs to be understood not in the sense of dip lou or folded plates carried by emissaries or policymakers of one country to another country but as kutaniti, planning and implementing policies in the mandala or ‘circle of spaces’ of contemporary times. In this light, diplomacy or kutaniti can no longer be a prerogative of a particular discipline, nor can ‘disciplines’ be added and diplomacy made into an

---

12 Ibid.  
13 Ibid.  
14 Ibid.  
‘inter or multi-disciplinary’ exercise. What is required is a post-disciplinary methodology, indeed, of the kind found in Kautilya’s *Arthasastra*, the dialectical method of *prasangika* or contemporariness. It is this method I will be using to highlight Bangladesh’s foreign policy in contemporary times. I will limit myself to three circles of contemporariness.

2. THE FIRST CIRCLE OF CONTEMPORARINESS: 1971

1971 had a lasting impact on the minds of Bangladeshis, creating an epistemological break when it comes to their understanding of past, present, and futures. This is not difficult to understand. In pre-1971 era, reference to Bangladesh or what was previously ‘East Pakistan’ always got related to the communal partition of the sub-continent and the creation of a ‘Muslim homeland.’ That practically lost its hegemony as a discourse and became one of the many, with the linguistic identity and a ‘civilisation’ more rooted in the history of Bengal became more prominent as a source of knowledge. But the ‘break’ was equally traumatic. Not only the number of killings but incidents of rape by the Pakistan military and its collaborators were equally high, particularly considering the nine-month period of the liberation war. The highest figure of 3 million casualties came from Bangladesh and Indian authorities, and this, I believe, included the death of women and children in refugee camps as well, while the lowest figure of 26,000 is found in the Pakistan-government sponsored Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report.16 In between the high and low figures there were several other figures of Bengalee casualties at the hands of the Pakistan military, like K. Chaudhury estimated between 1 and 3 million,17 Richard Sisson and Leo Rose estimated 300,000,18 while the Adviser

---

to the Governor of the then East Pakistan, Major General Rao Farman Ali, estimated 40,000 to 50,000.\textsuperscript{19} Incidents of rape by the Pakistan military in the nine-month period were equally high, in fact, numbering as high as 400,000, which is also regarded as ‘underestimated’ by Geoffrey Davis, the Australian doctor who was brought to Dhaka by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and the United Nations following the liberation of Bangladesh in December 1971, mainly to perform “late-term abortions and facilitate large scale international adoption of the war babies born to Bangladeshi women.”\textsuperscript{20}

Two issues need to be flagged here. Firstly, if we include the number of war-related abortions, including the ones in refugee camps in India sheltering around 10 million refugees, the number of 3 million death could end up being a low figure. Secondly, the number of death, although worth considering, has little to do with the internationally codified meaning of genocide. According to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, the meaning of ‘genocide’ includes “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” and includes: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Moreover, the Convention states that the following acts shall be punishable: (a) Genocide; (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide; (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide; (d) Attempt to commit genocide; and (e) Complicity in genocide. This would imply that physical as well as mental conditions, indeed, with the ‘intent to destroy,

\textsuperscript{19} Interview with Mohiuddin Ahmed and Muntassir Mamoon, third week of March 1998.

in whole or in part,’ are critical in considering a ‘genocide.’ In the case of Pakistan’s role in the erstwhile East Pakistan and now Bangladesh in 1971 there is enough evidence of this. Much of the problem was created with the Bangla translation of ‘genocide’ as gonohatya. The latter if re-translated then it would mean ‘mass killing’. While ‘mass killing’ could be a part of genocide but, as indicated earlier, it need not be the only factor. Indeed, even without killing one could end up contributing to genocide if evidence of ‘intent to destroy, in whole or in part’ of a racial, religious, ethnic or national community is found.

But then the people of Bangladesh in 1971 witnessed not only killing and rape in thousands but also the destruction of houses, schools, mosques, temples, bridges, offices, and many more, in cities, towns, and villages. The trauma remained real not only for the direct victims and their family members, including the 10 million refugees who had fled to India, but also those who carried out day-to-day life but lived in fear inside the Pakistan military-occupied Bangladesh in the nine-month period. This resulted in two contradictory outcomes, both sadly dystopian in nature, which is now a part of our ‘collective unconscious,’ very much in the sense outlined by Carl Gustav Jung. As Jung reminded us, the contents of the collective unconscious “come from the brain—indeed, precisely from the brain and not from personal memory-traces, but from the inherited brain-structure itself.”21 In this sense, the ‘collective unconscious’ and the ‘archetypes’ are not acquired, but inherited. To follow Jung further on this, the archetype of fear or trauma, for instance, is “not disseminated only by tradition, language, and migration, but that they can rearise spontaneously, at any time, at any place, and without any outside influence.”22 If that is the case then dealing with it is the only option; any attempt to obliterate it will reproduce it further. As Jung noted, “When spirit is neglected it becomes the source of many pathologies.”23 Indeed, “only a change in

22 Ibid., p. 154.
23 Ibid., p. 203.
the attitude of the individual can bring about a renewal in the spirit of the nations. Everything begins with the individual.24 In the case of Bangladesh, the individual, faced with the circle of post-1971 dystopia, cannot help being an innocent victim of two contradictory outcomes:

Firstly, engaging with the Other, with a passion to transform hopelessness to hope. This is where our migration discourse lies, sadly, for both 'privileged' and 'less than privileged' classes. Indeed, those who can afford and have acquired some skill, the 'privileged lot,' end up going to the relatively developed countries, mainly the West, while the relatively unskilled and semi-skilled job seekers go to the Gulf countries, Malaysia and Singapore, getting employed mainly in labour-intensive work. The growth has been phenomenal. According to ILO, each year more than 400,000 workers leave Bangladesh for overseas employment.25 One estimate indicates that as of November 2016, a total of 21,657,632 Bangladeshi migrant workers went abroad for work.26 The impact of this is found in the flow of remittances, about which we have more to say in the next section. It may be pointed out, however, that 50 per cent of the overseas employment from 1976-2015 were unskilled,27 and about 56 per cent of the remittance flow come from the Gulf countries.28 This has other consequences, some of which are potentially damaging and dangerous. Let me explain.

The post-1971 Bangladeshi diaspora in the Gulf countries, at least a sizeable of them, for instance, could not help but be attracted to a puritan version of Islam and in turn help promote the Wahhabisation of Islam in Bangladesh. If London and New York are considered as the citadels of authentic 'progress and development' then Saudi Arabia

24 Ibid., p. 78.
27 Ibid.
with two holy cities of Mecca and Medina remains for many a Muslim believer the bastion of authentic Islam. Whatever goes there becomes the marker of Islamic identity, the export of which to the homeland on the part of the diaspora turns into a pious act and an Islamic responsibility. Members of the diaspora, again, a sizeable of them, for instance, send money back home, but often with a call to maintain a strict religious code in the family, including the dress to be worn in public. At the same time, given the non-commercialisation of zakat and little or no knowledge of Islamic banking opportunities, coupled with the factor of doing something noble for the homeland, the diaspora also end up sending money to mosques and madrasahs, often without keeping a track of who is doing what with the money. In fact, there is no guarantee that part of the financial support would not end up funding the militant outfits. And this becomes more deadly when one particular mazhab wants to impose its interpretation of Islam on the followers of other mazhabs. Much of the intolerance and violence arise from inter-and intra-mazhab contestations, with ‘hopelessness’ getting further reproduced at home!

The case of the ‘privileged lot’ going abroad is not so different either. Not with standing some positive results, its impact has been equally damaging if not dangerous. Two of which are ‘brain-drain’ and the flow of wealth in the reverse direction. On the former, one indication is found in the number of Bangladeshi doctors migrating to Australia. The official website of Bangladesh Medical Society of New South Wales (NSW) indicates having 399 members from the medical profession.29 In Queensland alone, the number of Bangladeshi physicians is said to be around 500, according to an informal but credible source. In whole of Australia the same source puts the number of Bangladeshi physicians to be around 1,500.30 Given Australia’s population of 25 million people this is quite substantial. But brain-drain

30 The author was informed by a Bangladeshi doctor residing in Queensland during his visit to Brisbane in September 2015.
alone is not the factor, there is simultaneously the transfer of wealth of the ‘privileged lot’ in the reverse direction, from Bangladesh to the relatively developed economies. As the following report discloses:

To settle in Malaysia under its My Second Home (MM2H) programme, for instance, one needs to show liquid assets worth at least RM 500,000 (about BDT12.2 million) and offshore income of RM 10,000 (about BDT245 thousand) per month. Between 2002, when the programme was launched, and April this year, some 25,500 people from across the world migrated to the country. Of them, 2,874 (11 per cent) are Bangladeshis, according to the Malaysian government website. This means, these Bangladeshis laundered about BDT35 million at least to settle under the MM2H programme, and none was required to take approval from the competent authority in Bangladesh, as Malaysia does not inquire about the source of the money... Similarly, a Bangladeshi can get residence permit in the US or Canada by showing liquid assets worth US$500,000 (about BDT38.7 million). Statistics are hard to come by, but reportedly hundreds of affluent Bangladeshis have made these two countries their second home. Again, the US and Canada will not inquire where the money has come from, experts say.31

Much of the transfer of the ‘privileged lot’ includes selling their family property or renting out their property in Bangladesh and transferring the wealth through undisclosed channels and investing them abroad. The archetype of fear is what is reproducing the collective unconscious and this creates dystopian waves from time to time, pushing people to engage with the Other and seek residence abroad. Indeed, the proliferation of the Bangladeshi diaspora is the ‘new normal;’ the international community only needs to recognise this. There has been some reaction to this leading to the tightening of the visa regime for the Bangladeshis. But then one must not forget, several countries, including Saudi Arabia, UAE, even Singapore, once benefitted from Bangladesh’s cheap labour! This needs to be flagged more creatively and made an issue in Bangladesh’s foreign policy discourse.

Secondly, the fear of the Other, with an equal passion to transform hopelessness to hope. Such ‘fear’ is not difficult to understand. Since Bangladesh suffered 190 years of colonialism under the British plus 25 years of semi-colonialism under Pakistan plus a genocide in 1971, and that again, with some amount of complicity of the US government, as it is generally perceived, there is fear and resistance to the Other, particularly of the West. Nationalism is, therefore, as much an issue of emancipation as it is a force of divisiveness nurtured presumably with the goal of resisting and keeping a distance from the Other.

It may be pointed out that it took nearly two centuries for Bengal and a little less than a century for the rest of India to get rid of the colonial power but then nationalism or disloyalty to the British came in a curious way. Interestingly, George Orwell captures this brilliantly in his novel, *Burmese Days*, published in 1934. It is mainly a story of divisiveness. A corrupt Burmese magistrate, U Po Kyin, plans to destroy the reputation of the Indian Dr Veraswami, the Civil Surgeon and Superintendent of the jail. In the process Orwell highlights not only ‘the dark side of the British Raj’ but also the slippery foundation of nation and nationalism. Let me cite from the novel:

> We are going to make a concerted attack on Dr. Veraswami.... We are going to slander him, destroy his reputation and finally ruin him forever. It will be rather a delicate operation...

> ...Softly, softly, softly is my way. No scandal, and above all no official inquiry. There must be no accusations that can be answered.... What shall I accuse him of? Bribes will not do, a doctor does not get bribes to any extent. What then?

> “We could perhaps arrange a mutiny in the jail,” said Ba Sein. “As superintendent, the doctor would be blamed.”

No, it is too dangerous. I do not want the jail warders firing their rifles in all directions. Besides, it would be expensive. Clearly, then, it must be disloyalty—Nationalism, seditious propaganda. We must persuade the Europeans that the doctor holds disloyal, anti-British opinions. That is far worse than bribery; they expect a native official to take bribes. But let them suspect his loyalty even for a moment, and he is ruined.
Nationalism thus came to South Asia, including Bangladesh, as a divisive force, creating havoc in the minds and bodies of the people. Not for nothing did Rabindranath Tagore mention that “Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India’s troubles.” 32 Bangladesh and South Asia, in fact, ended up experiencing two genocidal partitions, one in 1947, and another in 1971. Myanmar, as it is alleged, is still carrying out genocide and crimes against humanity against its national dissenters, to which we will return shortly. Orwell’s Burmese Days, while connecting Myanmar, Bengal and India, is a prelude to an unfolding dystopia, which soon gets scribbled into a masterpiece called 1984, published in 1949, with the horrifying remark: “The Big Brother is Watching You!” Indeed, all the three countries, in different measures, have internalised the Orwellian dystopia! Bangladesh, for its part, went through a series of policies starting from ‘nationalisation’ to ‘self-reliance,’ only to find itself that the ‘fear of the Other’ not only reproduces the Orwellian dystopia but also ends up benefiting the coercive machineries of the state! But then traces of such fear are still evident and are now a part of our ‘collective unconscious,’ and that is what could end up reproducing hostility towards the Other!

3. THE SECOND CIRCLE OF CONTEMPORARINESS: GLOBALISATION

Over some two decades, Bangladesh averaged a GDP growth of 6.5 per cent. In 2017, a rate of 7.1 per cent growth was recorded and, according to the IMF, Bangladesh’s economy emerged as the second fastest growing major economy. This is no mean achievement, particularly for a country which was labelled as an “international basket case” in the 1970s. Noteworthy here is the fact that Bangladesh reduced poverty from 44.2 per cent in 1991 to 18.5 per cent in 2010, and is projected to decrease even further to below 13 per cent in the current

year. The country is projected to become a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041. The question that merits attention is what contributed to Bangladesh’s economic development?

A single word response would be ‘globalisation’! This is because with globalisation ‘production’ became international for the first time in the history of capitalism, increasing the possibility of a win-win situation in the relationship between developed and developing economies. Indeed, in addition to the internationalisation of trade, finance and investment we now have the internationalisation of production. That is, multi-national or rather transnational companies now collect resources in several countries, process them in another several countries and finally, export the finished products to the rest of the world. A fully finished product, therefore, no longer has one single birthmark; it has multiple birthmarks since several countries have gone to produce it. A Compaq computer, in that sense, is no longer entirely American, or a Toyota car fully Japanese. The final product of both these items will have components made in several countries of the world. Put differently, unlike the previous internationalisation of things, in the globalisation phase of capitalism the thing itself is the product of the international or global market.

In the case of Bangladesh’s economy, globalisation is critical in reproducing two things. One, the remittances from the diaspora; and two, the earnings from the RMG sector. As of March 2018, according to World Bank, remittances from nearly 10 million migrant workers settled in over 140 countries reached US$13 billion, up from US$11.49 billion in February 2018. Remittances in Bangladesh averaged US$11.89 billion in 2012-2018 period, reaching an all-time high of US$14.91 billion in July 2014. The narrow slide in the flow resulted from a global downturn, including low prices of crude oil in the Middle East. What it implies is that Bangladesh can no longer remain attentive to its own economy but must be equally attentive to economies of the world, particularly of the countries where there is a sizeable Bangladeshi diaspora. In terms of expertise, there is a serious deficit in Bangladesh, often making the country captive to ideas, theories and strategies manufactured elsewhere.
The growth of RMG sector has also been phenomenal. The first apparel export started in 1978 but now the industry includes 4,500 factories and over 4.2 million workers, mostly female. Bangladesh is currently the second largest producers of RMG in the world after China. In 2017, Bangladesh export earnings from the RMG sector stood at US$28.14 billion. This Bangladesh has attained only by adding value to the RMG production chain which is otherwise global. In this sense, two-country export-import calculation has become practically irrelevant in the age of globalisation. This is because the ‘export component’ of a commodity can very well include a part of the ‘import component’ and vice versa. Put simply, the deficit that Bangladesh has with India or China when measuring the export-import figures gets relatively balanced when Bangladesh has a ‘surplus’ in its trade with the US, for instance, and the overall economy of Bangladesh growing with a respectable figure of over 7 per cent. In the age of globalisation, therefore, the single country-country matrix ought to be replaced with the country’s engagement with the global and see whether the country has attained an overall growth rate, despite having deficit with some of the countries while surplus with others. In this context, it seems that the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) prefers to have active economic relations with all the countries, including China, India, and the US. Let us examine this further.

At the same time, Bangladesh’s top export destinations in 2016 were the US, Germany and the UK, and it is projected that the under the current state of Bangladesh’s engagement with the world this would remain the same in 2030. This otherwise indicates that there are economic compulsions, both with respect to investment and export, when it comes to Bangladesh-US relations, for instance. In the area of

---


Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: Diplomatic Challenges in Contemporary Times

Table 4.1 Top Eight Investors in Bangladesh in 2016
Valued in Million US$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Investment Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>673.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>330.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>217.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>160.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>159.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>88.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>79.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>48.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


investment, however, things are changing fast with Bangladesh’s increasing engagement with China, particularly following President Xi Jinping’s visit to Bangladesh in October 2016 and the two governments’ signing of 27 agreements involving US$24.45 billion in assistance and investment for Bangladesh, along with 13 Chinese corporations’ signing of joint venture agreements worth US$13 billion with Bangladeshi companies. The total commitment comes to US$37.45 billion. This is bound to change China’s investment portfolio in Bangladesh, with China destined to emerge as the largest investor in Bangladesh soon.

On the surface this may look that China is engaging in an economic conflict with the US in Bangladesh, but this is not true and the matter is far more complex than what meets our eyes. Firstly, Bangladesh’s avowed foreign policy declaration of “friends towards all and malice towards none” is now best played out when it comes to engaging with China and the US. Bangladesh will always be seeking the best possible options when attracting investments to its country. And since Bangladesh holds no enmity with either of the countries, openly or
secretly, there is no reason for Bangladesh not to cultivate good relations with both the countries, particularly when the relationship is deemed beneficial. But economic investment alone will not do. If the latter is to be made effective it requires greater investment in non-economic sector as well. Let me explain.

Since Bangladesh is seeking investments from both China and the US, amongst many other countries, it would be worthwhile to reflect on the post-war relationship between Western Europe and the US, particularly relating to the rebuilding of Western European economies with financial aid from the US or what later came to be known as the Marshall Plan. Critics have already labelled the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as ‘global Marshall Plan,’ this time with China supporting more than 68 countries, including Bangladesh, to build their much-required infrastructures. But anyone familiar with the Marshall Plan would know that one of the reasons that the US could quickly rebuild Western Europe was because of the latter had a literacy rate of over 90 per cent with relatively skilled population. So, it was easy to make the development sustainable with the economies of both the US and Western Europe growing rapidly. Indeed, China should consider this earlier experience of development seriously and when investing on infrastructures under the BRI it should expand the investments to the field of education, including literacy. Bangladesh is in a dire need of such an investment, indeed, to make a difference to the lives of nearly 30 per cent of its illiterate population. It is worth pointing out here that the role of Government-Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) partnership in Bangladesh was critical in making best use of globalisation, particularly the manner in which the NGOs have empowered the female workforce and disseminated informal education throughout the country. Any break in this partnership will only benefit those who envy the relative ‘economic’ success of Bangladesh!

But globalisation also saw the ‘re-rise’ of China and the ‘uneven rise’ of India. It may be pointed out here that in the 18th century China was the largest economy in the world. *Undivided* (colonial) India or South
Asia, on the other hand, was the second largest economy in the world.\textsuperscript{36} Now that China’s re-rise is an accomplished fact, the moot question is whether South Asia can re-rise likewise. Bangladesh, however, is in a unique position to creatively nurture the newfound geopolitical terrain. There is no reason why Bangladesh should not start contemplating on holding Annual Business Summit of Bangladeshi, Chinese and Indian entrepreneurs, not only for the good of their respective countries but also for the development of the region. It could stand as a model for the world. The changing terrain is already noticeable. This year more Indian students are going to China than Britain for higher studies!\textsuperscript{37} Let us be clear about one thing, each and every space in the world is geopolitically important, provided its people have made a difference to their life and living. This brings us to issues reproduced by other kinds of globalisation, namely subaltern globalisation.

Critics have already referred to the mushrooming of global networks resisting economic globalisation as ‘globalisation from below.’\textsuperscript{38} The latter includes a diverse group of people—environmentalists, NGOs, religious groups, small farmers, labour unions (incidentally of both developed and developing countries), women’s movement, consumerists, African debt relief campaigners, anti-sweatshop activists, and the like, all one way or other either critical of or directly suffering from and struggling against the impact of economic globalisation. Here the forces of the seemingly disempowered non-state actors have creatively joined hands to overcome the exploitation of the empowered non-state actors, \textit{i.e.} the forces of economic globalisation. The subaltern nature of the resistance movements, particularly the networking, can hardly be minimised.


\textsuperscript{37} Himali Chhapial, “China Gets More Indian Students than Britain,” \textit{The Times of India}, 07 January 2018.

But then, there is a further subaltern variant to the whole notion of globalisation from below. This refers to the deepening of relationship between and amongst the ‘dubious groups’ and ‘shadowy activities’ ranging from smuggling of goods and people, illicit production and trading of small arms, money laundering, narco-production and trading, terrorism, and the like, and that again, across and beyond national, ethnic, racial, and even religious affiliations. The subalterns, particularly the poverty-ridden and marginalised population, become easy target of such groups and activities. As Mittelman noted, “where poverty is severe, criminal gangs flourish.” The link between poverty and criminality is less linear than what is seemingly suggested here. A state of subalternity in fact creates conditions that make people disinterested in the business of reproducing the power of the state. Misgovernance otherwise becomes the (dis)order of the day. People, particularly the subalterns, increasingly start depending on informal, often criminal, means for reproducing their livelihood. Even when requiring business or personal security they fall back on the power of the ‘godfathers,’ hired goons, mastans, and the like, than on the otherwise inept, often corrupt, governmental machineries. A shadowy network of things and transactions get reproduced and in the process destabilises not only the power of the state but also the power of the subalterns, indeed, making them more vulnerable and disempowered. This further creates grounds for fresh recruits and creative but demonic ventures for organising and reproducing subaltern globalisation. The complex structure is somewhat demonically intriguing. I will limit myself to one area, narco-terrorism.

Narco-production and trading is a lucrative business in this region. Afghanistan remains the world’s largest opium producer, accounting for some 70 per cent (3,300 tons) of global opium production; it is followed by Myanmar, accounting for 14 per cent (650 tons) of global production. India too is a big producer of licit opium, although an


earlier estimation showed that about 10 to 30 per cent of the licit crop are diverted to the illicit market.\(^{41}\) In fact, in India 12,250 hectares of land area are devoted to cultivating illicit opium poppies.\(^{42}\) At the same time, there are other kinds of licit chemicals and pharmaceutical drugs produced in India that are diverted and sold to the illicit market. Indian-produced chemicals, such as acetic anhydride, ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, can be or should we say are used for the illicit production of heroin and methamphetamine. The latter along with caffeine are the two key components of ‘yaba’ (madness medicine). Earlier the Indian smugglers were involved in producing and selling phensidyl across the Bangladesh border, but now they are producing and selling yaba, as return from the latter is much higher ‘due to soaring demand’.\(^{43}\)

The same is the case with Myanmar’s illicit drug producers. When world attention against the production of opium crops reached Myanmar the ‘drug lords,’ indeed, with the complicity of the Myanmar military, switched their production to synthetic drugs, mainly yaba, to keep profiting from narco-production. However, in order to operationalise the sale of illicit drugs, a vibrant but complex relationship between drug dealers and consumers, producers of licit chemicals and illicit traders, security and custom officials, high-risk investors and money launderers, and that again, not only nationally but regionally and globally, is required. There are several critical implications of this.

First, the transnational narco-networks, now backed by armed insurgents, make anti-narco-production or anti-narco-trafficking drive immensely difficult. And given the terrain (both physical and topographical) in which the insurgents and the traffickers operate there

\(^{41}\) DEA Intelligence Division, “India Country Brief”, Drug Intelligence Brief, Washington DC: Office of International Intelligence, Europe, Asia Africa Strategic Unit, May 2002.

\(^{42}\) Market Analyses by Drug Type, op. cit.

is now all the more reason to believe that the nationally-organised military or coercive solutions may not be the correct way of overcoming the menace of narco-terrorism.

Second, subaltern aspirations get entwined between insurgency and narco-terrorism, almost to the point of blurring the distinction between the two. While this becomes handy for the state machineries in the strategy of depicting the insurgents as narco-traders and winning back the support of the members of the dissenting communities, it often leads them to quick-fix remedies with little or no results. As the World Bank-sponsored study on Indo-Bangladesh border smuggling some two decades back pointed out, “Ordinary men, women and even children participate in smuggling as couriers, porters and rickshaw pullers,”44 which only indicates that the subalternity of smuggling or even narco-terrorism is far more complex than what is readily understood. There is, therefore, no guarantee that the narco-menace would discourage the subalterns from joining the trade.

Subaltern globalisation otherwise reproduces the archetype of fear, making it a formidable part of the ‘collective unconscious.’ And it is precisely because of this, we fear both closeness and alienation. Indeed, we fear too closeness of a neighbouring country as much as we fear apathy and alienation of a neighbouring country. On the first, we try to maintain a distance, while on the latter, we try to reach out as much as we can. India and China (and now Myanmar) are good examples of the first and second respectively.

4. THE THIRD CIRCLE OF CONTEMPORARINESS: THE ROHINGYA EXODUS

Bangladesh is facing one of the worst refugee crisis in contemporary times, having to shelter a population larger than Bhutan with bulk of them crossing over to Bangladesh in less than three months! However,

one does not require too much intelligence to understand the following sequence of events and the reasons behind the unfolding of the current Rohingya crisis. Four dates are critical. On 23 August 2017, the Advisory Commission on the Rakhine State (also known as the Kofi Annan Commission) submitted its final report to the Myanmar national authorities. On 24 August 2017, the media, at home and abroad, published the report in detail. On 25 August 2017, the so-called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked the Myanmar military forces. The very next day, on 26 August 2017, the Myanmar military resorted to what came to be referred to as “a textbook case of ethnic cleansing,” which in next three months saw more than 750,000 Rohingya people, mostly women and children, flee Myanmar to take refuge in Bangladesh. The unfolding of the crisis otherwise makes it clear that the issue is no longer limited to Myanmar and Bangladesh. Rather, it is an issue that is simultaneously national, regional, and international. This makes the crisis equally problematic but not something that is totally out of the norm and difficult to resolve.

But the question that merits attention, how was Bangladesh able to handle the flow of nearly 700,000 refugees in just three-month time, and now sheltering 1.07 millions of them?\textsuperscript{45} The answer probably lies in the first circle of contemporariness, 1971, and the second circle of contemporariness, Bangladesh having nearly 7 per cent growth, indeed, with a unique government-NGO partnership. No doubt, GoB deserves credit for this, but so does the humanitarian workers now toiling restlessly in the Rohingya camps. In disaster management Bangladesh has attained an expertise that can easily be exported and made useful in foreign policy. But the challenge of feeding and housing the refugees is formidable. The support from the international community has been relatively modest but adequate. The Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, launched by UNHCR and IOM in

\textsuperscript{45} The Department of Immigration and Passports has already completed the biometric registration of 1,074,498 while RRC-UNHCR listed 825,265 Rohingyas of 191,189 families under Family Counting Exercise program. See, Tarek Mahmud, “Rohingya Refugees in Need of More Aid”, \textit{Dhaka Tribune}, 25 February 2018.
March 2018, made an appeal for US$951 million to support the humanitarian operation for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh for the period March-December 2018.\textsuperscript{46} This target is likely to be achieved but the problem will be in raising and sustaining the flow of international funds if the crisis becomes a protracted one. In the meantime, GoB has made it clear that there would be no repatriation without UNHCR’s support. Put differently, Bangladesh would abide by the principle of non-refoulement, that is, no forcible repatriation.

The exodus of the Rohingyas this time, however, is different from the mid-1970s and 1990s. The international community has already taken cognizance of the military-sponsored violence that took place in the Arakan, and called it either ‘ethnic cleansing’ or ‘crime against humanity’ or ‘genocide.’ Also, reference has been made to the Myanmar government failing in R2P (Responsibility to Protect). If nothing is done on this issue, it will create space for \textit{irresponsibility}, not only in this region but also around the world. In fact, Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, has already come up with the following recommendation in her report of 09 March 2018:

\begin{quote}
With regard to Rakhine State, establish under the auspices of the United Nations, a structure based in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh supported by various necessary expertise for a duration of three years to investigate, document, collect, consolidate, map, and analyse evidence of human rights violations and abuses; and to maintain and prepare evidence in a master database to support and facilitate impartial, fair and independent international criminal proceedings in national or international courts or tribunals in accordance with international criminal law standards.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

If agreed by the United Nations General Assembly this could be used to prepare prosecutorial files. It may be mentioned that the International


Criminal Court has already invited the ‘competent authorities’ of Bangladesh to submit ‘observations’ on the question “whether the Court may exercise jurisdiction over the alleged deportation of more 670,000 members of the Rohingya people from Myanmar into Bangladesh.” The deadline for the submission of the ‘observations’ by GoB has also been fixed for ‘no later than 11 June 2018.’

Yanghee Lee, however, goes further and calls upon the Myanmar government to “Revise the 1982 Citizenship law to bring it into line with international standards and best practices including through the abolition of distinctions between different types of citizens;” and also to, “Amend the four race and religion protection laws of 2015 including the removal of provisions undermining the rights of women, children and religious minorities.” This only shows that the current Rohingya crisis is qualitatively different from the exoduses of mid-1970s and 1990s.

Moreover, targeted sanctions on the Myanmar military, including those responsible for committing ‘crimes against humanity,’ have already been enforced by Britain, US and several other Western countries. The latter is destined to play a positive role with so many international legal instruments against mass atrocities now in place. Shying away will only contribute to a deadlier world! The pace no doubt is slow but is gaining momentum with pressure from members of international civil society, including Nobel laureates, artists, media personalities, human rights organisations, and many more. Already several international conferences at the non-governmental level were held in different parts of the world—Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Berlin, Dhaka, Cologne—and all, more or else, ended with a call “to impose comprehensive sanction on Myanmar until it ends genocide, restores citizenship to the Rohingya population, rescinds apartheid type laws and returns properties and land to the displaced Rohingya population.”

---

48 International Criminal Court, “Request under Regulation 46 (3) of the Regulations of the Court,” 07 May 2018, p. 3.

49 Ibid., p. 5.

50 Report of the Special Rapporteur, op. cit., p. 16.

51 Article 10 of the “Cologne Declaration,” Cologne, Germany, 02 May 2018.
Commendable though such initiatives, Bangladesh should not shy away from taking leadership of the Rohingya crisis. This is because Bangladesh has not only placed itself on high moral ground by letting the Rohingyas in but also has the support, albeit with few exceptions, of people, communities, and states around the world. It is worth pointing out here that charges of ‘genocide’ or ‘crimes against humanity’ against the Myanmar military will not go away even with a successful bilateralism between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

What about the seemingly negative regional response, particularly that of China and India? It is not surprising that China would continue to cultivate its age-old yin-yang or dialectical approach to diplomacy, with the objective of having a positive outcome for all if not for China alone! This is best reflected in China’s opposition to any resolution at the Security Council which calls for penalising Myanmar, but at the same time when the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Bangladesh in November 2017 he readily floated, indeed, to the surprise of many, a three-point plan, which is, cease-fire; repatriation; and tackling the root causes of the conflict, albeit through development of the Arakan region. This is not difficult to understand, particularly in the backdrop of China’s BRI, and, indeed, with both Bangladesh and Myanmar being party to the Initiative. China too must be concerned, if not embarrassed, with the Myanmar military as it plans to invest billions of dollars in Myanmar under the BRI but the country is now a focus of international attention for committing genocide or crimes against humanity. No one prefers to invest in the place with instability and a future marked by uncertainty. An earlier disposal of the crisis is something that the Chinese would also want desperately.

In some quarters in China there has been a suggestion of establishing ‘a non-attributed refugee zone at the border of China, Myanmar and Bangladesh,’ but this could be a short-term solution, not a long-term one. Since the Rohingyas have no territorial claims, what is required is

52 Author’s discussion with some Chinese scholars in Guangzhou in March 2018.
Myanmar providing them equal rights and citizenship. To begin this process, as it has been identified and recommended by Yanghee Lee, as noted above, Myanmar first needs to enact fresh laws or bills, either in the parliament or through presidential proclamation, which will create confidence amongst the Rohingyas to return and settle in Myanmar. Moreover, China’s three-point plan, as mentioned above, is not so different from the recommendation found in the Kofi Annan Commission report of 23 August 2017 and Prime Minister Hasina’s five-point plan outlined at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2017. There is, therefore, a growing consensus as to how the crisis ought to be resolved.

What about India? I am afraid the policymakers advising Narendra Modi failed him this time. In fact, Modi missed a golden opportunity to emerge as a world leader, given the fact that India’s relationship with both Bangladesh and Myanmar being equally good, Modi was best placed in inviting both Sheikh Hasina and Aung San Suu Kyi to Delhi to resolve the crisis. India’s ‘tilt’ towards Myanmar during Modi’s visit to Naypyidaw in September 2017 not only made Bangladesh ‘angry’ but also alerted China, indeed, to a point of making Myanmar more ‘dependent’ on China. But this should not be the reason for Bangladesh not to seek support from India or China or any other country even if they have a positive relationship with Myanmar. The success of diplomacy, in fact, lies in dealing with contradictions and turning deficit into surplus. It is time that our Prime Minister makes a trip to Beijing and Delhi, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs makes an effort to materialise Vladimir Putin’s visit to Dhaka! Perception matters in diplomacy, more so in getting constant attention of the international media. We are, after all, in the era of iWar or virtual war, where getting ignored virtually is as bad as giving free space to the adversary.

As indicated earlier, this is not simply a Bangladesh-Myanmar issue. Rather, it is an international issue, an issue of norms and values, rules and regulations, decency and civility, an issue of being civilised. Indeed, an issue of being human, how to ensure justice to a population
in a dire situation, a population who have lost everything, even to dream and live a life with dignity!

5. IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

The three circles of contemporariness are as much an abstraction as they are real. Indeed, one can make best use of them not by focusing on the theory of scarcity (not what we have less, as it would reproduce the ‘collective unconscious’ bordering on dystopia even further) but on the theory of abundance (what we have more). Europe precisely did this following World War II, particularly France and Germany, the two arch enemies, cooperating on something they had in abundance, namely coal and steel, and transformed the whole of Europe. In this context, one could say that the SAARC initiative, with its focus on trade relations, was a non-starter and bound to fail, as it was based on the theory of scarcity and not abundance. Even after three decades of SAARC the intra-regional trading remains less than 5 per cent. The focus should have been on abundance, for instance, on human capital, 1.5 billion on them, but unfortunately in India alone over 400 million people live below poverty level. The picture is equally dismal when it comes to literacy. The bulk of South Asia’s population, over 50 per cent, still do not have literacy.

In the case of Bangladesh, ‘people’ and ‘water’ (rain, riverine and oceanic) we certainly have more, and it is to this we need to shift our

---

gaze and make best of Bangladesh in the changing global dynamics. Indeed, in the age of globalisation two sectors that have made a difference to life and living in Bangladesh, as indicated earlier, are both largely based on the theory of abundance. Both ‘remittances’ and ‘RMG’ are labour intensive and as such both have made good use of abundance or what is now referred to as the demographic dividend. But certainly more needs to be done, particularly when more than 65 per cent of the population of Bangladesh are of working age, between 15 and 64. In this case, if labour intensive production can make good use of cheap labour as a result of abundance then the potential of Bangladesh emerging as a major shipbuilder is very much there. There are already signs of that, with Bangladesh manufacturing and exporting ferries, cargo vessels, and ocean-going multi-purpose ships to several countries, including Denmark, Germany and Finland.

Compared to ‘people’ the other item that Bangladesh has in abundance, namely ‘water,’ the focus has been dismally less if not negligible. This is unfortunate because Bangladesh, after all, is a water-country and not a land-country. Not for nothing Bangladesh is called ‘nadi-matrik desh’ (river-centric country). But this would require a change of mindset, which could come about only with long-term meaningful investment in areas ranging from infrastructure to intellect. Indeed, the task would be to connect our livelihoods to ‘water-roots’ as much as to ‘grass-roots’! And now that the maritime boundary has been fixed the urgency for investing on water is even greater.

Let me then conclude by saying that diplomacy is as much an art as it is a science. It is as much an issue of the matter, the objective world, the world of political-economy, as it is of the mind or, as some would say, the soul. Bangladesh will thrive only by combining the two, albeit not mechanically but creatively.
