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The State of Bangladesh-United States Relations: Before the Kerry Visit, and Beyond

The Working paper seeks to examine the gamut of the Bangladesh-United States relations, of which an important milestone, given the backdrop against which it was undertaken has been the visit to Dhaka in August 2016 of the US Secretary of State John Kerry. It argues that as a relationship it has not always been smooth and feathers have been ruffled on both sides on occasions. Yet stabilizing it would redound to the interest of both governments and peoples. The paper concludes with the argument for a strong reengagement between the next Administration in Washington DC and Dhaka, closing any attention-deficit on both sides.

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Introduction

Bangladesh-United States relations have never been quite the bed of roses that officials tend to proclaim on the eve of, or oftentimes in the course of, an important bilateral event. Diplomatic tact, on both sides, is often stressed to the full even to bring about even this verbal outcome, leave alone the substantive. Just as was the case during the brief visit of the US Secretary of State John Kerry to Dhaka in August this year. It was a visit long overdue. It had to wait the

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last leg, the final home run stretch of his tenure. This, despite Kerry's personal pro-Bangladesh predilections, as acknowledged by himself, as a fan of one of his illustrious Senatorial predecessors from his State of Massachusetts, Edward Kennedy. Kennedy was an ardent champion of the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, when most American policy-makers either opposed it, or preferred to look the other way, despite fervent appeals from many segments of public opinion, at home and abroad. An instance is the hugely popular 'Concert for Bangladesh', organized in New York, at the Madison Gardens in the *summer of 1971*, by *the Beatle, George Harrison, and the musician, Ravi Shankar*.

But such passionate pleas, including the artistic paeans, fell on deaf ears in Washington. There were, of course, ample reasons for it. The Bangladesh movement, alas for the US, was most ill-timed.² 1971 was the year when the so-called 'Nixon Doctrine' was taking effect. Concrete progress were being made on the reduction of the military presence in Vietnam, and in strategic dialogues on arms race with the Soviet Union. A maturing relationship with East Asia was the beginning of new contacts and trading opportunities with the developing world (East Asian nations were still 'developing' those days). Above all, a new relationship was evolving with China, for which Pakistan was acting as the enabler and conduit. President Richard Nixon entertained a passionate dislike for the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, Bangladesh's primary global advocate. Hence small wonder that no heed was paid to the despatches of the American 'man on the spot' in Dhaka, Archer Blood, detailing Pakistani military atrocities.³ As a result, when the Indo-Pakistan War on the Bangladesh issue broke out in December, there was the perceptible American 'tilt' towards Pakistan, resulting in the reported ordering on 10 December 1971 of the US Carrier 'Enterprise' into the Bay of Bengal.⁴

² As to how the India-Pakistan-Bangladesh crisis posed a foreign policy challenge for Washington, and how the US chose to 'tilt' in Pakistan's favour, see: Henry Kissinger, 'Tilt: The Indo-Pak Crisis of 1971' in *The White House Years* (Little Brown & Company: Boston, 1979), pp 842-918

³ The US Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood, had sent a cable to the State Department, on 6 April 1971, two weeks after the Pakistani military crackdown in Bangladesh, which read: 'With the conviction that US policy related to recent developments in East Pakistan serves neither our moral interests, broadly defined, nor our national interests, narrowly defined, numerous officers of the American Consulate General Dacca, US Aid Dhaka, and USIS Dacca consider it their duty to register strong dissent with the fundamental aspects of this policy'. Cited in Laurence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution* (London: Zed Press, 1979), p.157. Blood was punished by being recalled, and given less responsible posts. Interview with Dr Walter Anderson, US Department of State, Washington, 15 September 1978.

⁴ For the US, Pakistan, as an ally, was always a strange bedfellow, often running the risk of 'becoming its own worst enemy'! The latter phrase was used by an analyst of Pakistani politics, Steven Cohen, See, Steven Philip Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p.2.

Bangladesh–US Relations: 1972-75

These memories lingered in the Bangladeshi post-independence mind, as memories often do. These were exacerbated by Henry Kissinger's unkind, and as later evidence squarely demonstrated, unfair, description of Bangladesh as a 'bottomless basket case'. But the realist in him ultimately prevailed. As did Senator Adlai Stevenson's argument that 'it serves no purpose to pretend that the eighth largest country in the world does not exist'⁵. These views were buttressed by the Hollings–Saxbe legislative resolution urging the US Administration to recognize Bangladesh. With intellectual acceptance of the reality, and perhaps the potentials of Bangladesh, came the formal recognition, announced on 4 April 1972, and the despatch of aid to help prop up the war- battered economy. From the nascence of Bangladesh till the assassination of the nation's founder, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the US pumped in nearly half a billion dollars as development assistance, a quarter of Bangladesh's total foreign aid, way ahead of other donors, including Bangladesh's primary political and economic benefactor, India.⁶

Despite the woeful state of Bangladesh's post-war economic and economic infrastructure, Bangladesh had inherited a well-trained bureaucracy, led by the Bengali segment of the erstwhile Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP), who managed to put governance back on the rails rather quickly. Many CSP officers had actively supported the cause of independence, along with much of the Bengali middle Class and therefore enjoyed proximity with Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League party that had spearheaded the liberation movement. Since the stated, or at any rate, the preferred ideology was 'socialism' (and the initial economic contacts were with the original political backers of Bangladesh such as the then-Soviet Union and the Eastern Europe), a powerful Planning Commission was set up ensuring public control of the 'commanding heights of the economy'. It was the Planning Commission and the External Resources Division (ERD) of the Finance Ministry that negotiated foreign aid and also monitored utilization, project implementation and amortization. In short these institutions were very powerful in the system. The political leadership of the system devolved on a number of western educated intellectuals like Professors Nurul Islam and

⁵ *Times of India*, 9 February 1972, p.2.

⁶ India was, till then, the next donor with US\$ 339.9 m (18% of the total aid received by Bangladesh), the International Development Agency (IDA) with US\$ 276.07 m, was third (14%), Canada with US\$ 155.8 m was fourth, and the Soviet Union with US\$ 134.8 m was fifth (7%). Other 29% were accounted for by West Germany (US\$ 122.42 m), the United Kingdom (US\$ 97.8 m), Japan (US\$ 64.83 m), Sweden (US\$ 59.48 m), Czechoslovakia (US\$ 42 m), the Asian Development Bank (US\$ 33.70 m), Australia (US\$ 21.40m), and others (US\$ 103 m). *Asian Recorder*, Vol xx, No. 25. June 18-24, 1974, pp12053-54.

Rehman Sobhan, who despite their socialist empathies had no problems with dealing with the Americans. Nor did their bureaucratic support base led by ex-CSP officers, also as M. Syeduzzaman and MA Muhith (currently Finance Minister). There were hiccups, though. The withholding of US food-aid till trading with Cuba, seen by the US as a belligerent State, ceased led to starvation deaths in Bangladesh in 1974, and also went to show as self-evident truth that the motive of aid was not altruistic.

Contemporary Bangladesh-US Relations

Contemporary Bangladesh has evolved substantially since those early days. In 1972 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country was estimated by the World Bank to be approximately US\$ 6.29 billion. In 2014 it stood at US\$ 173.82 billion, an expansion of 27 times in forty years. At least 6% growth rate has been sustained over two and half decades. The country aspires to middle income status by 2021, as the four decade of its existence concludes. It is also included in the list of Goldman Sach's 'Next Eleven'. Unsurprisingly the focus of economic interactions has moved away from aid to trade and investments. Still, Bangladesh remains the largest recipient of US assistance in Asia, after Afghanistan and Pakistan⁷. In recent times the aid quantum has, in line with the shift in emphasis, shrunk in size. For instance in Financial Year 2012 it was US\$ 256,837,361, the military component being US\$ 10,341,780. According to the US government, this amount, which mostly went to grow more food, build more roads, and train teachers, health providers and troops, was part of a continuing plan to reduce poverty, enhance food security, improve health and education, mitigate the impact of climate change and natural disasters, counter violent extremism, and achieve better governance to spur equitable and sustainable growth. The major difference between then and now being that, unlike the earlier times, the Bangladesh government today is in the driver's seat. There have been the expected spikes in aid support at hours of need, which have, expectedly, attracted sharper profile. These were manifested in disaster relief operations, such as in Operation Sea Angel 1, and Operation Sea Angel 11, following cyclones in 1991 and 2007 respectively.⁸

⁷ US Department of State, Fact Sheet, February 16, 2016. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3452>. Dt 30 Aug 2016.tn

⁸ 'Bangladesh-United States Military Relations', Bangladesh Foreign Policy Survey Quarterly, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), Vol4, No 3, July-September, 1998. Some key statistics pertaining to military cooperation are cited from this detailed study.

The US is Bangladesh's largest export market. Bangladesh, which effected a phenomenal transition from a purely agricultural to a manufacturing economy, exported goods worth US\$ 31.2 billion in FY 2014-15, 81.69% of which comprised Ready Made Garments (RMG). In the RMG sector US\$ 6.34 billion went to the US (Bangladesh is the third largest clothing exporter to that country), a nearly 12% jump over the previous year. In June 2013, following an accidental collapse of a Bangladeshi garment factory that killed 1000 workers, the US suspended, over poor safety standards, the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) that allowed for duty free access to the US market for Bangladeshi products. While that action did indeed spur the government to ensure improved compliance, particularly in the areas of inspections, safety and security, it also resulted in a modicum of bitterness that marked every bilateral interaction since. Bangladeshis also smelt a whiff of protectionism in the US decision. Nonetheless the apprehension that the suspension of the GSP would dent export volumes did not come to pass, and sheer market dynamism resulted in an upward curve with regard to quantum. This was also a signal to Dhaka that trade with the US could be substantially divorced from politics, and the power of the Administration over such matters was limited, an important take-away from these statistics.

Bangladesh attracted US\$ 1.5 billion in 2013-14 from the US in the form of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), a rise of US\$ 980 million from the previous year. On 25 November 2013, the US and Bangladesh signed the Trade and Investment Corporation Forum Agreement (TICFA) in Washington. It created a mechanism for regular meetings to identify obstacles, and means to overcome them, to increased trade and investment. Such meetings have been held since then. But compared, for instance to India, FDI inflows were severely limited. The reason perhaps lie in the absence of effective dispute settlement mechanisms, and associated judicial processes enhancing investor confidence. The point is apparent though that like trade, issues concerning investments are pretty much divorced from the state of political relations. It is a safe extrapolation therefore that as Bangladesh reduces its dependence on aid and moves away in terms of economic interactions towards trade and investments, reliance on the need for the US Administration's goodwill is reduced – a fact that fed into the twists and turns of bilateral political relations, determining governmental negotiating postures and positions.

The principal area in which governments of necessity are the primary drivers, and each government has in this respect to take account of another, is defence and security. Initially there was some reluctance on the part of the US to get too involved with Bangladesh that began its international existence as a close friend of the then Soviet Union, and Indira Gandhi's India,

not loved in Washington. Over time as Bangladesh's policies evolved, Washington saw benefits in close cooperation with Dhaka. The military played a significant role in Bangladesh's politics through much of its history, and particularly during those periods bilateral cooperation in this sphere deepened. The US valued the participation of Muslim-majority Bangladesh in 'Operation Desert Shield' during the First Gulf War against Iraq in 1991, and accorded assistance to build Bangladesh's capacity as a major United Nations peacekeeper, which furthered US foreign policy goals in both Africa and close to home in Haiti. Though in 1998 Bangladesh political authorities rejected the US proposal to sign the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), that in Dhaka's perception would grant the US military unimpeded access, they were happy to go along with the Humanitarian Assistance Need Agreement (HANA), which accorded to some Bangladeshi analysts was a 'diluted, liberalized and modified' form of SOFA.

The Perception of Common Threats

Where the partnership at government level was key was security in global and national counter-terrorism activity. On 24 June 2016, both countries issued a Joint Statement following the fifth US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue in Washington. They recognised *Daesh* and *Al Qaeda* as common threat to both nations at a global level and announced Bangladesh's participation in the US Counterterrorism Partnership Fund⁹. Days later, on the night of 1-2 July terrorists attacked a café in Dhaka's leafy posh suburb of Gulshan and killed 18 foreigners and a number of locals. This followed an earlier series of attacks against individual minority community members. Terrorism thus burst into the political radar of Bangladesh as a major issue, which many saw the most overt reason for Kerry's trip to Bangladesh, though deeper analyses would show that this was only one of many and not necessarily the preponderant cause of the visit.

In the past US Secretaries of State have paid fulsome praise to Dhaka. On a visit to Bangladesh in 2003, Colin Powell described Bangladesh as "an elegant, compelling and greatly needed voice of moderation in the Muslim world"¹⁰. When Hillary Clinton, now a Presidential candidate, visited in that capacity in 2012, the ardour was more restrained. This was partly because she was less than happy over the treatment she assessed as unfair being meted out to

⁹ 'Joint Statement of the Fifth US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue, US Embassy in Bangladesh. Quoting Office of the Spokesperson, Department of State, Washington DC, June 24, 2016. <https://bd.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-fifth-u-s-bangladesh-partnership-dialogue/>, Dt. 1 September 2016.

¹⁰ "Powell praises Bangladesh", *BBC News*. Retrieved 22 July 2015.

her friend, the Nobel Peace laureate Professor Muhammed Yunus, whom the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Sheikh Mujib) had removed from the stewardship of the Grameen Bank. Hasina had also been demonstratively cool towards the former US Ambassador Dan Mozena, whom she saw as ‘interfering’ and consequently kept at an arm’s length, and consequently saw very little of. The 2013 National Elections witnessed a boycott by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia on apprehensions that the polls might be rigged since the Hasina had scotched the ‘election through Caretaker government system’. The result was a walk-over by the Awami League and political marginalization of the BNP to the extent that even the latter could not have foreseen. The American penchant for a political balance was seen as a negative sentiment by the Awami League. While Hasina desisted from openly poking America in the eye, she was not averse to occasional show of flashes of defiance. Furthermore she was possibly quite happy to see that her consolidation of power was possible without Washington’s blessings, just as the success of Bangladesh’s independence struggle was possible decades ago in 1971. Such being the setting, Kerry as Secretary of State, was unlikely to rush into a situation, where, at least in the analysis of some, angels would have feared to tread!

Backdrop of the Kerry Visit

But realities of politics created compelling reasons to bring this visit come to fruition. First, the Bangladesh government’s close ties with India, Hasina’s denial of space to Indian insurgents, resolution of some tricky bilateral issues with India such as those of land and maritime boundaries, and effective economic cooperation created sufficient stakes for India to feature Bangladesh at high level discussions between India and the US. Given the strategic profile that India is beginning to enjoy in Washington, the Obama Administration must have assessed it was high time Bangladesh was accorded some specific attention.

Second, despite enthusiastic camaraderie with the US Bangladesh was making headway as a key regional and international actor. It was a major Muslim-majority country where the faith practised was generally of a moderate persuasion and hence an example to be held up to others of the Islamic ilk. A reading of the ‘Fact Sheet’ of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs reveals an acknowledgment of Bangladesh’s active membership of such key international for a as the United Nations (where for years it has been a consistent participant in

peace-keeping operations), ASEAN Regional Forum , the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

Third, Bangladesh had achieved remarkable development successes particularly in such areas as poverty reduction, child welfare and education and women's empowerment despite multifarious challenges (the World Bank called the phenomenon a 'Bangladesh paradox' for those reasons), and if a greater stability could be ensured, there could be potentially higher commercial possibilities for the American private sector companies, just like India.

Fourth, American disinterestedness could and would easily pave the way for greater Chinese penetration, of which there was already a strong existing political culture. This would be to the chagrin of both US and India. China has significant allies among Bangladeshi politicians, bureaucrats, commercial circles, think tanks and the military, which could come to unsavoury fore (for the US and India) during the forthcoming visit of President Xi Jinping.

Finally, terrorist acts in Bangladesh, whether home-grown as the government insists or externally-linked as the Americans believe, were mounting and US support was needed to stem its tide and also prevent it from spilling across the frontiers, which would be to India's interest. So a situation had come about when the act of the Kerry visit was important in itself, perhaps more than the actual substance.

The visit, at long last

However, happily for both sides, the visit was not bereft of substance. Kerry struck the right chords by first visiting the 'Bangabandhu Museum', the premises where Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujib, was assassinated in August 1975. There he noted that Bangladesh was "moving in line with the vision of Bangabandhu under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's strong leadership"¹¹. Those few well- chosen words would have smoothed the way for any tough words he might have had to convey to his hosts thereafter. There are 'three D's' that are the stated goals of American policy in countries of such milieu: 'Democracy', 'development', and 'denial of space to terrorists'. Much like motherhood, it would be difficult for any side to find fault with any of these in broad terms. The devil could lie in the details,

¹¹ "IS believed to be 'connected' to BD operatives: Kerry", *Daily Star*, Dhaka, 29 August, 2016.<http://www.thedailystar.net/country/john-kerry-dhaka-significant-tour-starts-1277230>. Dt 30 August 2016

though. Among key government leaders Kerry held meetings with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali.

To strike a balance, or at least to be seen to be doing so, in terms of domestic politics in Bangladesh, Kerry also met with Khaleda Zia, the BNP Chairperson, though being out of Parliament, she was not technically the formal leader of opposition. The General Secretary of the BNP, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, painted a very positive picture of the American side. He stated: “They (the US) want to work with Bangladesh as a friend to establish democracy, human rights, and the rule of law”.¹² This of course implied that ‘democracy, human rights and rule of law’ did not exist in Bangladesh, and to restore these, US assistance would be required to be forthcoming.

Naturally, the Americans needed to be more subtle (for such assistance could be seen as being tantamount to ‘interference’), and their version of the discussions were more measured. The US Deputy Spokesperson Mark Toner said the following with regard to the talks: “The Secretary emphasized the importance of having a multiparty system with space for *peaceful* political opposition as a key component of a secure, pluralist democracy”.¹³ The word ‘peaceful’ was obviously used to signal discouragement of the kind of violence that the opposition BNP has been accused by the Awami League of having resorted to during the period preceding the elections of January 2014. To balance further Toner went on to say that Kerry “also underscored the implementation of a *united effort, involving all segments* of the community for countering the threats facing the country”.¹⁴ Given the nature of Bangladeshi politics, this call for unity, could be nothing much more than only ‘a consummation devoutly to be wished’!

While aiming to be neutral with regard to internal issues, Kerry did point to the need to resist the temptation, on the part of the government, to stifle opposition or debate, by cleverly putting it in the context of the goal of combatting terrorism: He said “Democracy still provides the most resilient and reliable platform we have for preventing and responding to violent terrorism... to defeat terrorists we must uphold, not betray the democratic principles we cherish

¹² “After Khaleda meets Kerry, BNP hopes to ‘restore democracy’ with US help”; bdnews24.com, 29 August 2016. <http://bdnews24.com/politics/2016/08/29/after-khaleda-meets-kerry-bnp-hopes-to-resto...> Dt. 30 August 2016.

¹³ US Department of State, Readout, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington DC, August 29, 2016.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and they abhor”.¹⁵ Such utterances ruffled no feathers, but put the message gently across. The US did not have the leverage to do anything much else.

The latter point could have been a bitter pill to swallow, if it was not for the fact that India is obviously doing a disproportionate amount of heavy lifting, on behalf of the US, with regard to Bangladesh. This would work when American and Indian interests coincide entirely. But this might not always be so. The US would prefer to inject a bit more of domestic balance, between the domestic protagonists in Bangladesh. Reports have it that Kerry, in the course of his brief nine hour visit (To many analysts, Bangladesh deserved more time!), had indeed made a pitch for an accountable, transparent and inclusive governance with a wary eye on the assertive governance of the powers that be in Bangladesh. But to what extent he would be heeded, or were they stated mainly for the record, remains to be seen.

There is another element that deserves a mention. Despite the talk of the so-called American tilt to Asia, and the underscoring of the significance of Muslim-majority nations as allies, President Barack Obama had failed to include Pakistan and Bangladesh in the long list of his international destinations. This could be seen as a mark of a modicum of indifference that would hardly be seen as reflecting the pivot.

China-US-Bangladesh: A Triangular Relationship

As early as January 2009 US President Barack Obama had made focus on Asia a key priority. Initially called a ‘tilt’, and later ‘rebalance’, the thrust was more towards the Pacific, including the South China Sea mostly in order to constrain Chinese assertions. Now that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a key cornerstone of the ‘rebalance’, has lost support in both Republican and Democratic camps under protectionist electoral pressure, Obama felt obliged to raise the rhetoric in favour of the Asian commitment, at the cost of substance. This has come through in the ASEAN Summit in Laos this September.¹⁶ But Xi Jinping’s China, with its *Zheng Guo Meng* or ‘China Dream’ seemed relentless in pursuit of its perceived self-interest which includes the ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative (now known simply as the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative). The competition with China is now also transferred to South Asia. In Pakistan, the

¹⁵ ‘Kerry Urges Bangladesh to Step Up Efforts against Terrorism’, Nightly News, Dhaka, 29 August 2016. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/kerry-urges-bangladesh-step-efforts-against-terr...> Dt. 30 August 2016

¹⁶ Tan Hui Yee, ‘US committed to Asia-Pacific for long term: Obama’, *Straits Times*, 7 September, 2016.

Chinese presence is already disproportionately large.¹⁷ Any penetration of Chinese influence which threatens to erode that of India would be perceived as being detrimental to American interests as well.

Another issue is the possibility of Chinese involvement over the issue of Bangladesh's deep sea port. This is an absolutely essential maritime infrastructural requirement for Bangladesh, which in its 45-year old history since independence has not built a new port. Now that by 2021 the export sector is expected to exceed US\$ 50 billion annually, the existing port of Chittagong and the river port of Chalna is woefully inadequate to service the burgeoning trade. Hence the planned deep sea port. There are four potential locations: Chittagong, Sonadia, Matarbari and Payra, all in the Bay of Bengal. The Chinese want the contract, but are reportedly being held back by Indian apprehensions, and American analysis of the possibility of their using it to build the so-called "String of Pearls" enclosing India. So Bangladesh is seen as "a keystone nation in the region, balancing together the contending influences of India, China, the US, and Japan"¹⁸.

In Bangladesh also, this has been growing over time, despite significant ties between the government and India. In October 2016, Xi Jinping, who will be in India for the BRICS Summit, is likely to visit Bangladesh. Already a whopping US\$ 9 b low-interest loan is planned by China to help build six rail projects, connecting Dhaka with key domestic industrial areas, and the Indian border. Some analysts have, therefore, suggested that "Bangladesh has become a focus for the growing geo-political rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi"¹⁹.

All these also point to a rising strategic importance of Bangladesh, which is not being lost on New Delhi most certainly, but also would be a note-worthy point for whichever Administration, the Republicans under Donald Trump, or the Democrats led by Hillary Clinton come into office following the US elections in November 2016.

¹⁷ Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury, 'China-Pakistan Relations: Evolution of an 'All-Weather Friendship', in *Pakistan: A Diplomat's Insights* (Singapore: Market Asia Books, 2015), pp 22-26.

¹⁸ See Wade Shepard, 'Bangladesh's Deep Sea Port Problem', *The Diplomat*, 7 June 2016. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/bangladeshs-deep-sea-port-problem/> Dt 6 September 2016

¹⁹ China plans \$9 billion loan for Bangladesh, *The Economic Times*, 5 July 2016. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/china-plans-9-billion-i...> Dt. 6 September 2016

Beyond the Kerry Visit

The realism in American foreign policy still remains tinged with an element of idealism as a part of the broad American political culture, even though it has largely been modified, partly as a result of perceived repeated policy failures in the Middle East and Afghanistan, partly because of the rise in importance of China and India, and partly because of the acrimonious and unsavoury nature of American domestic politics as evidenced in an unceremonious on-going Presidential campaign that has cost America, if not in power, but most certainly in prestige. Still America would like to shape order in key regions of the world in keeping with its perceived self-interests which are manifold and complex, South Asia included, without seemingly appearing to be a hegemon. In any case with China, as also with India, looming close, they can hardly do otherwise. Sometime ago, Henry Kissinger had quoted the Australian scholar Coral Bell as saying that America's challenge was to recognize its own pre-eminence, but to conduct its policy *as if it were* ...living in a world of many centres of power²⁰. The difference now is that it is indeed (not *as if*) living in such a world!

As America appears to slide into the so-called 'elegant decline' (the current manifestations of its Presidential electoral contest is threatening to appear to render this descent 'inelegant' to many foreign eyes) – the expression *so-called* is used advisedly as this notion is deeply contested – there is a correspondent rise of what the Europeans believe as their essential values. This is largely viewed by the Europeans as being embedded in their 'soft power'; human rights, gender mainstreaming, development, poverty alleviation being among them. The spread of these, which the European foreign policy argues is central to their external behaviour, would require a degree of 'managed globalization'. As an expert has stated: "The European doctrine of managed globalization envisions a world of multilateral rules that will supersede US power"²¹. So a country like Bangladesh, whose public ethos tends to share these values, to the extent that it wishes to partner the west, has a choice between Europe and America. But, of course, Europe and America are not in a competition for such courtship, and now that the UK has chosen to exit the European Union, this may limit somewhat European influence on the 'Anglo-oriented' developing world. Bangladesh is perhaps more deserving of international, and also American attention, than has been the case to date. As an analyst has stated, "whether

²⁰ Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need A Foreign Policy? Towards a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), p 288.

²¹ Elaine Sciolino, 'Nuclear Powers Vote to report Tehran to the UN', *New York Times*, 5 February 2006. Quoted in, John Bolton, *Surrender is Not an Option: Defending America at the UN and Abroad* (New York: Threshold, 2007) p.320

they (Bangladeshis) live in Bangladesh or have fanned out across the globe , they are in touch with transnational cultural visions that vary from the secular to the orthodox, from radical to moderate and from conservative to avant-garde...a multi-layered culture has always been the hallmark of the Bengal delta. The delta's history of multiple, moving frontiers has simply entered a new and exciting phase'²². It ought not to be ignored. Also, given the fact that in South Asia the relations between India and Pakistan remain volatile – there are even times when the two need to be pulled off from the brink of war – Bangladesh, at some point of time to the Americans, might seem to be a useful conduit to reaching the two protagonists. But right now, Dhaka and Islamabad do not enjoy any camaraderie worth writing home about – since their ties have been murky over some issues including the war-crimes trials in Bangladesh, over which Bangladesh has accused Pakistan of ‘interference’ – this kind of a role on the part of Dhaka seems a distant possibility, though one can never say never with absolute certitude in politics.

But the fact remains that even if the visit does not have a direct immediate impact on either bilateral relations, or Bangladesh's internal or external behaviour pattern, the visit was an important interaction. For a variety of reasons Bangladesh is an important state player, and no matter the nature of Administration voted into office in Washington in November, both sides would want at least a working relationship. Indeed both sides should seize the opportunity of the change in Washington to re-engage each other with greater vigour. The US could hold up Bangladesh as an example of a market driven reasonably rapidly developing Muslim majority nation influenced by similar values. The US for Bangladesh would remain a continued source of material and intellectual support .It is not inconceivable that Sheikh Hasina might bring the election schedule in Bangladesh forward from the current 2018/19, calculating that the opposition now may be weak enough for her to win in a canter, which would generate for her a much greater level of acceptance in the West in general, and the US in particular. That would create a very positive climate for strengthened linkages. Neither side should allow the Manichean principle of seeing things as of black and white influence perceptions or behaviour. Bilateral relations in the contemporary world are much more complex than that and should be driven by reason and interest, both of which should constitute invitation to sober reflection designed to forge closer ties between these two countries.

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²² Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.267