Bangladesh Foundation For Regional Studies

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INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON

BANGLADESH'S INDO-PACIFIC OUTLOOK: OPPORTUNITIES AND WAY FORWARD

02 SEPTEMBER 2023

JOINTLY ORGANISED BY

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)
and Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies (BFRS)

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INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON

Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook: Opportunities and Way Forward

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies (BFRS) jointly organised an International Seminar on "Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook: Opportunities and Way Forward" on 02 September 2023 at the BIISS auditorium. HE Dr AK Abdul Momen MP, Honourable Foreign Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, graced the international seminar as the Chief Guest. HE Md Shahriar Alam MP, Honourable State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, was present as the Special Guest. Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman, BIISS Chaired the Inaugural Session and delivered the Welcome Address. Ambassador Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, presented the Keynote Address. Director General of BIISS Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc Chaired the Closing Session. The Introductory Remark was delivered by Mr ASM Shamsul Arefin, Chairman, BFRS. The Keynote Address was delivered by Ambassador Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Ambassador Pankaj Saran, Convener, Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues, New Delhi also delivered his remarks in the Inaugural Session and Mr M J Akbar, Former Minister of State for External Affairs of India delivered his remarks in the Closing Session.

There were four sessions in the international seminar including the Inaugural and Closing Session. The first working session titled "Prosperity and Resilience" was moderated by Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, BB, President, Association of Former Ambassadors and the second working session titled "Inclusive Security for Growth and Development" was moderated by Ambassador Ahmad Tariq Karim, Director, Center for Bay of Bengal Studies, Independent University, Bangladesh. Distinguished panelists of the working sessions were HE Salman Al Farisi, Secretary General, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA); Professor Dr Hideaki Shinoda, Graduate School of Global Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo; Professor Surat Horachaikul, Director, Indian Studies Center Chulalongkorn, University, Bangkok; Ambassador Ravinatha P Aryasinha, Executive Director, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute, Colombo; Barrister Nihad Kabir, President, Business Initiative Leading Development (BUILD); Admiral Karambir Singh, PVSM, AVSM, IN (Retd), Chairman, National Maritime Foundation, India; Dr Iqbal Singh Sevea, Director, Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore; Mr Michael Kugelman, Director, South Asia Institute, Wilson Center, Washington, DC; Dr David Brewster, Senior Research Fellow, National Security College, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Canberra; and Professor Dr Lailufar Yasmin, Chairperson, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

The other eminent international and national panellists were Professor Sujit Dutta, Distinguished Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi; Dr Smruti S Pattanaik, Research Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi; Dr Sreeradha Datta, Professor, Jindal School of International

Affairs, O.P Jindal Global University; Dr C Raja Mohan, Senior Fellow, Asia Society Policy Institute, New Delhi; Dr Swapan Dasgupta, former MP, India; Ms. Preeti Gaonkar, Director for Operations, Asia-Europe Foundation, Singapore; Mr Hemanta Kharel, Chairman, Nepal Council of World Affairs, Kathmandu; Dr Rameez Abbas, Associate Professor, College of International Security Affairs (CISA), National Defense University, Washington, DC; Ms Pema Tshoki, Researcher, Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies (CBS), Thimphu; Professor Dr Shahab Enam Khan, Department of International Relations and Head of Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs (BCIPA), Jahangirnagar University; Brig Gen M Sakhawat Hossain (Retd.), former Election Commissioner, Bangladesh; Mr Abul Hasan Chowdhury, former State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh; Ambassador Farooq Sobhan, Distinguished Fellow, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), Bangladesh; Professor Dr Anwar Husain, Bangabandhu Chair, Bangladesh University of Professionals and Air Cdre Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, ndc, psc, (Retd), Treasurer, University of Asia pacific etc. Senior officials from different ministries, ambassadors, high commissioners, current and former diplomats, senior military officials, media, academia, researchers, teachers, students, representatives from diverse international organisations participated in and enriched the seminar by presenting their valuable opinions, comments, suggestions and observations. The seminar was live-streamed at BIISS Facebook Page.

INAUGURAL SESSION

Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker
Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman, BIISS, started his welcome address by mourning the revered memories of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and paying homage to his family members who were assassinated on the fateful night of 15 August 1975.

He stated that the evolving geopolitical realities of the Indo-Pacific region is offering opportunities for countries in the region on the one hand, and raising difficulties in policy choices on the other. Since the 21st century is shifting economic gravity towards Asia, countries in the Indo-Pacific region are keen to avail the benefits of development. However, it is claimed that the strategic competition among big players may affect the security architecture of the region and hamper economic prosperity, raising concerns among emerging economies. He said that Bangladesh, as a littoral of the Bay of Bengal with a significant location and responsible position in it, is coming up as a vital partner in the region, requiring a business-friendly environment to grow unindicted. This course is about how Bangladesh will act in such a given situation.

He emphasised that, emerging as an important economic power and arising at a takeoff stage with sustained growth of seven plus percent for the last decade, Bangladesh aspires to be an economic hub set in the development highway. He stated that the resilient people of Bangladesh do not want to stagnate in this growth and development trajectory so rigorously pursued by Hon'rable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Vision 2041, in realisation of the father of the nation's dream of Golden Bengal, the developed and prosperous Bangladesh.

The Chairman further stated that Bangladesh unveiled its own strategic outlook as a key direction for its journey in the Indo-Pacific region. Based on the central principle of furthering the nation's Pacific foreign policy came, 'Friendship towards all and malice towards none'. He added that the outlook demonstrates Bangladesh's view of the Indo-Pacific as a space for opportunities rather than confrontation. It subscribes to the vision of a free, open, inclusive, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific. The outlook's core objective is to attain economic development with a kind of autonomy with which Bangladesh can engage all the stakeholders of the region in a positive-sum approach. He stressed that Bangladesh does not want to take any position that compromises this approach. Bangladesh believes that the identification of convergence of interest among stakeholders will facilitate cooperation and enhance the culture of peace inherent in the country's millennia-old tradition. He further added that in the context of emerging challenges in the region like climate change, maritime security, and developing and managing the real economy, especially in the Bay of Bengal, such open-ended cooperation and partnership can benefit all people in the region.

The Chairman argued that Bangladesh's outlook was well encapsulated in the remarks of the Hon'rable Prime Minister's panel discussion at World Economic Forum in July 2019. The Prime Minister mentioned that any initiative in the Indo-Pacific should include the creation of an environment of peace, harmony, and stability for all countries, focus on all aspects of sustainable development, engage countries based on mutual trust and mutual respect for mutual benefit, and focus on wealth creation for all where development must be inclusive. Moreover, initiatives in the Indo-Pacific should create fair competition, not rivalries.

The Chairman concluded by expressing his eagerness to know and understand from the distinguished foreign guests how Bangladesh can find common ground with all the stakeholders in the region through the promotion of the eternal values and principles of mankind, which are equity, justice, human dignity, and peaceful co-existence. These values are the basis of Bangladesh's outlook, and the exploration of new avenues for cooperation has always been a goal pursued by Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

ASM Shamsul Arefin
Chairman, Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies (BFRS)

At the outset, Mr Arefin paid deep homage to the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with family members and to the brave freedom fighters of the country who made their topmost sacrifice for the independence of Bangladesh. He mentioned that the Bangladesh Foundation for Regional Studies (BFRS) believes in rightful leadership to help understand the political, social, cultural, and economic evolution of contemporary society. Bangladesh in the greater context of the Indo-Pacific region consolidates towards a comprehensive national identity with distinct features of its own. He believed it is immensely important to share the ideas with friends from across the globe who might have an interest in the Bay of Bengal region and beyond. In that case, the International Seminar on 'Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook: Opportunities and Way Forward', jointly organised by BIISS and BFRS, will certainly add more value to understanding the entire gamut of the geopolitical framework of the region.

He opined that the Indo-Pacific region has gained tremendous geo-strategic and geo-economic momentum in the last few years. Being located at the heart of the Bay of Bengal, there is no scope for Bangladesh to sit aside. Rather it recognises the importance of understanding and engaging with the evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific to utilise the untapped potentials and greater interests. As the seminar aims to explore Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) and examine the country's national interests in the region, the discussions will pave the way for enhancing regional and international collaboration with all the partner countries.

He mentioned that it is a known fact that on 24 April 2023, Bangladesh declared its IPO which is a visionary and timely initiative prior to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan, the USA, and the UK. The unveiled IPO answered many questions about Bangladesh's positions on various issues while promoting peace and stability in the region. Bangladesh envisions a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for the shared prosperity for all and to realise her vision of being a modern, knowledge-based developed country by 2041. The

IPO enshrines a wide range of development and security issues, such as ensuring maritime safety and security; harnessing the blue economy; combating transnational organised crimes; promoting the culture of peace; enabling order for sustainable and equitable development; fostering multimodal connectivity; strengthening cooperation in science, technology, research, and innovation; and most importantly, addressing the issues of climate change, energy and food security for shared benefits of all. All these issues have been set, he believes, in aligning with the visions of 'Smart Bangladesh' and 'Vision 2041'.

He added that Bangladesh actively participates in various regional fora like BIMSTEC, SAARC, ARF, and IORA to promote regional ties and economic integration. Bangladesh believes that the Indo-Pacific has immense potential for trade, investment, and economic growth. As connectivity is crucial for the region, Bangladesh desires to actively participate in various connectivity initiatives including BBIN MVA and BIG-B for enhanced people-to-people contact, tourism, and strong regional cooperation. To achieve all economic and other interests, the foreign policy dictum of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—'Friendship to all and malice towards none'—will be at the core of Bangladesh's approach towards the Indo-Pacific.

According to him, although the Indo-Pacific region presents immense opportunities, at the same time, it has challenges because of growing geopolitical tensions and competition between and among the major powers. The government wants to contemplate that the competition will only cost heavily to us. Instead of rivalry, the country wants to be on board with everyone and explore dividends from all in the region that can be achieved by establishing a culture of peace and maintaining the principles enunciated in the UN Charter and the international conventions. He concluded his remarks by reiterating that Bangladesh pursues a policy of inclusiveness that

benefits all. Bangladesh has become a role model for peace in the region and beyond. It is expected that the member countries will work as forerunners of a 'free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific' for upholding regional potential as far as the economy is concerned. They will take the lead in building a strategy that will be tailored to the requirements of the region by engaging in multilateral dialogues for establishing peace and prosperity and pursuing similar interests in various security and development issues. He hoped that the insightful discussions of the presenters and panellists would take the common vision a step ahead by offering various windows of opportunities and policy directives.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Ambassador Masud Bin Momen
Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

At the outset, Ambassador Masud Bin Momen thanked BIISS for organising this international seminar. He noted that since its launch in April 2023, Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) has generated considerable interest at home and abroad. It reinforced the current government's conviction that it had indeed been the right move to make. It was critical for Bangladesh to articulate its approach to the Indo-Pacific in a concise manner in order to minimise the scope for unwarranted confusion or speculation. It is a matter of pleasure that the IPO has so far elicited a positive response from all major international partners of Bangladesh for its thrust on "shared prosperity for all". In the interest of time, he focused on the following five issues that deserve some further clarification.

First, at its core, IPO is centred on the current government's vision for a "free, open, peaceful, secure and inclusive Indo-Pacific" – a 'catch-all' formulation Honourable Prime Minister had first used in an official communication in 2018. This broad vision is very much aligned with Bangladesh's time-tested foreign policy dictum, i.e., "Friendship to all, malice towards none" – bequeathed by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The country's founding father embraced this dictum in consonance with the four Fundamental Principles of State Policy that form the bedrock of the Bangladesh Constitution – the supreme law of the land. The government perceives these principles and dicta to be all bound by a cohesive thread derived from the spirit of the country's independence struggle culminating in the War of Liberation. The government considers the IPO to be firmly anchored in this legacy, and thus a reflection of the government's abiding commitment to an inclusive, democratic, rights-based and rules-based international order serving Bangladesh's national interest.

Second, as its name implies, IPO is indeed focused on the geographic location that surrounds the meeting point of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Bangladesh has consciously avoided defining the perimeters of the Indo-Pacific in order to signal the country's readiness to engage with all actors that have launched their respective Indo-Pacific strategies with their own preferred delineations. What can be found common to all Indo-Pacific strategies is their incorporation of the Bay of Bengal and its littoral states including Bangladesh. Mainly due to its unique geo-strategic location, Bangladesh holds varying degrees of relevance for different Indo-Pacific strategies – a fact that Bangladesh needs to espouse to its own advantage. In the government's conception of the Indo-Pacific, therefore, there is a combination of both terrestrial and maritime areas despite the apparent emphasis on oceans and seas in the notion of the Indo-Pacific itself. There cannot be any scope for assuming that Bangladesh's IPO takes a sea-bound focus at the exclusion of the land mass constituting the broader perimeters of the Indo-Pacific.

Third, this brings all to the crux of IPO with its obvious accent on "inclusivity" as a non-negotiable element for Bangladesh. The government has all along insisted on preserving the idea of inclusivity even in negotiated documents with Bangladesh's international partners while referring to the Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh does not afford to pursue a divisive or exclusionary approach to the Indo-Pacific as it strives towards collective resilience and prosperity in similar tandem with Bangladesh's own development trajectory. The fact that Bangladesh launched an IPO in the same year as signalling its interest in enhanced engagement with BRICS is perhaps reflective of its conscious choice to associate with multiple configurations in a multi-polar world.

Fourth, the thrust on inclusivity necessitates that Bangladesh cooperate with its interested Indo-Pacific partners on a wide-ranging issue concerning development and security. While one keeps in mind, the primary goal of the government attaches to economic diplomacy. Bangladesh will be able to achieve national development objectives only in an environment of regional peace and security. Like all Indo-Pacific partners, Bangladesh faces a number of non-traditional security threats that can be a serious detriment to its economic growth and development aspirations unless it tackles them through effective regional and international collaboration. Here, the government would like to stress that security or defence cooperation does not necessarily entail joining any military bloc or alliance per se.

Fifth, on the question of rolling out or implementing IPO, the government considers it to be subsumed under the government's multi-dimensional foreign policy initiatives on all the individual issues the government has identified in the document. It would not be feasible or advisable to always identify specific actions and initiatives pertaining to IPO alone. For instance, in the maritime domain, as Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Bangladesh steered the adoption of the IORA Indo-Pacific Outlook in November2022. In May 2023, Bangladesh hosted the sixth Indian Ocean Conference with a focus on leveraging the economic potential of the Indian Ocean and its contiguous territories. In June, at Bangladesh's initiative as Chair, the UNESCO, IOC, INDIO was elevated from a Regional Committee to one of the Sub-Commissions under the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission.

Again, in the critical area of connectivity, Bangladesh remains committed and active on multiple fronts, including through regional or sub-regional configurations like SAARC, BIMSTEC and BBIN. In April 2023, during her bilateral visit to Japan, the Hon'ble Prime Minister reaffirmed support for Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's elaboration of the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt or BIG-B surrounding Bangladesh and the contiguous parts of Northeastern India. Focusing on that area, the work on the Matarbari Deep Sea Port as well as the expansion of Chattogram Port remains underway, while new avenues are being opened up in road and rail connectivity with Northeastern India. Bangladesh's connectivity initiatives along the other sides of its borders with India are also witnessing diverse forms of investment, including the inauguration of a diesel pipeline across the northern part in 2023.

The government believes that bilateral connectivity projects would feature prominently during Hon'ble Prime Minister's upcoming meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. In July, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina exchanged views with her Nepalese counterpart Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal about the possibility of further opening up trade and energy corridors. Bangladesh is also a part of the Belt and Road Initiative or BRI. Meanwhile, Bangladesh remains engaged in discussions with UN-ESCAP and the Asian Development Bank on multiple connectivity corridors across the region and also with the EU and European Investment Bank on viable cross-border connectivity projects under the Global Gateway Initiative. Looking ahead, Bangladesh will continue to attach priority to regional connectivity in pursuance of the country's political leadership's vision to position Bangladesh's territory as a connectivity hub in the Indo-Pacific context.

To conclude, he added that he has taken note of the suggestions from different quarters to consider developing a detailed strategy document on the basis of IPO. The government launched IPO not just to keep it bound within two pages, but also as a tool that may help make some difference in the lives of the country's people.

REMARKS BY

Ambassador Pankaj Saran
Convener, Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues, New Delhi

Ambassador Pankaj Saran expressed his pleasure to be back in Dhaka and admired the remarkable, all-round progress that Bangladesh has made. He added that progress is visible in all aspects of life, whether it is infrastructure or economic development, and not just in the city or the capital of Dhaka, but across the entire of Bangladesh. Today, in the Indo-Pacific region, Bangladesh is a success story. He further added that it is clear in India that a stable, prosperous, and dynamic Bangladesh is an essential part of this region. This region is witnessing rapid transformation, and it is important that we have partners like Bangladesh to be a part of this process. India, of course, supports Bangladesh in achieving its national goals, and the rapid improvement in the Indo-Bangladesh relationship has clearly been good for both countries and for the entire region. He said that the relationship has now emerged as an example of interstate relations in not just the Indo-Pacific region but across in the wider global arena. He pointed out that the people of India, the government of India, and the Prime Minister Narendra Modi were looking forward eagerly to host Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Delhi for the G20 summit. He said that Bangladesh is regarded by India as an important part of the global south.

Ambassador Saran emphasised that the Indo-Pacific and Bangladesh in particular, is a pivotal and critical part of the region, and it is very heartening to see Bangladesh to come out with the outlook. He added that it is important for Bangladesh to transcend its role and identity from an Indian Ocean littoral state to an active and robust player in the entire Indo-Pacific region. The reason for this is that we in the Indo-Pacific region are all striving to build an open, intrusive, multipolar, secure and a rules-based international order starting in the Indo-Pacific region. We cannot have global harmony, peace, and stability without multipolarity, first in our region and then across the world. The South Asian states look forward to building a region free from coercion and expansionism in which the core interests of all the states are advanced and the security of states cannot be a zero-sum game in which one's country's security comes at the expense or at the cost of another. The countries to devise frameworks and models for cooperation in which the benefits have to be available to all people.

Ambassador Saran argued that all states' initiatives must be transparent and sustainable. This must not lead to debt traps and should ensure that connectivity and economic prosperity respect national sovereignty and each other's core interests. In the background of all this, Bangladesh is a key player in this vision. He expressed his hopes that the seminar is the first step in the implementation and expansion of the concept of the Indo-Pacific that the outlook contains. He looks forward to Bangladesh's contribution not just in the maritime domain but also in other domains relating both to traditional and nontraditional security, climate change and global warming. There are many activities the countries focus on, and India looks forward to moving forward with Bangladesh in this enterprise.

Ambassador Saran argued that we belong to Indian sub-continent region, and we have to devise these cooperative frameworks that enhance collective security, collective peace, and collective stability based on accepted international norms of behavior and international rules and regulations. He thinks that in this context, it is clear that at this juncture today, the Bangladesh-India relationship offers a model for cooperation in which the openness, the connectivity, and the integration of the two economies are creating multiple ripple positive effects across the subregion. He emphasised that the Indo-Pacific is not intended to be an exclusive area of cooperation. In fact, it is exactly the opposite. It is supposed to be inclusive, and this is the principal guiding basis on which we would like to proceed, not just in terms of economic development but in all areas, including dealing with very fast-changing security challenges and threats. In conclusion, Ambassador Saran stated that Bangladesh is only at the beginning of a very exciting journey in the Indo-Pacific region that is currently capturing the attention of the entire world as all eyes are on the Pacific region.

ADDRESS BY THE SPECIAL GUEST

HE Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP
Hon'ble State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh

At the outset of his speech, HE Mr Md Shahriar Alam paid tribute to the greatest Bangali (Bengali) of all time, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his wife Bangamata Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib, and other members of Bangabandhu's family, who embraced martyrdom on August 15, 1975, in one of the most barbaric carnages in human history.

Mr Alam stated that the post-World War II world order is increasingly being reshaped with the rise of countries in the Indo-Pacific region, and by far the fastest-growing region, resulting in a global realignment of strategic postures. As a demonstration of the world's renewed interest in the Indo-Pacific region, various Indo-Pacific strategies, visions, outlooks, guidelines, etc. have been introduced and advocated by countries and associations like the USA, European Union, United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, India, ASEAN, Australia, Republic of Korea, Canada, Czech Republic, and Bangladesh at different points in time. Asia Rebalancing Strategy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), Trilateral Security Pact (AUKUS), Indo-Pacific Tilt, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), Indo-Pacific Economic Forum for Prosperity (IPEF), etc. have been adopted by countries centered on the Indo-Pacific region to address the new security challenges as well as infrastructure, economic, and technological developments in this region.

Mr Alam emphasised that, as a littoral state of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh's appreciation of the Indo-Pacific narratives is based on her Foreign Policy dictum "Friendship towards all, malice towards none", set forward by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He added that a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific is essential for peace, security, stability, and growth in the region and beyond. He argued that Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook is not security-centric, rather, it focuses on inclusive development of this region. It is not about critical choices between the major powers. It aims at promoting fundamental principles, such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, inclusiveness, shared prosperity, etc. He said that we support making and clarifying claims based on international law, not allowing the use of force or coercion, and seeking to settle disputes by peaceful and diplomatic means.

Mr Alam stressed that Bangladesh believes in strengthening regional connectivity via quality infrastructure, people-to-people exchanges, and institutional harmonisation. Bangladesh wants to be assured of peace, prosperity, and stability in the region by focusing efforts on capacity building as well as humanitarian and disaster relief operations. He added that militarisation of this peaceful sealane is not in the interest of anyone. Acknowledging the climate threats in South Asian region, Bangladesh would like to see renewed momentum in climate cooperation to reduce vulnerability in South Asian. He highlighted that the outlook focuses on multilateralism and the centrality of the blue sphere. Bangladesh wishes to establish broader and deeper ties with major powers and other regional countries, as today's security challenges are more directly related to cross-regional and global issues such as prevention of the spread of international terrorism as well as maritime security.

Mr Alam said that, "You all know that a few months back we announced the Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh after a lot of scrutiny, which has 4 principles and 15 objectives. These objectives may increase, many more may be added to these objectives, we told everyone that day".

The seminar helped us to listen from our friends in the Indo-Pacific region and the benefits that we receive of course would help us. And if there is anything left to add few more on top of the 15 greater objectives that we think we can potentially achieve.

We are participating in a special event today, where there are multiple sessions. Here, we will listen to everyone, and we may receive some advice that can be very valuable for Bangladesh and the greater Indo-Pacific region. I have referred to the names' of those who are present here, and throughout the day, they will discuss matters that can help enrich us for the days ahead.

We must consider that having any military objectives in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in areas with communication routes in the oceans, is not advisable. Instead, it is crucial for us to cooperate with each other, increase people-to-people contact, promote trade and commerce, and ensure unimpeded movement for everyone. We should work together to make sure that happens.

Mr Alam concluded by saying that Bangladesh believes that cooperation and collaboration among the countries of the Indo-Pacific region are essential for the shared prosperity of all. Therefore, Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook is an attempt to tell the world that the region is for our common prosperity, not just for those who live in it but also for the whole world.

WORKING SESSION-I: PROSPERITY AND RESILIENCE

Remarks by the Moderator

Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, Bir Bikrom
President, Association of Former Ambassadors

Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury presided over the first working session. During the opening remarks, he extended his appreciation to the academics who had participated from home and abroad and also praised HE Md Shahriar Alam MP, the special guest of this seminar, for the valuable perspectives he delivered in the inaugural session. Following the discussion with the Secretary General of the IORA, HE Salman Al Farisi, Ambassador Chowdhury acknowledged that the IPOs of the IORA and Bangladesh are quite comparable to one another. Then, he recalled the words of the late Japanese Prime Minster Shinzo Abe after the remarks of Professor Dr Hideaki Shinoda. He recalled the Former Prime Minister who described the Indo-Pacific as a great connecter of democracy and prosperity. According to him, the comment of the late Prime Minister is still valid today as much as it was during that time. He also pointed out that the IPO of Bangladesh was released just on the eve of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan. According to him, the Prime Minister's visit to Japan was successful with a great exchange of minds between Bangladesh and the Japanese government. Regarding the remarks of Professor Shinoda, Ambassador Chowdhury thanked him for recognising Bangladesh's contribution to the UN peacekeeping operations. On the issue of rules-based order, he pointed out the importance of knowing who makes the rule. According to him, Bangladesh—as a responsible player in the region—needs to have a position to include its input in the regional and global system. It is also important for Bangladesh to define and determine the rules for a rules-based order.

Ambassador Chowdhury, then, thanked Professor Surat Horachaikul for informing the audience about the translation of the book on Bangabandhu into the Thai language, which according to him, is another manifestation of the universality of the values that the Father of the Nation represented. He stated that Bangabandhu is one of those few people in history who helped in founding a nation. He also recognised Thailand's promising role in promoting BIMSTEC and giving resilience. About the forms of society, Ambassador Chowdhury also acknowledged that both Bangladesh and Thailand have a plurality in the society. Both nations embrace diversity and pluralism in their roots. Afterwards, Ambassador Chowdhury accredited having the country's self-interest at the forefront to address the common challenges after listening to Ambassador Ravinatha P Aryasinha. He emphasised that having an inclusive outlook by keeping national interests in mind is pertinent which may work as a mantra for addressing common challenges.

Finally, Ambassador Chowdhury ended his remarks by stating that Bangladesh is promoting public diplomacy and it is important to take public diplomacy to the media. According to him, interactions among the media of all Indo-Pacific countries are important and can provide a major input in policymaking.

REMARKS BY THE PANELISTS

HE Salman Al Farisi
Secretary General, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

HE Salman Al Farisi, at the beginning of his remarks, expressed his gratitude to the organiser for arranging such an important seminar. Recognising the geostrategic and geoeconomic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, HE Farisi, at first, shared some views on IORA's IPO. According to him, IORA needs to ensure that the Indian Ocean region remains a zone of peace. It has already offered a well-positioned platform for its members to deepen regionalism and economic cooperation. IORA's reach is extensive both geographically and in terms of the issues related to development and cooperation. As the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean have naturally integrated into one region, it has attracted global attention driven by common opportunities and challenges. The large maritime area that spread across the Pacific rim, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Eastern and Southern Africa, is also home to about 64 per cent of the global population and contributes over 60 per cent of the global GDP. He further informed the audience that nearly 2.5 billion people are living in IORA member states, making the organisation an integral element of the Indo-Pacific region. To develop a vision to guide IORA's engagement and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, it adopted its outlook on the Indo-Pacific at the Council of Ministers Meeting held in Dhaka in November 2022 under the capable chairmanship of Bangladesh. HE Farisi further stated that the IORA outlook on Indo-Pacific is a strategic document that reemphasises the principle enshrined in the IORA Charter. In this regard, he informed that the IORA is working to ensure an effective and timely implementation of the outlook by formulating a roadmap in partnership and synergy with member states and dialogue partners in regional and international cooperations as well as relevant stakeholders.

HE Farisi then pointed out the synergies between IORA's IPO and Bangladesh's IPO. According to him, Bangladesh's IPO has very much commonality with the IORA's IPO. Both documents resonate with the principle of respect for sovereignty, territorial non-interference, peaceful co-existence, mutual benefit, inclusivity, and the promotion of good governance and international law including UNCLOS and other relevant UN treaties and conventions. IORA's IPO has five elements of partnership. Firstly, enhancing maritime safety and security of the region through capacity building and cooperation on disaster management, search and rescue, and disaster resilience. Secondly, promoting economic growth and shared prosperity through transparent systems and sustainable trade and investment in order to build a stronger and resilient regional and global value and supply chain. Thirdly, promoting conservation and sustainable management of marine resources and blue economy. Fourthly, enhancing connectivity including physical, digital, technological and people-to-people linkages in the region. Fifthly, enhancing collaboration with other regional and international organisations to foster dialogue and enhance complementarity. According to him, these five core elements of IORA's outlook are indeed comparable with Bangladesh's IPO. Hence, there are many opportunities to develop partnerships for implementing these IPOs.

Based on the experience and comparative advantage of IORA, HE Farisi stated that both Bangladesh and IORA can strengthen mutual efforts to develop a coastal economy or blue economy. About the IORA working group on blue economy and the core group on fisheries management, he informed that IORA has implemented many capacity-building projects for member states including in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh. The IORA Blue Carbon Hub was also launched in 2019 with the aim of building knowledge and capacity to protect and restore the blue carbon ecosystem throughout the Indian Ocean. To address the issue of maritime pollution, IORA has adopted a strategic framework of action on marine debris in the Indian Ocean. In this regard, he gave the example of a three-party cooperation workshop on maritime assistance and rescue in Chauddagram, Bangladesh in September 2022, which was funded by Australia. According to him, this kind of mechanism of cooperation can be taken more in the future for implementing both IORA's and Bangladesh's IPO. IORA has also a special fund mechanism which is a pool of finance to support member states in implementing projects. This fund can also be used for joint projects. In this regard, HE Farisi stated this as a possibility of using this special fund to have a joint project in the future.

HE Farisi also pointed out that regional and international collaboration is one of the elements of both Bangladesh and IORA's IPOs. Both documents stress the importance of enhancing collaboration with other regional and international organisations to foster dialogues and develop complementarities. From the perspective of IORA, this issue is significantly relevant as this inter-governmental organisation is keen to deepen its link with various stakeholders to enhance economic growth in the Indo-Pacific region. He also stressed that sustainable economic growth requires collective sufficiency and increased resilience of the people against global challenges. In this context, collective sufficiency meets the collective effort from all stakeholders in the region including

various regional organisations. As the only regional organisation embracing almost all countries in the Indian Ocean region, IORA can be the right partner for Bangladesh to implement the Indo-Pacific strategy. IORA is strengthening cooperation with relevant stakeholders including dialogue partners and international organisations, such as the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), the International Seabed Authority, and Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO. IORA's cooperation with BIMSTEC and Pacific Island Forum (PIF) is also in the pipeline. He further informed that there is the possibility of signing a MoU with the BIMSTEC and PIF in the near future. IORA is also strengthening its collaboration with ASEAN to synergise the effort of the latter in implementing the IPO including the area of the blue economy.

In conclusion, HE Farisi remarked that the IORA will continue to emphasise cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. This cooperation must be approached in a comprehensive manner not only from the security context but also from economic and development aspects. IORA strongly acknowledges that many countries have an Indo-Pacific concept. Thus, according to him, a synergy is needed to establish among these Indo-Pacific ideas. As IORA is now starting to implement its IPO, thus, the organisation is ready to work closely with all relevant stakeholders to strengthen regional architecture and support sustainable growth in the region. Lastly, he stated that there is a need to enhance partnerships and regional cooperations in an inclusive manner to maintain the Indo-Pacific as a global epicenter of growth.

Professor Dr Hideaki Shinoda
Graduate School of Global Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo

Professor Dr Hideaki Shinoda shared his opinion about Bangladesh's IPO from the perspective of Japanese interests in Bangladesh and the Indo-Pacific. Outlining the importance of Bangladesh from the perspective of Japan, Professor Shinoda recognised Bangladesh's increasing importance in the global scene and stated that the country is going to be an emerging global power with its rapid economic growth. He informed the audience that Japan is interested in remaining engaged with allies, such as the United States (USA) and other friendly countries. Japan perceives China as a superpower and considers India as a de facto or at least a potential superpower in the 21st century. Bangladesh is between two superpowers, therefore, according to him, the importance of the counrty is inevitable. About Bangladesh's IPO, he opined that there are many important points in its IPO that draw Japan's attention. In Bangladesh's IPO, there are some general thematic issues, however, Professor Shinoda felt that economic activities are an important issue to be considered. In terms of enhancing economic engagements with the member countries, he gave his positive feedback and informed Japan's willingness to seek partnerships with emerging global powers, such as Bangladesh. Bringing the concept of connectivity, Professor Shinoda tried to make his analysis about the Indo-Pacific orientation. According to him, the Indo-Pacific alignment is a concept that suggests connecting multiple components that exist separately in different parts of the region. About the idea of understanding the Indo-Pacific as a regional agenda, he argued that the Indo-Pacific is not only an area but rather a broader concept than the traditional perception of regional agenda. Thus, in his view, the Indo-Pacific idea is a global perspective with a focus on inter-regional connectivity.

Professor Shinoda further informed the audience that Japan has a wider global perspective and from that point of view, it wants to collaborate with Bangladesh in order to enhance a global agenda through Indo-Pacific channels. In this regard, Japan is keen on advancing the direction of collaboration. Professor Shinoda then discussed three aspects of the IPO of Bangladesh. First, he highlighted the principles of Bangladesh's IPO through which the government of Bangladesh makes it clear that the country will be committed to the UN Charter. This means—Bangladesh is making its position clear about the principles of the UN Charter in the context of existing international law. In this regard, he stated the importance of reconfirmation and reemphasised maintaining the commitment to the principles of the UN Charter. These principles should be the foundation of any kind of action and development of ideas about security and economic cooperation. From this perspective, he praised the government of Bangladesh for reemphasising its commitments through the IPO.

Secondly, in Bangladesh's IPO, there are some specific technical areas that the country has illustrated more than some of the other nations. From the perspective of Japan, these are indeed pertinent to avoid existing challenges and clear its position to other member nations. For example, the impact of climate change has been clearly illustrated in the context of Indo-Pacific in Bangladesh's IPO. In this regard, he informed that the government of Japan has been engaged with issues of climate change impacts in many ways by collaborating with Pacific Islander countries. Japan itself has also experienced many natural disasters at different times. Based on these experiences, Japan tried to accumulate knowledge and experiences for responding appropriately to natural disasters.

On the issue of disaster risk reduction, Professor Shinoda stressed building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific since the impacts of climate change have global ramifications. In this regard, sharing experiences, knowledge, and technologies about disaster management is crucial for affected countries like Bangladesh and Japan. Thirdly, he highlighted the inclusion of the issue of peacebuilding in the outlook. According to him, Bangladesh possesses the moral power to emphasise this aspect because of the prestigious record of its contributions to the UN Peacekeeping operations in different parts of the world and other notable UN activities. The importance of peace operations and peace agendas should not be overlooked in the agenda of the Indo-Pacific. Thus, he strongly supported Bangladesh's standpoint about the inclusion of the issue of peacebuilding and peace operations in the outlook.

Professor Shinoda concluded his remarks by reiterating some points which are in line with the three aspects that he pointed out in Bangladesh's IPO. Firstly, regarding the principles of the UN Charter, he reiterated Japan's viewpoint on the promotion of the Indo-Pacific or 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' in the context of the rules-based order. On this note, he encouraged the Bangladesh government to enhance its commitment to promoting the rules-based order. As a second point, he suggested the establishment of meaningful partnerships among Japan and like-minded states such as Bangladesh on the issue of disaster management by sharing knowledge and technologies. Thirdly, he emphasised Bangladesh's valuable contribution to peace operations and expressed his desire to know more about its experiences as a nation that has a strong interest in boosting worldwide peace promotions.

Professor Surat Horachaikul
Director, Indian States Centre, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

Professor Surat Horachaikul expressed his sincere gratitude to the Government of Bangladesh and especially to Bangladesh's ambassador to Thailand for a specific reason. Clarifying his citizenship, Professor Horachaikul informed that he is a Thai citizen of Indian origin. He also mentioned that Thailand is a pluralistic society with different kinds of people residing there for a long time. Introducing himself, Professor Horachaikul stated that he belongs to the Department of International Relations, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, while also running the Indian Studies Center in the country at the same time. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand assigned them to be the BNPTT leaders for Thailand part, which is known as the BIMSEC Network of Policy Think Tanks to all. The center is under the Institute of Asian Studies which has a Department of South Asian Studies as well.

Professor Horachaikul elaborates that these institutions aim to make noise about South Asia all the time in Thailand as political, international, and political history has made these two entities far away from each other in the name of the Cold War and other bipolar politics despite geographical proximity. In fact, Bangladesh is just as near to Bangkok as Hong Kong. Thailand also shares maritime and other borders with India and other nations and this creates lots of common issues among these countries. But for so long, South Asia did not seem to be quite something within that part of the world, especially when someone lived in different camps in the name of the Cold War and so on.

While informing the launch of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's autobiography in the Thai language by their team along with the Embassy of Bangladesh in Bangkok, Professor Horachaikul said that they found Bangabandhu is quite a universal man to everyone as his thought is also applicable to them citing Thailand's desire to have no enemies rather a friendship to all. There are a number of common things between Bangladesh and Thailand that can linked with each other. Moreover, two countries can work together based on these common things. When the book was launched in Thailand, it was quite popular among students and youngsters. Bringing the themes of prosperity, resilience, and inclusivity, he said that these require a holistic paradigm as they overlap each other. To understand these kinds of issues well, and the youth's perspective on these aspects, he mentioned the recently held election in Thailand since prosperity, resilience, inclusivity, and others are popular topics there due to the rising demands for ensuring the popular vote. The issue is not only talking about free and open navigation alone rather the trend in Southeast Asia is also to seek for more free and open society. Bangladesh and Thailand have a number of common themes where both can work together, he further added.

When someone is committed to the UN Charter, it is also being with the world. Questioning on how countries shape this thing, Professor Horachaikul also raised the issue of compensating for the loss of time citing the period of the Cold War and strengthening the bond between people to people, and academia to academia. He then mentioned his former students who are running BIMSTEC programmes. Inviting all BIMSTEC member countries and sending delegates to the northeastern part of Thailand for these kinds of programmes will indeed benefit more and people will learn from each other immensely.

Mentioning his writing in a congratulations message on Bangladesh National Day, he remarked that Bangladesh has changed dramatically in economics as it has more income and prosperity now. However, the gap between reality and perceptions remains prevalent. Bangladesh needs to do more on strategic communications to put the IPO into practice while also making sure that South Asia and Bangladesh are visible in Thailand's part

of the world. At the same time, countries in Southeast Asia will have to work harder than before considering the complexities of contemporary times. In his view, Bangladesh in this regard, can play an important role by being a leader on different issues rather than a follower as it has a moderate society, respect for pluralism, and a composition of different groups of people, which is in tune with Thailand's position. This goes back to the UN, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, respect for each other, and care about multicultural society. Coming to the Covid-19 issue as it impacts the supply chain and economy, he further suggested that countries should think of mechanisms where they can cooperate so that this kind of tragedy never comes again as every country pursues its own business.

Citing Bangladesh's foreign minister's speech which he delivered in the BIMSTEC, he added that how Bangladesh situates BIMSTEC in this Indo-Pacific concept is important. The theme of the session 'prosperity and resilience' also coincides with Thailand's call for the BIMSTEC summit this year. BIMSTEC concept this year is pro-prosperous, resilient, and open BIMSTEC. The summit will be held at the end of November of this year in Bangkok as the country is the chair for this summit. Therefore, there are a number of platforms where Bangladesh and Thailand can work with each other to make sure that this IPO is transformed into practice.

Ambassador Ravinatha P Aryasinha
Executive Director, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI), Colombo

Ambassador Ravinatha P Aryasinha thanked BIISS and BFRS along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for putting together a sharp but focused event on the IPO of Bangladesh with such a large number of participants. Representing LKI, an international relations and strategic studies center in Sri Lanka, Ambassador Aryasinha stated that he would like to bring the sense of countries like Bangladesh in the region and smaller developing countries on how they feel about development and some approaching issues relating to the Indian Ocean, or today's notion which is more broadly known as the Indo-Pacific region. Looking back to the height of the Cold War in 1971 with some nostalgia, he mentioned that the then Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, with the support of the neighbouring countries and the broader Non-aligned Movement, not only called for the Indian Ocean to be declared a 'Zone of Peace' but also sought to operationalise this concept in tangible terms – through rule-based norms for the governance of the Indian Ocean consistent with the UNCLOS, and for exploitation of the marine resources and its development potential–through the IOMAC and other modalities or regional organisations like SAARC, BIMSTEC, and the IORA. As he said, over 50 years while much has changed in the geopolitical environment, still countries are continuing to struggle to achieve that vision. Thus, ensuring inclusive security for growth and development, and prosperity for the people has been a challenge amidst the worst economic crisis the world has seen in recent times.

Now, many visions for this region's future have been proposed, and in that context, the government of Bangladesh through its IPO has led smaller developing countries or economies to project what countries including Sri Lanka see as priorities to ensure stability, energize development, and bring greater peace and security to the region. Bangladesh's IPO reflects the acknowledgment of the global and regional geopolitical environment and realities that confront countries. Since these are necessarily not of our making, we should cleverly navigate through this network by focusing on important issues that will reflect common interests. To accomplish that, it subsumes a specific determination not to get drawn into the polarised debates and confrontations, but to charter one's courses, such as respectful engagements and sensitivities to the major players, operative in the region's affairs and placing the interests of the people at the center. Above all, it will be a determined effort to assert the country's own identity. He believed that these are the hallmarks of this event which has been talked about in much detail in the seminar.

Ambassador Aryasinha flagged three issues broadly which would push this envelope a little bit further and help draw on some ideas that also get focused in a forthcoming monograph on "Sri Lanka's foreign policy in the 21st Century". The first issue, intentions apart, is related to the operationalisation of policies such as the 'Bangladesh Indo-Pacific Outlook', and other similar positions that are likely to follow by smaller developing countries, e.g., the carving out of foreign policy postures while avoiding being drawn into the crossfire between the contending major powers. This is, to some extent pertinent, for such countries who want to remain relevant, secure, and prosper. However, at present, it remains a challenge in practice to make a balance with the great powers. Nonetheless, this predicament has to be managed with even-handedness, firmness, and transparency.

Avoiding the 'pendulum swings' in policy which have been witnessed at times in many countries is a prerequisite, otherwise, it will have detrimental effects.

On that point, Ambassador Aryasinha raised a couple of issues on which countries might need to try to take some further implementation actions for dealing with the situation effectively. First, in the security realm, countries must not leave cause for concern with respect to the legitimate security interests that could emanate from the territory of one country on another – no doubt a particular concern to larger players that have broader strategic interests, than to others. Second, bona fide requests for access to ports and airports should be granted based on a common 'port/airport call policy', rather than in an ad hoc manner, and in that case, a consensus can be built around which is an important aspect of the IPO. Third, ensure that there is a rules-based order governed through international law, the UN conventions, treaties, and procedures in the maritime domain that is equitable to all its users. In this case, the law of the sea is a useful document that finds solutions to many problems.

Fourth, create the space and justification to engage in the socio-economic realm to exercise greater latitude in engaging with all countries as market forces may demand in contemporary times. Speaking in the context of Sri Lanka at an event organised by the LKI, former Sri Lanka Foreign Secretary H.M.G.S. Palihakkara observed that "the overarching challenge faced by Sri Lanka in its foreign relations is demonstrating that it is after tangible economic benefits and not "geopolitical mischief" in the Indian Ocean." Not only Sri Lanka but also other countries could draw from this challenge which needs to be addressed with different partners in different contexts.

Fifth, in the multilateral domain, given the rapidly changing dynamics and the vulnerabilities countries presently face on account of issues, both high-security and non-traditional security, such as climate change, human rights, and disaster management-related issues continue to be a preoccupation in the foreign policy calculus of

developing countries. Since they often get caught in the power politics such concerns need also to be addressed in the foreign policy mix. The final point (while operationalising) is the danger of one's territory being used by third parties which are regarded as a violation of normal diplomatic practices. In recent times, it has been a key concern for many small or middle-income countries.

Another issue is, in the face of mounting pressure in the ongoing power rivalry concerning the region, even on the occasions that countries have attempted to adopt a neutral approach, this has not been respected to a large extent. Rather, powerful countries have brought pressure to effectively engage in a 'zero-sum game'. How to overcome this 'zero-sum' push, through possibly the implementation of some verifiable measures will remain a major challenge to the foreign policy of the countries in the foreseeable future. Finally, how policymakers respond to the dramatic conceptual and institutional changes that are taking place at a broader level are crucial– some we must contend with, and others where we can seek to take advantage of that. He finally mentioned the current trajectory of organisations, such as BRICS which is related to broader global phenomena that have to be taken not simply as an inter-state issue but as a broader realm that also includes non-state actors, diasporas, and other parties together.

Barrister Nihad Kabir
President, Business Initiative Leading Development (BUILD)

Barrister Nihad Kabir expressed her gratitude for the invitation to this auspicious event. She emphasised a point that although Bangladesh's private sector views itself as a major driver of the economy, it often finds itself left out of geopolitical conversations. In this aspect, she shared her opinion that Bangladesh needs to focus on engaging with the diverse and resilient nations in the Indo-Pacific, even though the grouping may not be historically natural. She also stated that Bangladesh respects all countries involved in trade and commerce and does not want to be pushed into any geopolitical polarisation. She highlighted the country's challenges, such as its accommodation of 170 million people in a small geographic area and the existential threats of climate change or energy.

Barrister Kabir was critical of Bangladesh's peripheral role in regional strategies and policies despite its strategic location, large population, and rapid economic growth. She argued that Bangladesh should be central to regional initiatives, especially given assumptions that the country will become the 11th largest consumer economy within the next decade. She also pointed out that the Indo-Pacific region is increasingly becoming the global center of economic dynamism and strategic challenges, mentioning various statistics related to GDP, population, and poverty. She suggested that conversations should not be solely focused on military matters of national security, but also on economic and social stability.

In her conclusion, Barrister Kabir focused on the need for collaboration, partnership, and support from global and regional partners. She said Bangladesh is working hard on regional connectivity and for that, enhanced trade and economic partnerships are essential that will eventually sustain inclusive growth across the region.

OPEN DISCUSSION

Mr Hermanta Kharel
Chairman, Nepal Council of World Affairs, Nepal

Mr Hermanta Kharel, Chairman of the Nepal Council of World Affairs in Nepal, expressed his gratitude to the panelists and discussed the region from the perspective of Bangladesh. He noted that the overarching goal for countries in this region is prosperity, which he emphasised goes beyond economic or infrastructural development to encompass the well-being of people.

Mr Kharel listed several challenges faced by Bangladesh and other countries in the region. These include insufficient inflow of resources, poor health conditions, a lack of encouraging private sector investment, and high rates of unemployment among young people. Despite these challenges, he praised Bangladesh's proposed regional outlook as outstanding in concept, but difficult to implement. He pointed out that superpowers have competing interests in the region, often seeking to increase their influence rather than genuinely cooperate.

Mr Kharel concluded by highlighting the looming issue of drinking water scarcity in the region. He warned that within three to four decades, the region could face a major problem due to decreasing river flows and affecting both agriculture and production. To address this and other related issues, he emphasised the need for collaborative efforts aimed at regional development, particularly in the areas of connectivity and infrastructure.

Dr Swapan Dasgupta

Former Member of Parliament (MP), India

Dr Swapan Dasgupta, a former MP from India, shared his insights on the evolving dynamics between India and Bangladesh, particularly focusing on the economic and political aspects. According to Dr Dasgupta, the dialogue sometimes is in question since it is often dominated by diplomatic circles, leaving out key perspectives such as those from the business community and politicians.

Dr Swapan Dasgupta emphasised that politicians have unique perspectives, which can often differ from those of diplomats or academics. Drawing on his own political experience, he highlighted the monumental shift in India's attitude toward Bangladesh. He explained that this change is not only politically driven but also stems from Bangladesh's economic success, which is now viewed as complementary to India's economic growth.

Dr Dasgupta expressed his concern that economic cooperation has not taken a central role in broader bilateral discussions between the two nations, something he feels it as an urgent issue to address. He also noted the shift in India's focal points, where the relationship with Dhaka has moved from a Kolkata-centric orientation to involving other major Indian cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, or Bangalore. In his concluding remarks, Dr Dasgupta said that when it comes to building an Indo-Pacific community or looking at the Bay of Bengal, the emphasis should be on how best the two nations can complement each other economically.

Professor Dr Sujit Dutta

Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), India

Professor Dr Sujit Dutta from the VIF, India expressed gratitude for the invitation to speak and highlighted the uniqueness of the discussion's subject matter. He emphasised that one of the key challenges lies in addressing industrial issues through a common understanding and knowledge base.

Secondly, Professor Dutta argued that long-term stability in the region is critically dependent on peaceful coexistence among leading powers, who currently are not at peace with one another. He elaborated on the complexities of regional conflicts, global protocols, and the roles of various nations in shaping an inclusive approach. The professor highlighted that while many countries have historical ties that can help build leadership, the inherent competition among leading powers poses a significant challenge.

In the context of China, Professor Dutta felt that how China approaches many of these complex questions will be especially important to consider. He highlighted that while everyone needs China to some extent, understanding its position on various norms is difficult in some cases. Professor Dutta concluded by saying that structuring a politically and diversity-based order in the Indo-Pacific will require substantial work. This involves not just working on normative principles but also fostering new kinds of relationships among emerging powers. As economic power shifts, he emphasised that multilateral institutions would also need to be restructured, especially since health is a critically important issue in the region.

Air Cdre (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, ndc, psc

Treasurer, East West University

Air Cdre (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury from East West University raised two significant questions during his deliberation. First, he highlighted much of the discourses around the Indo-Pacific involve various projects, such as the Asian Highway, that directly or indirectly impact Bangladesh. He questioned how Bangladesh could overcome its isolation and become more integrated into the global community, specifically within both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region. He suggested that achieving this would positively impact the country's economy.

For his second question, Ishfaq Ilahi referred to the observations made by Dr Swapan Dasgupta about the evolving relationship between India and Bangladesh. He pointed out that just a few years ago, the dialogue was centered around the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in India and the issue of Bangladeshi infiltrators. However, due to Bangladesh's economic progress, the narrative has changed dramatically. Now, Chief Ministers from Indian states like Tripura and Assam are actively exploring how to utilise Bangladesh's cuisine and communication facilities.

Air Cdre Ilahi concluded by stating that while India remains important to Bangladesh, the latter has become increasingly significant to India, particularly given the geopolitical dynamics involving China. He emphasised that the relationships between Bangladesh and India have gained more momentum, especially in the context of Bangladesh's growing economic and strategic relevance.

Professor Dr Shahab Enam Khan
Department of International Relations (IR) and Head of Bangladesh Centre for Indo-pacific Affairs (BCIPA), Jahangirnagar University

Dr Shahab Enam Khan from Jahangirnagar University stated that the discussion raised in the seminar was indeed interesting and timely. He first emphasised the need to broaden the scope of the dialogue to include Myanmar, as pointed out by Air Cdre (Retd.) Ishfaq Ilahi. Professor Khan argued that without involving Myanmar, it would be challenging to address the economic and security interests of Bangladesh effectively.

Dr Khan identified two main problems in the Indo-Pacific. The first issue is that the security concerns of different countries cannot be overlooked. That is, harmonisation among countries concerning security matters is necessary. The second issue he raised is the economic growth trajectory that the countries are going through at present. He opined that this should be a focus for future discussions. He expressed optimism, noting that the presence of various stakeholders at the discussion indicated a willingness to look beyond security issues towards developing partnerships.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Khan highlighted the importance of enhancing regional economic systems, which he saw as lacking. He pointed out that intra-regional trade is still low and called for tangible solutions to improve it from 5 per cent to 10 per cent over the next five years.

Ambassador Farooq Sobhan

Ambassador to China and High Commissioner to India and Distinguished Fellow and Board Member of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)

Ambassador Farooq Sobhan, who serves as the Ambassador to China and High Commissioner to India, shared several thoughts during the discussion. He emphasised the importance of focusing on trade and economic cooperation within the context of the IPO. Ambassador Sobhan noted that geopolitical dynamics, involving key players like the USA, India, and China have had a significant impact on global trade and investments.

Ambassador Sobhan also pointed out some key challenges that have been further compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, which have added stress to economic groupings. He then called for fresh efforts within the Indo-Pacific framework to address these issues and suggested some new initiatives that are needed now more than ever. He suggested strengthening interactions and cooperation between governments and the private sector to meet the existing challenges. The Ambassador identified the G20 as a potential platform where new initiatives could be discussed. Finally, he mentioned the need to address existing tensions that stand in the way of economic progress and development and called for efforts to bridge the gaps and reduce tensions.

Ms Pema Tshoki
Researcher, The Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research (CBS), Bhutan

Ms Pema Tshoki from CBS, Bhutan shared her perspective, emphasising Bhutan's outlook on the Indo-Pacific. She remarked that prosperity and resilience are significantly influenced by the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), rather than just GDP. She described how the Bhutanese People value a safe and supportive community characterised by high trustworthiness and minimal fear of victimisation. Ms Tshoki expressed her hope that Indo-Pacific countries would aim for similar levels of trust and security among themselves to promote a free and peaceful region. She also touched upon the pillars guiding Bhutan, which include preservation, governance, cultural reconstruction, environmental conservation, and sports governance. Given the economic uncertainties caused by the pandemic, she mentioned that Bhutan is focused on stabilising its economy. The country is particularly dependent on a few sectors for foreign revenue, with hydropower being one of those segments. Although renewable energy like hydropower has a lesser environmental impact, its sustainability and resilience have been challenging, especially in achieving the target of 10,000 megawatts (MW) of electricity set in 2020 due to geological, administrative, financial, and other related issues.

Ms Tshoki further stated that climate change has put Bhutan in a vulnerable position, affecting its economy, security, and prosperity. However, the country is actively seeking both domestic and international solutions to these problems. She closed her remarks by highlighting the interconnectedness of nations, particularly neighbours, and advocated for collective efforts to address mutual challenges. She reiterated Bhutan's commitment to improving relations with Bangladesh and fostering high-level exchanges with other neighboring countries of the Indo-Pacific.

Dr Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan
American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB)

Dr Zahid Khan from AIUB posed a question concerning the dynamics of multilateralism in international forums, particularly in the context of Asian politics. He mentioned his experience of working with business partners in Japan and delved into the complexity of academic studies focusing on inclusive multilateralism. He found evidence of international alignment or misalignment on various issues.

According to Dr Khan, in a study covering voting behavior at the UN between 2017 and the present, Bangladesh voted against the USA in 69 per cent of around 1300 resolutions. Both India and China's voting alignment with Bangladesh ranged between 2 to 4 per cent, while Russia's was around 14 per cent. Despite these statistics, Russia's stance on the Rohingya issue diverges from that of Bangladesh, which views it as a national security concern. Similarly, on certain matters like regional positions and disarmament resolutions, Bangladesh finds itself in contrasting positions with other nations.

Dr Khan questioned the prospects for inclusive multilateralism in this geopolitical landscape. More specifically, he wondered about the specific strategies at times when the international platforms serve to polarise nations further, allowing powerful countries to dictate the rules at the expense of smaller nations. That is, the core inquiry was whether real-world data reflecting countries' positions in a multilateral setting would contribute to fostering a more inclusive form of multilateralism or perpetuate a system that reinforces existing power dynamics.

RESPONSE FROM THE PANELIST

Professor Dr Hideaki Shinoda
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan

Professor Dr Hideaki Shinoda addressed various points concerning Bangladesh's role in the Indo-Pacific, the Rohingya crisis, and the ongoing political turmoil in Myanmar. He acknowledged Bangladesh's significant contributions to alleviating the Rohingya crisis and expressed Japan's willingness to support the efforts. He noted that while international stability has been somewhat maintained due to Bangladesh's efforts, the crisis remains unresolved.

In 2021, a further destabilising event occurred in Myanmar, worsening the already complicated political landscape. Professor Shinoda mentioned that ASEAN has taken the lead in dealing with the immediate political situation in Myanmar. Although Japan does not claim to play a significant role, he suggested that the country would be happy to contribute if an opportunity arises.

Professor Shinoda then moved his focus to academic partnerships, stating that while Japan maintains strong academic ties with European and North American institutions, there is potential for greater academic cooperation with Bangladesh. He pointed out that multilateralism could be further promoted through enhanced partnerships between these two countries, especially in the context of the Indo-Pacific and the crises in Myanmar.

REMARKS BY THE MODERATOR

Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury

Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury who was the moderator of this session expressed his gratitude for the expert comments raised from the floor and offered a perspective shift concerning countries like Nepal and Bhutan. Rather than viewing them as 'landlocked' nations, he suggested that they should be considered 'land-linked,' given their use of ports in neighboring countries such as India. The moderator also acknowledged the valuable points made by the penalists about Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in this session.

Ambassador Chowdhury thanked Dr Dasgupta from India for his relevant points, especially in terms of improving connectivity between the two countries. He also emphasised the importance of addressing issues on the ground level, mentioning the case of an elderly Bangladeshi woman who had to carry her suitcase across no man's land before entering India. This, according to him, highlighted the need for making improvements in cross-border movement and making connectivity truly seamless.

After India, the moderator then commented on Mynamar, another neighbouring country of Bangladesh. He underlined that Myanmar must play a role if it wishes to become a part of the Indo-Pacific community. He noted that even ASEAN member countries have found it challenging to engage with Myanmar and expressed hope that the situation would change, allowing her to become an active participant in regional discussions.

Ambassador Chowdhury then thanked Ms Tshoki from Bhutan for sharing her insights and specifically acknowledged the deep and mutually beneficial relationships between Bangladesh and Bhutan. The moderator also mentioned Bhutan's Prime Minister's educational history in Bangladesh, emphasising the enduring contributions to the relationship between the two nations. The discussion ended with the moderator stressing Bangladesh's focus on public diplomacy. He noted the importance of media engagement across the Indo-Pacific region as a significant input into policymaking and expressed gratitude to all panelists for their insightful comments on this aspect.

WORKING SESSION – II: **INCLUSIVE SECURITY FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Remarks by the Moderator

Ambassador Ahmad Tariq Karim
Director, Center for Bay of Bengal Studies, Independent University, Bangladesh

After introducing the five distinguished panelists, the moderator of the session Ambassador Ahmad Tariq Karim took the opportunity to share some of his thoughts on Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook. He stated that it is important to understand why or how this outlook evolved. It is necessary to understand the frame of mind that led Bangladesh to say that this is what we are and this is how we look at the world. Understanding that would provide the best explanation regarding why this is called an outlook. Ambassador Karim observed that people may call the Indo-Pacific Outlook a strategy or policy but this is basically both strategy and policy. This is how Bangladesh is looking at the issue.

Ambassador Karim shared that the transformation of Bangladesh from a 'basket case' in 1971 to the 35th largest economy in the world today signifies its imperative. Bangladesh's development has been largely export-driven

and dependent on one major item but now it is diversifying. He reminded the audience that 90 percent of global trade uses maritime routes. Of the total maritime trade flow, 80 percent flows through the Indian Ocean, of which about 40 percent goes through the Bay of Bengal. This is relevant to Bangladesh. As Bangladesh is an export-driven economy, it needs to have its own channels of communication, trade and interlocution. So, it is very important for Bangladesh to have open connectedness in the Indo-Pacific.

Ambassador Karim highlighted that Bangladesh understands the importance of sustaining economic growth at home. As almost 50 percent of the nearly 170 million people are young and aged between 18 to 40, Bangladesh needs to work for job creation. It also needs to ensure a favourable climate for investment. For that, Bangladesh needs to build on its own geolocation at the Bay of Bengal.

Next, Ambassador Karim shared his insights on the Indo-Pacific routes. The Indo-Pacific route goes from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific through the Strait of Malacca. This is where the vital importance of the Bay of Bengal comes in. Bangladesh is at the epicenter of the Bay of Bengal and the Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh is now waking up to its own strategic importance. It has awoken to the need for developing internally to build resilience. In order to do that, Bangladesh does not wish the Bay of Bengal or the Indo-Pacific region to become an arena of contestation which will disturb Bangladesh's requirement for peace, development and progress. This frame of mind explains why and how Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook has been shaped.

At this stage of the remarks, the moderator of the session shared his thoughts on the geopolitical landscape. He stated that the reason why Bangladesh survived from 1971 to today is because it laid the fundamental principles of its foreign policy in dealing with other countries in those early days and has been following those till now. Ambassador Karim observed that when the country was born, the world was divided and in turmoil to a large extent. The world is still divided today, perhaps more divided and turbulent than it was earlier. However, in those times, Bangladesh's immediate neighbourhood i.e., Afghanistan and Myanmar were peaceful. Now both countries which are neighbours to the east and west are imploding. The Middle East was in turmoil then, and it is still today. East Asia had problems then, but it still has today. So, Bangladesh cannot deviate from the policy that helped the country survive those early periods and reach where it is now. It cannot deviate and get into problems by being under pressure from various powers. Bangladesh has to develop its own internal resilience to be able to stand up with them. Therefore, development, economic development, trade and investment are of fundamental importance. In this context, the Indo-Pacific is important for Bangladesh and thus it wants to maintain a multilateral region. The principles have been laid out very clearly. There are contestations and Ambassador Karim anticipated that these will increase. However, Bangladesh has friendly relations with the countries engaged in contestations and it does not want to become part of that contestations. Bangladesh has relations with each of them on its own stand and it does not want anyone to bring their contestations inside the country.

On the topic of strengthening cooperation, Ambassador Karim stated that as all countries of the region are dependent on the seas, it is the compulsion of each nation to further strengthen regional cooperation in the interest of security. Here security in a non-traditional sense is emphasised. Sustainable harvesting of the blue economy is also essential as the oceanic ecosystem is very fragile. As a Bay of Bengal littoral, Bangladesh is acutely aware of it. Addressing this issue could be one area to start cooperation. He also reflected on the ecological risks in the Bay of Bengal which should be a powerful impulse for the regional countries to come together because everybody is going to suffer.

Regarding the need for maintaining peace in the region, Ambassador Karim stated that Bangladesh's contribution to peace is certainly a factor that is impelled by the necessity that without peace countries cannot develop. This is why Bangladesh is one of the biggest contributors to the peacekeeping system. Regarding multilateralism, Ambassador Karim shared that Bangladesh is engaged and playing a role in shaping it. Bangladesh's infrastructure projects laid out by China are not a zero-sum game. The railway link of the Padma multipurpose bridge is being built by China. But the bridge is not a dead end. It makes Bangladesh's cost of production, travel and everything much more competitive. So, Bangladesh is trying to act as a bridge between the different players, not just the big ones but also the middle and rising ones.

Regarding the role of middle powers, Ambassador Karim emphasised that the power they have is the power of their ideas. He said that the middle powers seem to be forming a wave that is based on mutual interests. Emerging middle powers are also part of the wave. Many of these countries do not like to be forced into taking sides. This is driving them towards a point where perhaps a new type of multilateralism is emerging. A new configuration of the world order can emerge out of this.

Ambassador Karim shared that Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook is not different from its fundamental foreign policy principles. It just has a new dimension and a new location. Bangladesh has been playing the same balancing game for the last 50 years and it cannot afford to play any other game. He is positive that the details of the Indo-Pacific Outlook will be fleshed out after taking note of all opinions coming from this seminar. This will be ultimately driven by the national interest. It is to be seen how Bangladesh's national interests coexist with competing national interests or complementary national interests. Ambassador Karim concluded by saying that Bangladesh has always been a regional player. It believes in regional security for its own interest as well as for others.

REMARKS BY THE PANELISTS

Admiral Karambir Singh, PVSM, AVSM, IN (Retd)
Chairman, National Maritime Foundation, India

Admiral Karambir Singh, PVSM, AVSM, IN (Retd) started his discussion with the commonalities between Bangladesh's IPO and India's vision of Sagar (Security and Growth for All in the Region). The IPO stresses stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific as being crucial to Bangladesh in achieving its Vision 2041 goal of being a developed country. India too sees SAGAR as absolutely critical to it for becoming a US$ 5 trillion economy by 2025 and a developed country by 2047. He emphasised that stability and prosperity, especially in the seas, are crucial for aspirational nations such as India and Bangladesh, which are so heavily dependent on the seas for trade, resources, energy and flow of commerce. In this connection, he informed that almost 95 percent of India's trade volume flows through the seas while for Bangladesh the share is approximately 90 percent.

Admiral Singh opined that stress on adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is very aptly brought out in the IPO of Bangladesh. He argued that both Bangladesh and India stand on a firm footing, given that both have resolved the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) issues through international arbitration. He compared that to the explosive situation in the South China Sea (SCS), where the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling has been disregarded and the principle of 'might is right' prevails. However, he noted that Bangladesh, Myanmar and India need to show the same maturity when resolving the Continental Shelf issues in the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS).

He finds Bangladesh's IPO's statement on regional and international cooperation as encouraging. He said that regional cooperation has an important bearing on regional security. He recalled that during the Presidentship of the Bangladesh Navy at the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a lot of good work was done. To him, the maiden IONS Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) exercise was a great success. Similarly, Bangladesh's active involvement in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for

Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Colombo Security Conclave and others adds to its already high credibility in the area of regional and international cooperation.

He then appreciated the mention of SDG 14 in Bangladesh's IPO. He said that it was very refreshing to see a mention of the SDG 14 goal in the IPO which to his mind is something of great importance. He goes on to say that if one wishes to leverage the true potential of the blue economy for growth and development, there is a need to turn to sustainable exploitation of the seas. In this respect, the enunciation of Bangladesh's Delta Plan 2100 and India's Maritime India Vision 2030 are important steps. The two countries can additionally cooperate on making robust Marine Spatial Plans (MSP) as mandated by the SDG as well as cooperate in sharing best practices in Marine Spatial Data Infrastructure (MSDI), where India's National Hydrographic Office has good expertise.

Admiral Singh remarked that Bangladesh's IPO envisions a free, open, peaceful, secure and inclusive Indo-Pacific, which is almost identical to India's vision of a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific. He added that both countries have put emphasis on the term 'inclusive', which is extremely important because it is crucial for aspiring for collective growth. This, according to him, truly is the essence of SAGAR. Here he quoted India's Minister of External Affairs Dr S. Jaishankar: "India will grow with others, not alone".

While talking about the challenges of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, Admiral Singh said that even under normal circumstances, ensuring free and open oceans does not happen on its own. But of late, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine conflict and the ensuing financial crisis, several flash points especially in the Indo-Pacific– all exacerbated by fierce geopolitical confrontation have left no country untouched. He underscored that it is the less resilient developing economies that are really feeling the brunt of these geopolitical confrontations which are putting them in the danger of internal strife and geo-economic coercion. Free and open seas that have been underwritten, and are crucial to the common prosperity, are in danger of being converted into contested, closed seas which is the very antithesis of prosperity. He mentioned the examples of the Black Sea and the South China Sea in this regard.

Admiral Singh then shared his observations regarding what nations need to do amidst the great power contestation in the region. He opined that the nations need to exist and compete in the reality of an uncertain world without getting stuck into the ongoing negative spiral of great power contestation of the Cold War mentality, that sometimes drowns out rationality. He said that to address the challenges posed by the ongoing problems, there is a need to redouble the efforts to cooperate, communicate, collaborate and connect even more closely. And ideas for these 4Cs must flow unchecked, whether through bilateral, mini-laterals, multi-laterals, partnerships, or issue-based convergences. All these interactions, engender trust and even greater convergences which is a virtuous cycle of engagement that could prove an effective antidote to confrontation. He emphasised that as a team, there is a need to knit the region through genuine capacity building and capability enhancement. Besides, there is a need to help build collective maritime competence in the region. This will help find regional solutions to regional challenges and also help avoid schisms that an inimical power could exploit. To him, whilst doing so, the language of development resonates better than the language of contestation.

He then identified several avenues where there is a possibility of collaboration to strengthen maritime security. He, however, emphasised that to utilize those avenues, there is the need to acquire habits of cooperation. His first example of the avenue of cooperation is the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) which, with seven areas of common interest like maritime security, marine ecology, capacity building and resource sharing, etc., offers opportunities for collaboration. Several countries have taken the lead in these seven pillars. Under the UKs leadership, a study is going on to set up Centre of Excellence on various facets of maritime security in different nations of the region. He opined that Bangladesh would be an ideal location for one such Centre of Excellence.

The second example he referred to was the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) which offers an opportunity to share information on IUU fishing by connecting Information Fusion Centers (IFCs) in the region. This initiative will help keep the oceans more transparent and help modify the behaviour of anyone transgressing the UNCLOS. He suggested deputing an International Liaison Officer (ILO) by Bangladesh to the IFC IOR to appreciate the potential of initiatives like the IPMDA. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) was his third example of useful cooperative initiative for responsible capacity building. Fourth example was BIMSTEC, which is 25 years old and finally has a charter, as an excellent engine for regional growth and development. He remarked that BIMSTEC needs to be further energised, with the inclusion of Maritime security in its ambit. Fifthly, he referred to the Green Shipping Network of the QUAD, dedicated to decarbonising the shipping value chain, as an example of a collaborative effort that promotes climate change-friendly connectivity in furtherance of global public goods. The final mention was the BIG-B (Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Corridor) which has also great potential. He opined that if Bangladesh, Japan and India could collaborate to, for example, connect the envisioned dry port in North East India with the Matarbari Port, it would be a win-win proposition for all.

In conclusion, Admiral Singh remarked that today's complex geopolitical landscape presents several challenges; such as great power rivalry, divergent perceptions on key security issues, the intransigence of some in accepting a consensual approach and the lack of capability and capacity among some important stakeholders in the region. The maritime domain is well suited to overcome these challenges because the seas unite, not divide. On the other hand, considering the wide expanse, complexity, and transnational nature of challenges at sea, no country can do it alone. The maritime domain therefore could become the medium to lead the region and indeed the world out of the present situation through cooperation, communication, collaboration and connectivity. He noted that connecting trade routes, infrastructure, institutions, and most importantly people and ideas, is sure to create an enabling network, conducive to promoting peace and prosperity in these difficult times.

Dr Iqbal Singh Sevea
Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

Dr Iqbal Singh Sevea initiated his remarks by giving an overview of research works carried out by his institute at the National University of Singapore. He shared that their work is focused on analysing developments in contemporary South Asia and Bangladesh. In the past, the institute had examined developments within Bangladesh as well as Bangladesh's relations with other countries in the South Asian region and beyond. Sustainability and climate change are also some of the issues that they look at in relation to Bangladesh. The institute recently published an analysis of Bangladesh's contributions to the United Nations peacekeeping forces. The institute also analyses issues including the development of ideas and conceptions around the Indo-Pacific and also the concerns around it in some parts of the Indo-Pacific or the Asia-Pacific, whichever category is used. The institute has been looking at these issues for some time as it can relate to it particularly, given the fact that it is located in Southeast Asia. It is no secret that number of countries in ASEAN have some trepidation concern or different sort of approaches towards the concept of the Indo-Pacific. So the topic of discussion of this panel relates very well with some of the issues his institute has been looking at a broader angle.

After the introductory remarks, Dr Sevea briefly discussed how Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook emerged. He stated that over the recent years, there have been attempts to persuade, push, pull and pressure Bangladesh to take one position or the other with regards to the Indo-Pacific concept. It is interesting to note that the rhetoric sometimes used by the great powers has at times contrasted security and development. Bangladesh has always taken a position where it has to make its decisions with regard to the development agenda. Dr Singh found the theme and keyword related to development and inclusiveness very relatable.

Then Dr Sevea focused on increased accentuated sense of concern over the future of multilateralism. He said that in today's world, there are shifts in the multilateral, mini-lateral and plurilateral environment. In the Indo-Pacific region itself, there is a new sort of architecture. A crowded institutional landscape appears to be visible where some of these institutions can compete but can also complement. There can be an opportunity for alignment as well. Looking ahead, the future of the Indo-Pacific is not just about the great powers. There are a number of middle powers, regional powers, aspiring superpowers, potential superpowers, etc., whichever category is preferred. But there are a few things that are increasingly important within the Indo-Pacific region for countries

like India, Japan, Canada, France, UK and even the European Union. This is where a country like Bangladesh has an opportunity to leverage a line or draw upon as it charts its path as well.

He then discussed how the IPO of Bangladesh signifies both balancing and agency. According to him, there seems to be a general agreement that the Indo-Pacific outlook does not signify a break from other trajectories of Bangladesh's Foreign policy. As an example, he mentioned Article 25 of the Bangladesh constitution, i.e., foreign policy should be guided by principles of non-interference, peaceful coexistence and respect for international laws. This approach can be seen as an attempt at some stage to balance between the great powers on this issue. But he noticed that within this balancing, there exists an opportunity for the exercise of agency.

He expressed that the core of the discussion is how to exercise this agency. Here he quoted the Indo-Pacific Outlook's call for the establishment of rules-based multilateral systems to promote equitable and sustainable development. Dr Sevea emphasised that the 's' used in 'multilateral systems' signifies plurality which is important. This is not the same language used by other countries for instance, which calls for rules-based order and systems. This leads to the question regarding who gets to set the norms, who gets to set the rules, who rules, etc. Thus, it signifies balancing and having an agency at the same time. He remarked that the outlook itself and the evolving geopolitical and geo-economic landscape allow for greater agency for Bangladesh.

Afterwards, he shed light on the middle power issue. He said that though the evolving multilateral situation can give a very bleak view to many, one could also see those smaller states (here smaller states is used only in the relative term as Bangladesh is not seen as a small state) are having a greater chance to negotiate, get a deal, position themselves, negotiate their own standing even in this fragmenting or realigning global arena. This is where the middle powers play an important goal. In this regard, Japan is very important for Bangladesh and also for the future of the multilateral environment in Indo-Pacific.

Dr Sevea highlighted the priorities listed within Bangladesh's outlook. To him, it is clear from the document that Bangladesh's prioritisation is not about security issues, but about economic issues. In this connection he mentioned about blue economy which is another area where the economic benefits are emphasised rather than security benefits. This is seen in BIMSTEC as well. He commented that it would be interesting to see how the Indo-Pacific outlook would play out going ahead because if Bangladesh can focus on the economic agenda and develop a sort of architecture around this, it would move from just taking sides to actually reshaping some aspect of this regional arena as well.

Then he compared Bangladesh's outlook with ASEAN. He shared that ASEAN has been somewhat ambivalent with regard to the Indo-Pacific. He shared that ASEAN is going to host the first Indo-Pacific Forum in Indonesia where the focus will be on green infrastructure, resilient supply chains, digital transformation, creative economy and sustainable and innovative financing. Its four areas of priorities are maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and economic cooperation. In other words, the focus is on developing infrastructure as well as on setting the norms.

Dr Sevea drew parallel between the two approaches and expressed that both ASEAN and Bangladesh do not approach the Indo-Pacific as one unified region with one set of multilateral institutions which are ascribed to by everybody. Rather, both see the existence of regional groupings within the Indo-Pacific that overlap at times. He felt that this approach is going to be important while looking ahead. He shared that if one looks at the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum, it can be found that there is a concerted effort to bring the private sphere in. In ASEAN, there is private sector, public sector, as well as state-owned enterprises to discuss this issue. This is quite interesting because this shifts the agenda more towards the economic sphere.

At this point, Dr Sevea referred back to his point on the blue economy and elaborated on his thoughts. He shared that it is no surprise that the blue economy is very important to Bangladesh. The country has a 720-kilometer coastline, fishing and aquaculture industries which is a major contributor to Bangladesh's economy. Bangladesh is ranked third globally in fish extraction from open water bodies and ranked high in aquaculture as well. By 2043, it is estimated that Bangladesh will handle more than 124 million tons of cargo. He noted that all of this is contingent on freedom of navigation which requires implementation agreement to implement UNCLOS and also on norms and standard setting with regards to the blue economy. The discussions need to focus not just on things that are being already done in the blue economy, but on things that can be done in this sector. Deep sea mining is one of these issues here. Now we know that there is potential for Sulphur and other forms of critical minerals in the waters of Bangladesh. These are issues in which participation in the Indo-Pacific is going to be beneficial for Bangladesh. Bangladesh has an opportunity to be part of establishing the norms as well.

He went on to say that Bangladesh's imagination of the Indo-Pacific will be important as well because there are different ideas about this. For the South Asian region, for instance, the West Indian Ocean is incredibly important whereas from the US perspective, that is not necessarily the case. In this issue of the imagination of the Indo-Pacific and how these regional architectures are going to map onto each other, Bangladesh has an important role to play. If one looks at the Indo-Pacific, one can see that Bangladesh is located as a hub in terms of maritime connectivity. This brings the issue of Matarbari port and its connectivity. For Japan, the Matarbari port is not about Bangladesh but about connectivity towards India and elsewhere. If one looks at the region on an expanded scale, Bangladesh is an important hub of the Indo-Pacific, not just for the waters but also for the inland areas as well.

Mr Michael Kugelman

Director, South Asia Institute, Wilson Center, Washington, DC

Mr Michael Kugelman, Director, South Asia Institute, Wilson Center, started with situating the Indo-Pacific Outlook against the backdrop of intensifying great power competition in South Asia in general and Bangladesh in particular. He commented that at present Bangladesh and its neighbours are witnessing an intense geopolitical moment where there are rapidly growing risks of getting caught up in geopolitical rivalry. He cautioned that for Bangladesh, it is important not to get walked into zero-sum geopolitical polarisation narratives.

He then focused on the great power competitions in the region. He observed that Bangladesh and the region have become battlegrounds for three great power competitions – India-China, US-China and US-Russia competitions. Among them, he identified the India-China competition as the most enduring one which arguably was intensified since the deadly border clash three years ago. He further noted that tensions are high between New Delhi and Beijing; hence the stakes of their competition have increased.

He then discussed the US-China competition which, according to him, probably has never been as sharp as it is now. He argued that the US has come in from cold in South Asia; its presence is now more evident than it has been in quite some time. The US is increasing high-level engagements with countries across the region, beyond the usual suspense of India and Pakistan, which had been part of the default focus for the last few decades. He argued that at a time when there's no more war in Afghanistan, Washington's motivation for stepping up engagement in South Asia is to ensure that the US has enough relationships with most countries of the region except Afghanistan. Through building good relationships with most countries in South Asia, the US wants to ensure that the countries do not become completely dependent economically on China.

The discussion on the US-China competition was followed by a discussion on the US-Russia competition. Mr Kugelman identified the latter as the newest entrant to this recent phase of geopolitical competition in South Asia. This competition, he observed, emerged since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Biden administration, he highlights, is aware that Russia has no enemy and has a few friends in South Asia. It is aware of Russia's considerable soft power and cultural influence in parts of South Asia. It is also mindful that half of the SAARC

countries have one-time or other abstained from UN resolutions condemning the invasion by Russia. In this circumstance, the US has sought to urge countries in the region to take a stronger stand against Russia.

Mr Kugelman then delved into the discussion on flashpoints in the region. He argued that South Asia has started seeing flash points for great power competition around the region of which he highlighted a few. He started with Nepal where just in the previous week, the government ratified a new infrastructure grant from the Millennium Challenge Cooperation (MCC) of the US which has been identified as a part of the US' Indo-Pacific Policy. Nepal's parliament had refused to ratify it for five years fearing that through this Nepal would get dragged into US-China competition. The country, however, eventually relented and finalised the grants. Mr Kugelman noticed that since Nepal approved the grants from the MCC, China has picked up the pace of its efforts in Nepal and recently it signed some new agreements to accelerate existing BRI projects in Nepal.

He then drew attention to Myanmar where China and Russia and to a lesser extent, India are sending arms to the army. According to him, India might be doing it, in part to ensure that Miramar does not become overly dependent on Beijing. Thus, great power competition is empowering the Myanmar military with potentially destabilising implications for native countries, like Bangladesh as well as ironically India.

Following the case of Myanmar, he elaborated on the case of Pakistan which, he believed was a slightly different case. He observed that Islamabad has a deep alliance with Beijing and the Biden administration has sought to counter China modestly and perhaps unsuccessfully by preaching alternate forms of infrastructure investments through the development finance corporation and new entity associated with the Indo-Pacific policy. But he argues that it is the US-Russia rivalry, not the US-China rivalry that has made Pakistan a flash point recently. He explained that the US administration's discontent with Imran Khan's decision to travel to Moscow on the day of the invasion of Ukraine had led to some sharp words from a senior US official in a conversation with Pakistan's

ambassador in the US. And that led to a major crisis when based on that conversation, Imran Khan accused the US for playing a role in his coming down from power.

Mr Kugelman then focused on the geopolitical challenges of Bangladesh. He referred to the case of the Russian ship bearing parts for the Russia-funded Rooppur nuclear power plant which was turned away under the objection of the US. He presented the case as an example of how intensifying great power rivalry is playing out in a region with many non-aligned governments, including Bangladesh. He argues that in the region Bangladesh will face increasing challenges in balancing its relations with the four players– the US, China, India, and Russia. He, however, commended Bangladesh's balancing efforts which so far have been carried out successfully.

Then he discussed the Indo-Pacific outlook of Bangladesh. He identifies the document as a careful signal of Bangladesh's commitment to balanced relations with competing powers. He observes that the document highlights key principles of Bangladesh's foreign policy. From the document, he focused on some notable principles and words for example– open and free Indo-Pacific, which are the catchwords found in the US Indo-Pacific policy. He also highlighted some other principles that have often been articulated by China expressing its views about international relations principles, like not interfering with sovereignty and so on. He also drew attention to the name of the document– it is an outlook; it is neither a policy nor a strategy. The name 'outlook' gives the document a softer connotation signaling perhaps to certain audiences that it is not actually a formal Indo-Pacific strategy much like the one that the US and many of its allies and partners have come out with.

In conclusion, he posed some questions regarding the future direction of geopolitical developments in the world as well as in the region. He wondered whether there could be a tipping point for Bangladesh and other non-aligned governments of the region that would put their balancing policy to the test. What if China invades Taiwan? What if Russia expands its war to a NATO country like Poland? Though Mr Kugelman avoided making any assumptions about the answers to these questions, he pointed out that in such cases, there is a chance that Bangladesh and other countries of the region, could come under new unprecedented pressure from the US and its Western allies to take stronger positions against China and Russia. He concluded by cautioning about discounting these scenarios that he thinks could put the balancing policies of Bangladesh and other non-aligned states in the region to a very big test.

Dr David Brewster
Senior Research Fellow, National Security College, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Canberra

Dr David Brewster talked about how Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook could or should be an important step in repositioning its original posture reflecting its emergence as an important middle power in the Indo-Pacific. He noted that since independence Bangladesh has understandably focused almost exclusively on internal development and the problems of its immediate neighborhood. But, he argued, as the country develops to become a large middle-income state, there is not only the opportunity but indeed the imperative to take a more active role in a broader region; in particular to take a more active role in shaping the strategic environment in a way that suits Bangladesh. He strongly suggested that rather than just becoming a receiver of whatever is happening in the broader strategic environment, Bangladesh might endeavour to be proactive in shaping the strategic environment, supporting international norms and thereby playing an important role in regional stability.

Dr Brewstar then briefly discussed the history of the Indo-Pacific concept. Recalling the history of 15 years back, he highlighted the pioneering role of Japan among the countries that were initially pushing the Indo-Pacific concept. He referred to the speech of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the Indian parliament in 2007 which was enthusiastically taken up by Australia and the latter became the first country in the world to officially endorse the Indo-Pacific concept. He highlighted that it was the big powers that were slower in taking up the concept of Indo-Pacific. He argued that when China, adopted its One Belt One Road initiative (later renamed as BRI in 2014), that was its concept of the Indo-Pacific which is basically connecting the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions in a manner that benefited it. And then India and later, the United States during 2016-2018 adopted the Indo-Pacific as their concept of this part of the world.

From this brief history of the Indo-Pacific concept, Dr Brewstar derived an important lesson that oftentimes, it is the middle powers that come out as norm entrepreneurs and actively shape the strategic environment to benefit their own interests. Japan and Australia were fast to embrace the idea of Indo-Pacific because both found the concept to be beneficial to them. He went on to say that even though the big powers may have material power, it is often the middle or lesser powers that can wheel the power of ideas and the power of ideas is often much stronger than material power.

While describing the background of Bangladesh's IPO, Dr Brewstar recognised that the countries who have put forward the concept of Indo-Pacific, have rather different perceptions of what the Indo-Pacific is about depending on their own history, geography or economics. There is no particular standard or document designed in a way so as to be perceived by every country as suitable for their own histories or interests. Therefore, countries and even organisations are now adopting their own versions of the Indo-Pacific, whether it be France or ASEAN or other European countries, or IORA for example. It is in this context that Bangladesh has also adopted its own outlook towards the Indo-Pacific

Dr Brewstar opined that the IPO of Bangladesh inevitably focuses on economic development as it should be. Reminding the importance of international laws, he commended the IPO's particular focus on UNCLOS– an important international law. In this connection, he reemphasized the importance of middle powers coming from their willingness and ability to make statements that support international norms. He further emphasised that mentioning about international norms in statements is crucial for their existence. He gave some examples of such norms which, he believes, needs to be iterated and reiterated in statements. For example, there is a need to state– it is not okay for a large country to invade and a smaller neighbor. It is not okay for a large country to lay planes to vast amounts of international waters, for its own purposes. It is only by standing up and stating these rather self-evident facts that force is given to international norms.

He then focused on the emerging web of middle powers in the more multipolar region of the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, over the last 10 years or more, middle powers are developing partnerships with other middle powers. While some of them reflect traditional alignments, others are very much new and non-traditional alignments. For example, Australia has focused on building middle-power partnerships with countries like Japan and France as well as with Indonesia to which Australia has not been historically closely aligned. He enthusiastically hopes that in coming years, there could be a much closer partnership between Australia and Bangladesh reflecting their sharing interests, for example in shared maritime space.

Dr Brewstar stated that these partnerships are certainly not alliances even in any sense. Rather, they are reflections of shared interests and mutual interest to take action to protect these shared interests. To him, the growing web of middle-power partnerships is extremely important for a number of reasons. It gives the middle powers the opportunity to group together and talk about what their interests are and how they should be furthered. Also in coming years, they are expected to play an important role in mitigating some of the more adverse effects of major power competitions. They will act on some actions in a way that some of the bigger powers might otherwise take; they will provide voices for caution and potential moderation.

Finally, he drew attention to one important gap in Bangladesh's IPO. Although the document provides a valuable listing of objectives and principles that Bangladesh would like to see in the Indo-Pacific, the roadmap of how Bangladesh is going to achieve those is missing in the document. He concluded by saying that he would like to see Bangladesh as a confident and strong country not being afraid to identify itself as an emerging middle power right across the Indo-Pacific and is willing in conjunction with partners to take, whatever actions are appropriate to achieve its objectives and principles.

Professor Dr Lailufar Yasmin
Chairman, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Professor Dr Lailufar Yasmin, Chairman, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka started her presentation with a quote from Aristotle: "There are three sorts of people: those who are alive, those who are dead and those who are at sea". She remarked that the sea has become significant in this maritime century. The Maldivians are living underneath the water whereas Kiribati is the first country in the world to purchase land from Fiji in 2014 to ensure the survival of its people and its nation. She then highlighted several characteristics of Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook.

She highlighted that regarding Indo-Pacific, Bangladesh has always emphasised inclusive growth and development. She informed that so far, thirteen countries of the world have laid out Indo-Pacific strategies and outlooks. She drew attention to the fact that among the strategies and outlooks, inclusivity has been mentioned by Bangladesh and France only. Thus, Bangladesh envisions a free, open, peaceful, secure and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

She then elaborated on the meaning of inclusive security. She said that in the world of today's complex interdependence, there cannot be a division between traditional and non-traditional security threats. Their differences are blurring so fast that challenges are emerging from different spheres. She gave the example of COVID-19 and its transborder implications when countries were at a loss about how to cooperate with each other or whether to cooperate with each other or shut the border and stop working. She opined that things could have been addressed in a much better manner. Therefore, there is a need for more collective efforts which are required to fight against such challenges that can emanate from any known or unknown areas.

Professor Yasmin then delved into the discussion on state and non-state actors of threat. She argued that the idea of the Westphalian System is based on the assumption that threats to sovereign penetrability will emerge from another such sovereign actor but the world has seen that the threats that are emerging in the 21st century do not necessarily come from another state actor; rather, they come from other non-state actors which are transnational in nature, such as climate change, development challenges, IUU, Fishing etc. Therefore, there is a need to look at

the origin of global problems that do not remain confined within the borders of a country. Noting that the state is the helm of policy making, she advocated for coordination, discussion, continuous engagement and a problem-solving approach.

She then briefly discussed the concepts of sustainable co-development and inclusive security. She emphasised that it is an era where zero-sum games are not important. Rather, there is a need to talk about win-win games– there is a need to emphasise how a neighborhood can grow and develop together. In this connection, she touched upon the concept of sustainable co-development– a concept used by the United Nations (UN). She informed that the concept of co-development is a radical idea where there would be a redistribution of resources; therefore, it was not popular. However, later on, in the early 21st century, the concept of inclusive security was introduced keeping in mind that non-state actors can destabilise state boundaries which can actually affect the well-being of people be it women, children, or the elderly. Hence, the concept of inclusive security talks about security for all, and prosperity for all and the state's cooperation with each other.

Professor Yasmin then talked about the overlapping between the terrestrial and the maritime domain which often remains under-recognised. She highlighted that Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook does not overlook this issue. The outlook emphasises that there are areas where the connection between the immediate land area and the territorial sea is often under-recognised. If there is a fishing resource depletion happening in the territorial sea it will lead to joblessness of the fisherman. There is the possibility of them getting engaged in law-breaking activities in the nearby land-based regions. For example, the Maldivian youths are being recruited by violent extremists because of the joblessness caused by the sea level rise. She also pointed out that the problem of maritime mixed migration due to climate change or political instability in Myanmar is directly affecting the people living in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

She expressed that Bangladesh's idea of ensuring inclusive security is not about itself only but also about the region. Bangladesh used to consider itself as a landlocked country in the sense that it did not have unfettered access to the Bay of Bengal. Since the maritime demarcation of its maritime boundary, Bangladesh has been able to transform itself from the victim of geography to the blessing of geography. Now Bangladesh is considered as a regional hub for promoting the development and growth of land-linked countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Northeast India. In this connection, she mentioned about the Matarbari Deep Sea Port which is being developed by Bangladesh with the assistance of Japan. She viewed that the port could transform Bangladesh into a regional connectivity hub. Noting that connectivity is the arms race of the 21st century, she considered the Matarbari Deep Sea Port as a game changer in this particular region.

Professor Yasmin remarked that Bangladesh is ready to engage with all the actors within the region as well as beyond the region to ensure a stable and secure future for Bangladesh's 170 million population as well as for people living in this region. She observes that Bangladesh's IPO highlights the need for a comprehensive outlook and therefore it includes a number of issues such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS), countering violent extremism and health infrastructure of the region and beyond.

Finally, she identified several policy options. First, coordination is required among different ministries at the national, regional and global levels. Second, there is a need for proper redistribution of internal resources and

work alongside the development partners. Third, Bangladesh has to balance with America, Russia, and China– the actors in the coming geopolitical tussle. From another point of view, these countries also need Bangladesh as it is at the epicenter of the Bay of Bengal, which is the gateway to the Indo-Pacific. Finally, South Asian countries can collaborate together in deep sea fishing capacity building. In this regard, technology transfer needs to be emphasised.

In conclusion, Professor Yasmin commented that the idea of inclusive security is nothing new as the preamble of the United Nations (UN) Charter consistently talks about "we the people, we the nation" and it seldom talks about the states. With the onset of the Cold War and strategic rivalry, the world forgot the reason for the establishment of the UN. It was supposed to talk about human security, but human security as a concept emerged only in the 1990s after the end of the big geopolitical tussle of the 20th century. Therefore, inclusive security provides us with a broader guideline and Bangladesh has included the word in its Indo-Pacific Outlook. She opined that Bangladesh needs to go a long way. However, this is merely just the beginning and the country is going to point out what are the actionable agenda based on its primary national interest.

OPEN DISCUSSION

Dr Smruti Pattanaik
Research Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), India

Dr Smruti Pattnaik observed that Bangladesh's IPO is quite comprehensive. As a middle power of the region, the outlook provides Bangladesh with a lot of hedging space. Besides economic issues, the IPO covers a lot of issues including both traditional and non-traditional security issues. It includes value-based international order, terrorism, energy, connectivity and so on. For some issues, there remains a lot to progress, for example, international norm-based order. For other issues such as physical connectivity, energy and digital connectivity, work is already going on within the region at the multilateral level for example through BIMSTEC or ASEAN as well as at the bilateral level. She pointed out that as a regional organisation, BIMSTEC is yet to come up with a strategy regarding Indo-Pacific. This is in contrast with ASEAN which has adopted an outlook for the Indo-Pacific.

She commented that though comprehensive, all the issues covered in the 15 points of the IPO have made it too broad. She also observed that the outlook has many similarities with that of many other countries. She suggested making the outlook more pin-pointed so that it comes out as a clear-cut strategy and benefits Bangladesh thereby.

Dr C Raja Mohan
Senior Fellow, Asia Society Policy Institute, Delhi, India

Dr C Raja Mohan expressed that it has really been very enlightening to listen to the Bangladeshi discourse on the Indo-Pacific, but he asked for pardon if he sounded slightly like a discordant note regarding his thoughts on the topic. He shared that the need for Bangladesh's intervention in the Indo-Pacific is very welcomed and it has been long overdue. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific Outlook is really the first step. However, he expressed some disappointments by the framing of the outlook which suggests that 'this does not mean anything changes in foreign policy.' He shared that he is very familiar with such debate in India where it is repeated that whatever happens, we are the same. Dr Mohan stressed that change is inevitable and countries have to adapt to fundamental changes in these circumstances. Today that change is occurring at a very rapid pace in the Indo-Pacific region. Those who cannot adapt to it may have a high price to pay. This is the reality and countries need to come to terms with it quickly.

Dr Mohan insisted that the very use of the term Indo-Pacific implies recognition of change. It is not a mere geographic descriptor because China considers it as a political concept. It is a loaded concept. It is about a specific geopolitical idea of the need for a different balance of power, although this idea can be disagreed. But it needs to be noted that the recognition of the geography itself signals change. He identified some changes that have been visible in the nature of geopolitical rivalry. First, for the last 30-40 years, the major powers have been in harmony with each other; today they are not. There is a major war in Europe and a potential war in Asia.

Therefore, if there is a great power conflict and rivalry, countries need to exploit their agency to say "I don't make choices, I have nothing to do with this." The ASEAN countries have said that for a long time, but a lot of them can be seen making choices. Although they may publicly say they are not making choices, they are actually making choices.

The second major change he identified relates to the economic aspect. For 30 years, globalisation was thought to be irreversible and a China-centered globalisation was considered to be the future of Asia. In the last two years, China-centered globalisation does not seem inevitable. Much of the strategy is about how to decentralize the globalisation. This can be seen in what the US and Japan is doing with China and what India has done with

China. Thus, he confers that the economic structure in which Bangladesh and all other countries operate is going to change.

The third major change he discussed is the fundamental changes in the institutional landscape. Previously, participation in ASEAN meetings meant being part of the Asian architecture. Today there is QUAD, AUKUS and Northeast Asia trilateral. Many kinds of new institutional formats are coming up and this institutional change needs to be recognised. Dr Mohan urged Bangladesh to adapt to this reality. He insisted that Bangladesh has the agency to adapt on all three sides mentioned above– geopolitical, geoeconomic and institutional. Fresh initiatives and fresh approaches need to be taken to cope with the structural changes as well as to take advantage of the structural changes.

In his final thoughts, Dr Mohan shared that it is a pity that although the US and the Biden administration have played a sophisticated hand in India, Japan and East Asia, somewhere along the line they seem to have dropped the ball in Bangladesh. Here he referred to his American friends saying that there is very little strategy here. The same old kind of moralising is visible but there is no strategic perspective. He hoped that Bangladesh's other friends like Australia, Japan and India may step up to work with Bangladesh more closely if the US continues down this path. He reiterated that Bangladesh is a middle power with huge potential and it is a major economy in the making. Bangladesh needs to play that role. He hoped the countries of the region could work more closely with Bangladesh so that a regional architecture could be constructed that reinforces the new possibilities in the region.

His Excellency Mr Iwama Kiminori

Ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh

HE Mr Iwama Kiminori shared his view on the idea of inclusiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Ambassador Kiminori referred to the Japanese Prime Minister Kishida's speech in March where the important key word 'inclusiveness' was used. He mentioned that regarding Indo-Pacific, Japan does not use the term strategy or doctrine. Japan has a very soft approach and calls it the Indo-Pacific ideas or Indo-Pacific initiative. When it comes to issues like climate change, Japan emphasises that the initiatives should be widened. This is Japan's current strategy. Not only Japan, other countries are also evolving their ideas. The ambassador suggested that each and every country's Indo Pacific idea and theory should be looked at.

Then Ambassador Kiminori spoke about the Matarbari port. He referred that many people mention this as a game changer and they are proud of it. This is a huge project. There are plans to expand it further. He sought inputs from outside, of course including Bangladesh's side. Ambassador Kiminori also talked about Bangladesh's concentration on the economic side in the Outlook. This reflects attempt to avoid the security and strategic sides. But when it comes to blue economy and maritime safety, there is intersection between security sides and economic side. Blue economy is promoting the fishery and so on. In order to do so, one needs to look at the maritime safety as an intersection between the security aspect and the economic aspects.

Ms Preeti Gaonkar

Director for Operations, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)

Ms Preeti Gaonkar, Director for Operations, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), stated that the Seminar has provided a space for listening to each other's views and ideas. She then introduced the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) to the audience. It is an intergovernmental non-profit organisation established by the leaders of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), which is an informal political dialogue forum for the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, the ASEAN Secretariat, and the European Union (EU). Bangladesh is one of the key members, with the role of Vice Chair. So, ASEF is looking forward to working closely with Bangladesh.

While talking about the mandate of ASEF, she mentioned that it includes building connections between the people of Asia and Europe through opportunities that enable an exchange of ideas. She commented that ASEF is the only established multilateral institution for such biracial exchange, focusing on people-to-people connections and intellectual and cultural exchange. In addition, ASEF acts as an interface between civil society and ASEM governments and contributes to the ASEM process by generating unique recommendations for official consideration. ASEF emphasises diversity and equal partnership. She remarked that for shared growth and development, there is a need for cooperation, especially in a world facing fragmentation and uncertainty. This point has been highlighted in the objectives mentioned in Bangladesh's IPO. Besides, creating spaces for dialogue between the people of various regions is a role that organisations like ASEF undertake and serve as a reliable partner for Member States' outlooks and strategies.

Ms Gaonkar emphasised the need for creating a well-developed civil society. Academics, think tanks, the private sector, and businesses are integral parts of society. Creating better access to education and mutual learning is essential. Besides, enhanced participation of women in decision-making processes is key to enabling a knowledgeable civil society. She noted that ASEF undertakes projects on education, leadership development, and climate change. ASEF works closely with the EU and ASEAN in this regard. She also mentioned the next project of ASEF titled "Asia Europe Climate Dialogue". She concluded by saying that to gain cooperation, there is a need to strengthen people-to-people ties based on deeper mutual understanding and equal partnership.

Professor Dr Syed Anwar Husain
Bangabandhu Chair Professor, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Professor Dr Syed Anwar Husain shared that as a humble man of history, he always tried to look at everything in its historical perspective. When Bangladesh proposed its Indo-Pacific Outlook, he could see that Bangladesh is simply going back to history. Back in the second century BC, the Gupta Empire of northern India expanded culture, civilisation and influence to the Pacific region. He mentioned that in 1990, he had published a book titled “Superpowers and Security in Indian Ocean: A South Asian perspective”. The book was developed on the ideas of Professor Joseph Nye and the theory of collective self-reliance. He emphasised that the Indian Ocean region should have collective self-reliance to non-traditional security. He appreciated that Bangladesh has done a good thing in keeping its track in history. Dr Husain suggested that Bangladesh should emphasise not only on geopolitics but also on geoeconomics.

Brig Gen M Sakhawat Hossain (Retd)
Senior Fellow, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance, North South University

Brig Gen M Sakhawat Hossain (Retd) said that after reading Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook, he had questions regarding the implementation of the security framework. There is a sort of connotation that it is between China and rest. Particularly in South Asia, it seems to be between China and India. He referred to the latest developments on the map issue and India's preparation to face China if anything happens like 1962. Brigadier Hossain reiterated that in such case, Bangladesh needs to maintain the non-aligned foreign policy it had been maintaining till today. However, with Bangladesh's inclusion with the Indo-Pacific strategy or policy, it is very difficult to remain neutral in that sense. A strategy is always on perception. If anything like 1962 happens in the sub-continent, what would Bangladesh do is the main question. He inquired if Bangladesh would change its stance and whether Bangladesh is capable or will be capable to join any part of Indo-Pacific Strategy?

RESPONSE BY SPEAKERS

Professor Dr Lailufar Yasmin
Chairman, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

While replying to Brig Gen M Sakhawat Hossain (Retd), Professor Dr Lailufar Yasmin compared the present geopolitical situation of Bangladesh to 1971. The US got China by its side to fight against Bangladesh's birth, but now both China and the US want Bangladesh to be on their respective sides. Therefore, present-day Bangladesh is no longer 1970s Bangladesh, it is a different Bangladesh. It is the antithesis of 1971 that they both want us on their respective sides. From the regional perspective, there is an India-China rivalry over Bangladesh. Globally, there is a US-China tussle, and a US-Russia tussle but the presence of the European Union (EU) needs to be highlighted as well. She mentioned the upcoming visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Bangladesh. Hence, she opined, Bangladesh creates value for a number of countries.

She agreed with Professor Raja Mohan that Bangladesh has to learn to adapt. At the same time, there is a need to accept the fact that Bangladesh's geographical location has brought the country many blessings. Bangladesh needs to remember that the country cannot change its neighbors. Therefore, it is necessary to understand particular predicaments and act accordingly. She commented that taking sides is not in Bangladesh's DNA. The country has emphasised cooperation since its birth. She gave the example of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). She is optimistic that Bangladesh will not have to take sides. Bangladesh has its own strength and it has to learn to play on its strength.

CLOSING SESSION

Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc
Director General of BIISS

The closing session was presided over by Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc, Director General of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS). In his opening remarks, he expressed gratitude to the scholars from home and abroad who had participated in the seminar and shared their valuable thoughts and ideas throughout the day. He acknowledged the presence of distinguished guests, including HE Dr AK Abdul Momen, MP, honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, and Mr MJ Akbar, former Minister of State for External Affairs of India. He also recognised the participation of media representatives and extended a warm welcome to everyone present.

General Pasha began the session by paying tribute to the memory of Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and all the martyrs who sacrificed their lives during the country's war of liberation in 1971. He emphasised the excellent discussions that had taken place during the day's sessions and the valuable insights gained from the panellists. He highlighted Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook, which sees the Indo-Pacific region as a place of opportunities rather than threats. He stressed the importance of inclusivity and cooperation among various actors in the region.

Before inviting the chief guest, the honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs, to speak, General Pasha invited distinguished visiting scholars to share their remarks. Following that, he planned to invite three prominent personalities from Bangladesh to offer their views, also with a maximum of four minutes each.

Dr Sreeradha Datta
Professor, The Jindal School of International Affairs at O P Jindal Global University.

The first speaker was Professor Dr Sreeradha Datta, Professor, the Jindal School of International Affairs, at O P Jindal Global University. Dr. Sreeradha Datta, spoke on the Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh, which had been launched a few months prior. She emphasised the strategic significance of Bangladesh's geographic location in the Bay of Bengal region and suggested that a "Bay of Bengal Outlook" might be an aspect worth exploring further. She hoped that this aspect would be considered in the implementation of the Indo-Pacific Outlook.

Professor Dr Datta also highlighted the core principle of Bangladesh's foreign policy, which has been consistently implemented by its leaders– "friendship to all and malice towards none." She underscored Bangladesh's impressive outreach and its importance in the global context. She pointed out that Bangladesh is a key player in the South Asian sub-region, with a remarkable economic growth trajectory. Despite the diversity of economies and political systems in the Indo-Pacific region, Bangladesh's economic strength has made it a significant player.

Professor Dr Datta emphasised the strong partnership between India and Bangladesh, highlighting the reliability and dependability of this relationship. She mentioned the growth of economic corridors, including references to Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, and suggested that this sub-regional approach could be extended beyond South Asia, contributing to the Indo-Pacific outlook. She praised Bangladesh's role in regional development and its contributions to neighbouring countries, such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar. She stressed the need for further collaboration within the Indo-Pacific region and suggested that Bangladesh could serve as a core partner in this effort.

Professor Dr Datta concluded by expressing her belief that Bangladesh is India's most dependable and reliable partner. She urged the participants to explore how the strong partnership between India and Bangladesh could serve as a model for broader collaboration within the Indo-Pacific region, creating a network of shared interests and opportunities. Her remarks highlighted the importance of Bangladesh's role in the Indo-Pacific region and the potential for expanding cooperation beyond South Asia.

Dr Rameez Abbas
Associate Professor, College of International Securities and Affairs, National Defense University Washington.

Dr Rameez Abbas, Associate Professor, College of International Securities and Affairs, National Defense University Washington, began by expressing gratitude for the warm hospitality experienced in Bangladesh, mentioning visits to various places, including Dhaka University, Cox's Bazaar, and the Liberation War Museum. These helped her reflect on the themes discussed during the seminar.

She focused on two main topics of reflection: the Indo-Pacific Outlook and inclusivity. Dr Abbas noted that the term "inclusivity" within the Indo-Pacific Outlook took on a deeper meaning for him during his visit to Bangladesh. She highlighted the unique inclusivity she observed, such as women police officers working alongside their male colleagues, which reflected a different dimension of inclusivity in the country.

Dr Abbas pointed out that inclusivity, as a concept, needs to be understood in various contexts and that different countries bring their own meanings and interpretations to it. She stressed the importance of engaging in dialogues that communicate the diverse perspectives and meanings attached to inclusivity to avoid it becoming a mere buzzword.

She commended the conference for going beyond buzzwords and discussed how inclusivity was presented as an antidote to the dangers of zero-sum competition in the Indo-Pacific region. He referenced speakers like Ambassador Aria Sinha and Ambassador Pankaj Saran, who called for new inclusive frameworks and regional inclusivity. Dr Abbas highlighted the need to make inclusivity operational, emphasising issue-based convergences that could bring people together. She mentioned the importance of including various stakeholders, including municipal authorities, police officers, business communities, and the private sector, in transnational dialogues, which often require facilitating visas. She noted that the conference discussed topics like climate change, disaster response, ports, sustainable development, and economic security, all of which contribute to a development-oriented perspective on inclusivity.

Dr Abbas concluded by praising the conference for providing meaningful insights and putting multiple interpretations and dimensions on the concept of inclusivity. She found her visit to Dhaka and the seminar to be a fulfilling and hopeful exercise that advanced the discourse on inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific region.

Mr Hemant Kharel

Chairman, Nepal Council for World Affairs

Mr Hemant Kharel, Chairman, Nepal Council for World Affairs, thanked the organisers for holding the seminar. It was a great opportunity to hear from numbers of participants and learn of different views concerning the Indo-Pacific region. Many countries did not even have clear ideas about the region's geographical location. Although there is still no clear idea about the region, one such understanding remains very important. The main theme of this seminar consisted of prosperity, inclusive security, growth of this area, i.e., Indo-Pacific. In these regards, Bangladesh's geostrategic location could be really helpful, he opined. The country is in a position to coordinate with others in this region. As per Mr. Kharel, Bangladesh was not only maintaining good economic growth, but also very close relations with India, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka– all. In this regard, it can play a significant role to minimise intervention of powerful countries in the name of security. Development aspects need more to be used for this area. These powers are playing different roles under different jargons, terminologies, words. Moreover, in the name of development, they are supporting different countries, e.g., the US is supporting the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) may be a state supported programme, but in reality, these are all different things. Nepal is accepting the MCC as well, as basically, this organisation supports countries who have already met the criteria needed for development. Recently, they aided Nepal to develop a high transmission line, about 315 kilometres to maintain of highway and expansion of roads. This has proved very important for Nepal. The USA is providing such assistance to Nepal since last seven decades. Thus, there is a need of playing positive role by both countries for development of Indo-Pacific region.

Abul Hasan Chowdhury
Former State Minister for Foreign Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Abul Hasan Chowdhury, former State Minister for Foreign Affairs, said that Bangladesh and many other countries in the world, are having to readjust with reality of a multipolar world while the reigning hegemon has conceded its position. But this multipolar structure is something that presents hurdles for countries like Bangladesh, a country which stands firmly rooted in the principles enunciated by Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. These have been implemented by his daughter over the years to create a structure of peace. However, in establishing this structure, there remained problems. According to the World Economic Forum, due to this multipolarity, countries will be trading more within their respective regions. Thereby, world GDP will fall by 3 per cent. As a result, Bangladesh should not have any interest other than ensuring its own peace, prosperity and building itself in relation to other countries in Asia. Here Mr Chowdhury referred to the country being geostrategically well-positioned, as had been said earlier. Hence, when Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC) was formed, under the plea from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, could not be turned down and Bangladesh joined the group. Mr Chowdhury signed the joining agreement on behalf of Bangladesh government. But he felt as long as it would remain confined at the level of state ministers, it would not go very far. He was happy to notice that now the group had gone to the level of prime ministers. He also hoped the institution which was firmly rooted for promoting tourism, investment, health, infrastructure, should go for much more. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, its positions, visits, visitations have nothing to do with human rights but everything to do with the neutral stance taken in the changing geopolitical order which was done for the sake of the country itself and the region. None in Bangladesh could forget the massive level of support from neighbouring India during the liberation war of 1971 and finding any parallel in history would be very difficult. The Indian government and people alike, came to support 10 million refugees fleeing the war. None, even thousands of Bangladeshi freedom fighters, could think Bangladesh would become independent in nine months. Thus, it is impossible to forget the tremendous assistance provided by India.

Today, Bangladesh stands at the crossroads, having to constantly restructure itself, interrogate the original emphasis, principles and instincts, that led up to formation of this country. Multipolarity here is unacceptable

to the reigning hegemon. In this situation, Bangladesh would like to trade freely and seek investment from all. Although all countries would be affected, those like Bangladesh would be more. Mr Chowdhury believed the opportunities overwhelmed the costs as Bangladesh over time, showed its people's resilience. After 1971, Bangladesh was pushed aside as a basket case. But the country has been able to turn itself into a bread basket. In those days, for a country with 75 million people, there was no surplus but only deficits instead. Today, even for 170 million plus people, there is surplus of rice. There has been a total agrarian revolution which can be witnessed better outside of Dhaka. In his youth and later on, when Mr Chowdhury would go to visit a village, he would see most people were barefoot. Nowadays, there are numerous hatcheries, poultry farms, dairy farms which are contributing to economic development.

Thus, taking and idealising the dream of Bangladesh as a country of prosperity, fulfill commitments to the freedom fighters and martyrs who sacrificed their lives are very important. He then spoke on prospects of blue economy. For that purpose, cooperation would be necessary, in a spirit of doing well, not just on a country-specific basis but on regional basis. However, these problems are being challenged very gravely. Bangladesh has truly been unique. There is no other word for it for showing the generosity it should have, is the standing Rohingya refugees. Mr Chowdhury believed all the development parameters that looked good and all development possibilities which were simply not thought about, were being challenged by almost 1.2 million refugees currently being hosted by Bangladesh. The applause it used to receive now moved somewhere else. Still, the country would not push them back as Bangladesh has different history and heritage. Unfortunately, it has been a victim of the Russo-Ukrainian war and what the West decides. It has nothing to do with the stance of being more pluralistic or being more human rights oriented, but in which bloc the country seems to be in. These are very well understood themes. There is moreover, a need of thinking in terms of the region. It is this spirit regional blocs are formed so that all countries of the region could be benefitted. Bangladesh showed the whole world the impossible could be made possible. Even the most optimistic theoreticians could not believe what Bangladesh today achieved. The country wants to proceed and continue the process of prosperity, which will be done by utilising the resources that had been opened up. Bangladesh reached this position by peaceful process of arbitration. Mr Chowdhury suggested paying attention to blue economy, potentials of investment, conduct free trade and face the reality together that is going to be with all in the multipolar dynamics. He concluded by paying sincere homage to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his family members, those with him and were murdered on 15th August 1975. But even when the country was battered and shattered, Bangabandhu did not lose faith in his people. That faith, resilience, hard work, homogeneous aspects have greatly helped and Bangladesh would like to share these in a spirit of cooperation with all countries in the region and the world at large, if they are willing.

Air Vice Marshal (Retired) Mahmud Hussain, BBP, OSP, ndc, psc, acsc, GD(P)
Distinguished Expert, Faculty of Aviation Standardisation, Regulations and Safety,
Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Aviation and Aerospace University (BSMRAAU)

Air Vice Marshal (Retd) Mahmud Hussian remarked that the Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh emphasised mostly non-traditional issues. He suggested that in order to be all-inclusive the IPO should include the traditional security aspects as well. Countries of the Indo-Pacific should come together to address the traditional security challenges. Marshal Hussian talked about three hypothetical scenarios for example. First, if China invades the Chum Valley into Shiliguri Corridor on the Northeastern side of India then the actions breach the neutrality of Bangladesh. Second, if the Chinese look for an outlook in the Bay of Bengal, then they will move through Myanmar and Myanmar can use the opportunity to come into the Southern Side of Bangladesh, but Bangladesh will lose its neutrality. And lastly, if the Chinese establish a naval base in the Indian Ocean and stop naval traffic in Sea Lines of Communications then Bangladesh's neutrality is breached.

All the Indo-Pacific policy papers have a military aspect in their strategy. For example, he said France believes their Naval assets are not adequate to maintain a presence in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Australia signed a nuclear submarine pact with the US to improve their naval might. Bangladesh must not fall into the "Belgium Syndrome" as Belgium's neutrality was breached during the First World War. He suggested that Bangladesh's IPO must include a traditional security aspect to have a complete strategy for preserving Bangladesh's interest in the future.

Professor Dr Shahab Enam Khan
Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University

Professor Dr Shahab Enam Khan talked about inclusivity has a multiple pronged elements including economics, supply chain, climate, resource distribution and perhaps energy diversification. He mentioned about two important changes within Bangladesh, first the demography which can provide tremendous benefits to us in economic terms. The second is the technology has become so widespread and it is changing at a rapid speed. There is very difficult for us to keep a pace with that. Henceforth international institutions must make ensure that this growth of technology is equitable and tickles down to the bottom of the society. He also pointed out that migration became a critical factor for Bangladesh's national security interest and most certainly economic interest. So therefore, Bangladesh has a perennial crisis, the Rohingya issue, which remains at the heart of Bangladesh's foreign relations now. He believes that Bangladesh really values one fundamental norm of international politics, which is multilateralism. Bangladesh in the process of asking different countries whether there can be a solid consensus in the expansion of BIMSTEC and perhaps can also look forward to reforming SAARC, which is essential for Bangladesh's interest of providing connectivity. Bangladesh's jurisdiction in terms of its strategic interest, has expanded way beyond the region as it sits in between the Southeast Asia and South Asia, which allows us to really focus on the new dimension. So as a result, Bangladesh is also in the middle of a shape or changing, intermingling or what is called as complex interdependence between geopolitics and geostrategy. He mentioned that IPO of Bangladesh also talks about the collective understanding of security, as Bangladesh is a classic case of one of the largest providers of United Nations peacekeeping operation. Bangladesh works towards preserving global peace and stability.

The culture of peace essentially starts from both the diplomacy of Bangladesh as well as military outlook. Professor Khan says the IPO document also talks about stability. The concept of stability for Bangladesh is linked with two important components. One is the market which has an intra-regional dimension and an inter-regional dimension. He said Bangladesh suffers when comes to the intraregional, as the intra-regional trade is below 5% of our international trade. In order to maneuver through certain stagnation in the region trade henceforth, Bangladesh has signed with Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, taken part in the New Development Bank by BRICS, joined the World Bank and IMF and all these institutions remain vital in our economic portfolio.

Professor Khan highlighted that every policy has weaknesses. He believes that since Bangladesh has maintained an absolutely peaceful relationship with all its neighbors, including Myanmar despite having a massive refugee problem. Bangladesh always prioritises economics and de-securitise migration, de-securitised market, de-securitised water. Lastly, he concluded that the IPO can still provide significant dividends which will have equal distribution across the region but not essentially limited within the country.

MJ Akbar

Former State Minister for External Affairs, India

Mr MJ Akbar started off by thanking the organisers for their hospitality. He also appreciated the feast of intellect of the Seminar. He remarked that there have been two liberation struggles in Bangladesh. The first one was headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, in 1971. The second was hunger relief, spearheaded by Sheikh Hasina, the current Prime Minister, which is her historic contribution to the people of this nation. He stated that he agreed with the remarks made by Pankaj Saran and the Honourable Minister of State. He did, however, urge us to stop using the term "Global South." It is an antiquated expression from the 20th century, he remarked. He also reiterated Dr Raja Mohan's emphasis on changing one's way of thinking. He said that the forum's purpose was to declare that Bangladesh and India will be working together to establish new norms. This is the point at which the collaboration makes sense. The relationship between Bangladesh and India extends beyond merely one-way relations. There are others in this collaboration, and there ought to be others. However, the countries are not going to be imprisoned and trapped by the term "Global South".

He then talked about when the 20th century ended. The calendar in the historical century does not begin on a particular sunrise rather it begins with events. Thus, the 20th century lasted from 1914 until 1991. There were multiple reasons for it. The 20th century, in strategic terms, was controlled by two sets of powers. The world suffered badly from the first threat and did not do too well with the second threat either. The world's dominant imperialists posed the first threat. However, their age coincided with India's leadership of the anti-colonialist freedom movement. The two superpowers, who essentially divided up the world's wealth and power between them, posed the second threat. They had left us without the ability to do anything but nibble at the margins to obtain what we could with our own talents. That was what imperialism meant. But when one pillar fell apart as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. How did the two pillars manage to stand? A cluster of submissive powers accompanied both of them. One is NATO, one is the Warsaw Pact. As a result, a group of submissive participants existed, sometimes hiding their identities under ideologies. One of the great ideologies that was meant to provide protection was democracy. However, it was discarded as fast as anything else when it did not fit. Although there was animosity at times, it was essentially a split of block and self-interest.

MJ Akbar stated that he often wonders why America was so hostile to the birth of Bangladesh. He remarked that, given their differing justifications, he was not overly concerned about the other sources of animosity. However, the primary cause was the anticipated hacking of one of its perceived most obedient powers. That was the driving force behind Nixon and Kissinger's near-paranoid behaviour, which included preventing the evolution and the

birth of a nation. In addition to using their arms as weapons, they were also quite skilled at using their tongues. For years, Bangladesh was dismissed as the basket case. After Sheikh Mujib assumed power, the logic that had split the globe in two was essentially being undermined by his ideology of a foreign policy based on no malice towards anyone and friendship with everyone.

While talking about Bangladesh's strategic autonomy, he remarked that Bangladesh attempted to create an independent policy and dignity philosophy to demonstrate that the country was no longer going to play the role of origin and had become a nation. Undoubtedly, Bangladesh's foreign policy is founded from the outset on the basis of strategic autonomy. There were numerous individuals who genuinely carried out, adhered to, and contributed intellectual content to the policy, so there were variables along the road. This exact strategic autonomy, which is the most important, so far, as the 21st century begins to take shape. Now the world can see gradually the expansion of strategic autonomy.

Mr Akbar then spoke about the current state of the superpowers. He said that between Afghanistan and Ukraine Russia, one of the superpowers has become, in his view, a nervous party. He believes that America made a grave error when it believed that the fall of the Soviet Union also meant that America was getting stronger. Undoubtedly, America has a definition of power which is much more with its control of the march of technology and so on. It is one of the genuine overpowers in many respects but it is very evident that it has become a nervous party, he opined. And the fallout from America's uncertainties and Russia's weakness will be felt most in Asia. He commented that Asia will be the region that defines the 21st century for various reasons. This is the region that stretches all the way from Siberia to the Levant. Siberia is the source of 90 per cent of Russia's exports of minerals, petroleum, and other goods. After losing Hong Kong in 1842, the Chinese had to wait 150 years to regain it. They are still waiting to see what Siberia's future holds. The Chinese claims on Russian territory seem to have been overlooked in all the chaos and hoopla surrounding the new Chinese map.

He noted that the 1962 conflict with India was commonly referred to as "China's War with India." According to him, there ought to have been a mention of China's seven-month-long war with Russia in 1969, during which time the country fought to reclaim territory that it claimed was its own. Only after the war was lost did China truly communicate with Kissinger. Subsequently, the great Sino-Russia and Sino-American took place. According to his personal opinion, several Chinese present moves can only be explained. These are reasonable justifications based on the idea that Russia and America might have run out of steam for one another. He stated that this was the time to begin greater intervention on the spread of Chinese influence in the newly located areas.

Mr Akbar remarked that one of the crucial components of Bangladesh is the blue economy. He stressed that without blue stability, a blue economy is impossible, and without stability, problems arise. There's nothing more contagious which has repeatedly been demonstrated by history. War has no geographical boundaries; thus, instability is the most contagious thing there is. He placed emphasis on adopting a shared perspective of the Indo-Pacific region. He stated that the countries are not merely land below the Himalayas, they are also land above the oceans. He was delighted that one of the key elements of the Outlook was soft ideas. Shared prosperity is the cornerstone of Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook. A shared prosperity which is based on self-respect and self-reliance. And a treaty without exploitation. However, he warned to remain cautious about the conflict zone. He ended his remark with the urge to work together to achieve the power of balance rather than the balance of power.

REMARKS BY THE CHIEF GUEST

HE Dr A K Abdul Momen, MP
Hon'ble Foreign Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

HE Dr A K Abdul Momen, MP, hon'ble Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, began his speech by lauding BIISS and BFRS for organising the seminar. Accoridng to him, it was a timely initiative after Bangladesh announced its own Indo-Pacific Outlook in April 2023. Dr Momen paid sincere homage to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, remembered the three million martyrs and two hundred thousand women with solemn reverence who made the supreme sacrifice for Bangladesh's independence.

The Indo-Pacific is a crucial region for Bangladesh and the world for various reasons: it has some of the busiest sea lanes, vital trade routes, a diverse range of cultures and societies, are to name a few. However, the region also faces numbers of complex and shared challenges, from economic development, environmental protection to security.

Bangladesh enjoys strong economic, cultural, and diplomatic ties with countries of the Indo-Pacific region. As a littoral of the Bay of Bengal, it considers the stability in and prosperity of the region as crucial in realising the 'Vision 2041' of becoming a "Smart Bangladesh' and a 'Sonar Bangla', characterised by prosperity, social responsiveness, technological dynamism and long-term resilience. It believes mutual understanding, cooperation and collaboration among Indo-Pacific countries are essential for stability, peace, and prosperity of the region, in particular, and the world at large. It is committed also to working with regional partners to pursue regional and sub-regional integration through connectivity, jointly address shared challenges such as climate change and maritime security. Its growing multimodal connectivity with India through highways, inland and coastal waterways, rail and airways, restoration of severed connectivity after the 1965 India-Pakistan war, energy connectivity through projects like India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline for transporting diesel, cross-border power grid connectivity, digital connectivity, and subregional extension of such connectivity with other neighbours through arrangements like BBIN MVA (Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement)

are demonstration of its commitment towards regional integration. Now Bangladesh has become a connectivity hub as the country believes, connectivity is productivity.

Dr Momen said that being one of the fastest-growing economies in the world with inclusive socioeconomic progress, rapid reduction of poverty, promoting women empowerment and transformational power-energy-connectivity-digital infrastructure, Bangladesh has become a poster child of development. With rapid economic expansion coupled with geostrategic location, it is bound to attract higher attention of the international community, which has been the case in recent times. Mindful of enhanced roles and responsibility in the region, it has been pursuing inclusive engagements with all countries of the region. He added that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina believes economic prosperity in one country alone cannot guarantee the long-term sustainability unless all countries in the neighborhood also achieve economic prosperity. In fact, Bangladesh's resolution of issues with neighborrs through dialogue and discussion yielded mutual benefits. Here he cited the Chief Minister of Assam, Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma. During Dr Momen's visit to Assam, Dr Sarma expressed his gratitude to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, because of her approach to terrorism. Her announcement of zero tolerance on terrorism and that Bangladesh could not be a hub of any terrorist activity was profoundly helpful for states like Assam and Meghalaya in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). Dr Sarma also said the region had great potentials for development, but unfortunately, there were always fears of terrorism. As a result, the private sector was hesitant about investing in these states (Northeast India). After they were assured there would be no terrorist activity, the whole region is attracting private foreign investments. Assam had only one hospital but now about 17 are being built, and all are through the private sector. It shows if parties work together, it is mutually beneficial to the entire neighborhood; both Bangladesh and India are being mutually benefitted because of strong partnership and relationship.

The 'Indo-Pacific Outlook' (IPO) of Bangladesh encapsulates its rules of engagements drawn from longstanding principles of friendship to all and malice towards none, respect for national sovereignty and equality, political independence, non-interference in other's internal affairs, respect for international law and principles as enunciated in the UN Charter, adherence to relevant UN treaties and international conventions, including the 1982 UNLCOS. Bangladesh is committed to regional and multilateral mechanisms, actively participate in fora such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BIMSTEC, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) that are promoting dialogue and cooperation among members and partners on regional and global issues. Works done by them are creating greater synergies among countries of the region and contributing meaningfully to the objectives of the Indo-Pacific Outlooks or Strategies floated by the countries and partners of the region. IORA's adoption of the IPO, under Bangladesh's chairmanship, which laid out the common denomination of engagement of IORA members in the maritime domain, is an example of the responsible roles Bangladesh seeks to play in regional discourse. Bangladesh's hosting of the Indian Ocean Conference in May 2023 in partnership with India to promote dialogue among Indian Ocean littorals, demonstrates its commitment to promoting dialogue for a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for shared prosperity.

The Foreign Minister also stressed on water bodies and resources they contain. The Bay of Bengal is rich in untapped natural resources, including significant reserves of gas and other seabed minerals, and possibly rare-earth minerals. It occupies a central position in relation to global trade flows. Bangladesh has resolved maritime disputes with Myanmar and India; it is now time to use these resources. The country seeks international partnership and foreign investment to responsibly harness the potential of the sea. However, these treasures are also associated with transnational threats like trafficking of narcotics, weapons and people; illegal exploitation; externally and internationally displaced persons; terrorist groups; and increasingly, natural disasters and adverse changes in the climate, which disrupt national, regional and ultimately global stability and security. With only a metre rise in the sea-level, according to various estimates, nearly 20 to 30 million people will face displacement

in Bangladesh alone. In a word, the Bay of Bengal is critical for Bangladesh's existence. Water bodies also absorb global warming and therefore, it is critical for all, especially those in this region, to protect and preserve these priceless resources, with a view to saving this planet. There is need of working together, so that there are less abuse and misuse of the region's water bodies and resources they provide.

The protracted Rohingya crisis has its origin in Myanmar, but continues to weigh heavily on Bangladesh, and has the potential to destabilize the whole region unless the international community, especially neighbours, intensifies their efforts to the sustainable repatriation of the 1.2 million forcibly displaced residents of Myanmar, temporarily sheltered in Bangladesh, to their homeland Myanmar. Fast and sustainable settlement of the crisis is a centerpiece to promote peace, security and stability in the region. Bangladesh sees convergence of views among partners for the development of the Indo-Pacific region. Combatting climate change, sustainable use of the seas and ocean, de-carbonisation and clean energy, expansion of trade and investment, supply chain resilience, investing in and connecting people and building a sustainable green future, feature commonly in the visions for Indo-Pacific of most countries. Countries should pivot their commonalities to secure a better future. Bangladesh's partnership with Japan on the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt or BIG-B initiative in southeastern Bangladesh is creating a connectivity hub for the region. The country is keen to become the bridge that South Asia and Southeast Asia need for greater integration of the two sub-regions and make the Indo-Pacific region more connected. It is ready to scale up cross-border multimodal connectivity and seek more international partnership to advance such ambition. Bangladesh wishes also to embrace the opportunities that enhance economic cooperation, connectivity, and ensure holistic security of this region.

Dr Momen then quoted Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who always said, "Peace is imperative for development" and he wished that Bangladesh should send out messages of peace across nations. He wanted Bangladesh to be the Switzerland of the East. Last year, Bangladesh observed International Peace Conference in Dhaka commemorating Bangabandhu's reception of Joliot-Curie Peace Award. This was also observed in all Bangladeshi missions abroad. Bangladesh is currently the top contributor to UN Peacekeeping forces and more than 1,88,000 of its men and women served the UN to maintain peace and stability in post-conflict countries. Besides, in order to have sustainable peace across nations, Bangladesh has been promoting a vision of "Culture of Peace". All 193 UN member states adopted it with consensus. The basic element of 'Culture of Peace' is to create a mindset of tolerance, respect towards others, regardless of ethnicity, colour, background or religion, have such a culture across nations, and if such a mindset can be created, only then can the spread of venom of hatred by one group against others be stopped, helping achieve sustainable peace. Parents, schoolteachers, academicians, community leaders, politicians, and of course, leaders from all religions, must work together for that purpose. Bangladesh wishes to have a stable and peaceful Indo-Pacific region away from proxy wars and conflicts. In fact, regional peace and stability are indispensable for well-being of all people of this region.

VOTE OF THANKS

Ambassador Gousal Azam Sarker
Chairman of BIISS

Ambassador Gousal Azam Sarker, Chairman, BIISS, extended his profound gratitude and thanks to the Chief Guest, HE Dr A K Abdul Momen, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, for gracing this event with his presence despite his busy schedule and enlighteninig the audience with his valuable speech. He thanked HE Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP, State Minister for Foreign Affairs, for his kind and inspiring presence in the opening session, Ambassador Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary, for the keynote delivery, all distinguished panellists, foreign delegates who did their best in their respective contributions and provided insightful discussions at the seminar, moderator for skillfully conducting the entire programme, representatives of different embassies, eminent persons, experts, scholars from academia, and other dignitaries for their rich contributions and thought-provoking addresses. He also thanked media representatives for covering the event. An event like this would not take place without the combined effort of all people working involved. Ambassador Sarker wrapped the session up with thanking all members of BIISS and BFRS for their hard work and active cooperation in making the seminar a success.

HE Md Shahnaz Alam MP

Tribute
To
Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
Indo-Pacific Seminar Delegation

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The Editorial Team thankfully acknowledges Dr. Razia Sultana, Senior Research Fellow; Dr. Benuka Ferdousi, Senior Research Fellow; Shanjida Shahab Uddin, Research Fellow; Ayesha Binte Towhid, Research Fellow; Farzana Fatima, Research Officer; Apple Mahmud, Research Officer; and Rafa Tabassum Ali, Research Intern, for their assistance in preparing the proceedings.

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