



Proceedings
Country Lecture
on

Five Decades of Bangladesh-China Relations: Towards a New Height

Thursday, 08 May 2025



Organised by
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

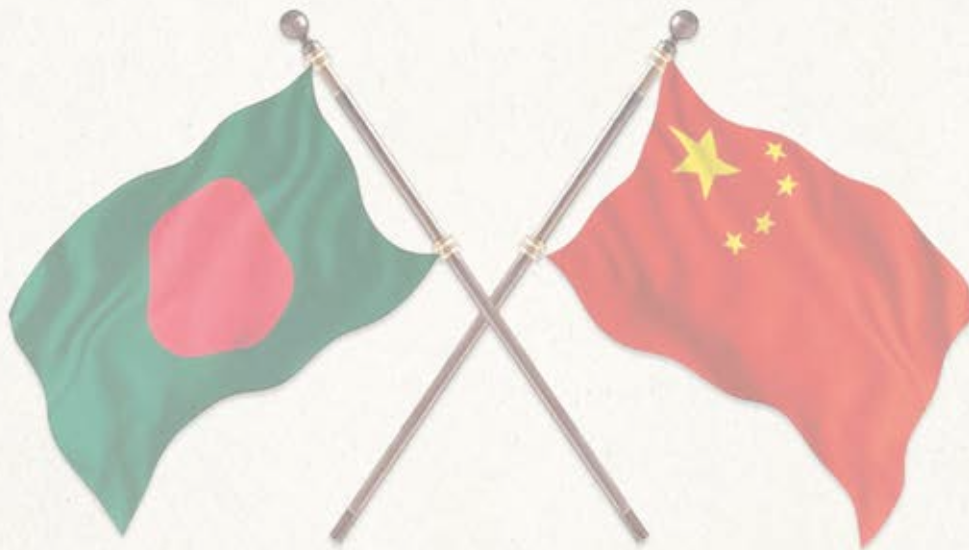




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Country Lecture on Five Decades of Bangladesh-China Relations: Towards a New Height



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised a Country Lecture on “**Five Decades of Bangladesh-China Relations: Towards A New Height**” on Thursday, 8th May 2025, at the BISS auditorium. **H E Mr Yao Wen**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the People’s Republic of China to the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, was the Guest Speaker at the Country Lecture. Ambassador **AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, **Chairman, BISS**, Chaired the Session. **Major General Iftexhar Anis**, **BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng, Director General, BISS**, delivered the welcome address. **Professor Imtiaz Ahmed**, Retired Professor of International Relations & Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Dhaka, Bangladesh, set the tone of the Country Lecture. Senior officials from different ministries, diplomatic missions, media, researchers, academicians and students from various universities, representatives from other think tanks, and international organisations actively participated in the country lecture. They enriched it by presenting their valuable opinions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion.

Welcome Address



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng
Director General, BISS

Major General Iftekhar Anis began the event, highlighting the significance of five decades of formal diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and China, a partnership that had grown steadily since 1975. He stated that this relationship had been grounded in mutual respect, non-interference, and win-win cooperation, and had evolved to encompass a wide range of sectors, including infrastructure, trade, defence, education, culture, and people-to-people exchanges. He believed the Lecture would offer a valuable opportunity to reflect on the remarkable journey of bilateral cooperation and to explore new dimensions of future collaboration.

The Director General further noted that 2025 had been declared the “China-Bangladesh Year of People-to-People Exchanges”, emphasising the deepening ties between the two nations. He mentioned that since 2006, China had become Bangladesh’s largest trading partner, even without sharing a border. He emphasised the need to view this partnership beyond bilateral frameworks, taking into account regional and global dynamics. Major General Anis emphasised that China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) had contributed significantly to infrastructure development in Bangladesh, particularly in ports, roads, and energy sectors. At the same time, advanced technology sharing has supported industrial and digital modernisation. He also highlighted the long-standing defence cooperation between the two countries through joint exercises, purchases, and training exchanges.

Addressing the participants, Major General Anis pointed out that the economic partnership between Bangladesh and China had expanded remarkably in recent years, demonstrating alignment in development priorities and financial interests. He mentioned that in the last decade, Chinese companies had got contracts worth over US\$ 22 billion in Bangladesh's development initiatives, including vital infrastructure like highways, bridges, and energy projects, improving connectivity and energy security.¹



The Director General stated that trade relations had advanced notably since June 2020, when Bangladeshi products gained zero-tariff access to the Chinese market. This access, he said, had boosted export potential and helped reduce the trade imbalance. He referred to the recent visit of Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus, during which China extended duty-free and quota-free access until 2028 and signed various agreements covering economic cooperation, classical literature, cultural heritage, media, sports, and health. He remarked that this demonstrated the multidimensional nature of Bangladesh-China relations, which now included soft power diplomacy and people-centred development cooperation.

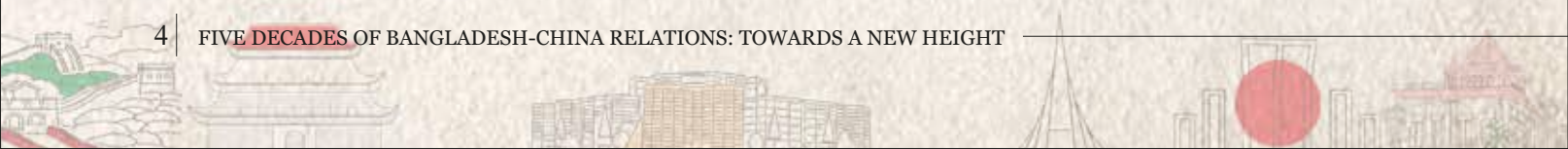
Speaking on the Rohingya issue, Major General Anis identified it as a major concern for Bangladesh. He acknowledged China's support for the early repatriation of Rohingyas who had fled from Myanmar's Rakhine State. He stated that China had taken a diplomatic and mediatory role in facilitating dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. He said the future of cooperation would depend on several factors, such as the political situation in Myanmar, the willingness of the Rohingyas to return, and the engagement of the international community.

¹ Abbas Uddin Noyon, "How China's Belt and Road changing Bangladesh's economy and infrastructures," The Business Standard, 01 October, 2023, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/how-chinas-belt-and-road-changing-bangladeshs-infrastructures-709826>

Nonetheless, he expressed optimism that China would continue to play a constructive role, advocating for bilateral dialogue to advance the repatriation process.

The Director General further highlighted the cooperation between BIISS and the Embassy of China in Dhaka, which enhanced Track 1.5 diplomacy through regular dialogues and exchanges with institutions like International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC), China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CIISS), Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), and China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), building a strong platform for mutual understanding and strategic discussion.

In conclusion, Major General Anis expressed hope that the CLS would deepen understanding of the evolving dynamics of Bangladesh-China relations and offer insights into how this partnership could be further elevated in light of regional and global changes. He encouraged all attendees to engage actively and envision a future where Bangladesh-China cooperation can reach even greater heights.



Presentation

Five Decades of Bangladesh-China Relations: Towards a New Height



Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

*Retired Professor of International Relations &
Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Dhaka, Bangladesh*

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed began his speech by emphasising that people create countries, not the other way around. He argued that people shape and reshape countries, sometimes making them attractive and sometimes horrid and unattractive through shortsightedness and bickering. He stated that the people make the relationship between countries. He stressed that one must consider the relationship between the people of these two countries while discussing Bangladesh-China relations, not only from the last five decades but from the previous thousand years or more, as Bangladesh and China are civilisational entities. He contended that it was necessary to delve into the past as much as the present to elevate the Bangladesh-China relationship to 'a new height.' He quoted T S Eliot to reinforce this point: "Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past."

The relationship between these civilisational entities, Professor Ahmed explained, had roots that extended far beyond modern nation-states. Chinese travellers like Faxian in the 5th century, Xuanzang and Yijing in the 7th century, made arduous journeys to Bengal. Faxian had described the region's people as "happy." At the same time, Xuanzang had observed the eastern part of India as "rich and moist, and the cultivated fields productive," explaining why travellers from

faraway lands were attracted to Bengal. Similarly, Professor Ahmed noted that Admiral Zheng He's (1371-1433) voyages represented a more spectacular connection, as his armada sailed through the Bay of Bengal, stopping at Chattogram port in the 15th century. Zheng, He had commanded seven expeditions over 28 years, with his largest fleet comprising more than 300 ships and 37,000 sailors. The flourishing trade between Bengal and China was evidenced by a giraffe sent as a gift from Sultan Shihabuddin Bayazid of Bengal to Emperor Zhu Di in 1414.

Professor Ahmed pointed out that exchanges also flowed in the opposite direction. Notable travellers from Bengal to China included Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas (595-674 CE), one of Prophet Muhammad's companions, who travelled to China via Lalmonirhat and the Brahmaputra. The Chinese Hui Muslims credited him with introducing Islam to China during the Tang dynasty in the 7th century. Another significant traveller was Atish Dipankar (982-1054 CE) from Bikrampur, who journeyed to Tibet and other adjacent regions of China in the 11th century.



Professor Ahmed explained that the richness of Bengal eventually attracted Europeans to make oceanic voyages, though with different objectives than those of Chinese explorers. While Chinese voyages were exploratory and returned with knowledge and tradable goods, Europeans sought gold, spices and profits from trading rights. They were interested in colonising distant shores, exploiting the wealth of the colonised, and sending the bounty back to their home countries. Professor Ahmed especially emphasised that before the colonisation, China was the wealthiest country in the world until the beginning of the 19th century, and “undivided India” was second, comprising 23 per cent of the world economy. Bengal during this period was recognised as a “paradise”. The colonisers chose Bengal as their entry point and succeeded in colonising it in 1757, amid shortsightedness and bickering of the locals.

Professor Ahmed added that this colonial period laid the foundation for what he called the “geopolitics of conflict.” Since the Europeanisation of the world, geopolitics has carried negative connotations. Theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries conceptualised geopolitics in terms of colonialism and *lebensraum* (living space). However, he emphasised that it was the policy of yesteryears. The geopolitical theories from colonial times had become redundant after decolonisation, as national capitalism transformed into globalisation and multipolarity emerged. This multipolarity was fluid, not rigid like unipolar or bipolar systems. Despite some countries trying to reverse this trend, he believes human aspirations worldwide, with knowledge and technology at their fingertips, could not return to colonialism. Instead, he argued that globalisation and multipolarity had created space for what could be called the “geopolitics of cooperation”. Since Bangladesh and China had embraced globalisation and multipolarity and were ready to engage with an uncertain but promising world, Professor Ahmed suggested both would be eager to promote “geopolitics of cooperation” to serve their citizens better.

In the backdrop of global transformation into a fluid multipolar system over the last five decades, Professor Ahmed acknowledged China as a trusted friend to Bangladesh, committing developmental support amounting to over US\$ 7.5 billion since recognising Bangladesh in October 1975. Moreover, China is Bangladesh's largest trading partner, with trade volume exceeding US\$ 25 billion. Despite this massive developmental support, Bangladesh owes China only US\$ 5.57 billion, approximately 9 per cent of its total external debt of US\$ 103.63 billion as of December 2024.

Professor Ahmed refuted what he called, Sino-phobic portrayals of a debt-trap scenario. However, to allay fears, he highlighted that successive Bangladesh governments have requested China to reduce interest rates and extend loan repayment periods. A quicker decision from China on both issues would further strengthen the bilateral relationship. The China-Bangladesh relationship, he further observed, had remained exceptional for two reasons: China's non-interference in domestic politics and its maintenance of relationships with all political stakeholders in Bangladesh, regardless of their affiliation as left, liberal, or right.

Looking forward, Professor Ahmed identified four key areas where Bangladesh and China could enhance their relationship to a ‘new height’:

I. The Teesta Project

Professor Ahmed explained that the flow of the Teesta river was seasonal. Due to a lack of dredging, floods occur during the rainy season, and the river becomes nearly waterless during the dry season. This affects thousands of families in northern Bangladesh. A credible solution would be to store water during the rainy season for use during the dry season, though this solution comes with costs.

Professor Ahmed noted this is where China enters the Indo-Bangladesh hydro-political scenario following Bangladesh's request for a US\$ 983.27 million loan to implement a "Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project." This involvement stemmed from India's failure to resolve the water issue by signing a draft agreement on the Teesta over the past 14 years.

Professor Ahmed identified the three following options for addressing this issue:

- 1) Bangladesh could pursue a unilateral deal with China, though this would require political will and might risk unfriending India. Nevertheless, Professor Ahmed emphasised how in the age of emerging multipolarity, China and India are already engaged in the geopolitics of cooperation.
- 2) A tripartite arrangement between Bangladesh, China, and India could be formed to build water storage facilities, considering that if India felt threatened by China's involvement, joining the initiative would be better than opposing it. As asserted by Professor Ahmed, this would be a game-changer and a model worth celebrating in the emerging multipolar world.
- 3) Professor Ahmed suggested that the most credible option would be forming a consortium that includes China, India, Japan, and other countries and international agencies. This approach would recognise that the Teesta project is economic, not security-oriented, and could be profitable for all members. He pointed out the similarities with other infrastructural economic projects, where components came from multiple countries, beyond China and Japan. The consortium can be a win-win case, making the investment profitable for all the members.

II. The Rohingya Crisis

Professor Ahmed stated that the Rohingya issue is equally contentious. Various bilateral, multilateral, and tripartite efforts have been attempted, including a "tripartite joint working mechanism" formed by Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China in New York in September 2019. However, to date, this initiative has failed to repatriate a single Rohingya to Myanmar.

Professor Ahmed argued that new approaches should be initiated despite limited success in existing pathways. Quoting Sun Tzu and Einstein, he emphasised "every crisis is an opportunity." He proposed an out-of-the-box solution akin to a mini-Marshall Plan for the Rakhine State, which would appeal to both the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army while facilitating the repatriation of Rohingya with help from multiple countries, where China could play an active role in making this a reality. Drawing from similarities, he used the parallel of Saudi Arabia's former intelligence chief, Prince Turki al-Faisal, who had recently proposed a Marshall Plan for Gaza so that the Palestinians can "remain in their homeland".

III. Health, Education, and Innovation Hub

Professor Ahmed pointed out that an opportunity has emerged for closer Bangladesh-China relations in the health sector. Rather than simply encouraging Bangladeshi patients to seek treatment in China due to India's visa restrictions, Bangladesh should seek China's support in revamping its health sector. He suggested that China's investment in Bangladesh's health infrastructure, research, and technology could attract patients, doctors, and researchers from Bangladesh and beyond, potentially stopping the "brain drain" and contributing to national development. As part of the 50-year celebration of diplomatic ties, China has already committed to building a 500 to 700-bed hospital in Bangladesh. Additionally, Chinese technology could link Bangladeshi and Chinese hospitals for diagnosis and research, starting with a pilot project

involving 10 hospitals, preferably outside Dhaka. Once the pilot efforts are successful, the linkages could be further scaled up.

According to Professor Ahmed, educational collaboration also showed great potential, particularly at the primary school level. With newer technologies, Bangladeshi and Chinese primary school students and faculty members could communicate online, learning languages, scientific materials, and each other's cultures. However, he contrasted that it would not create the Asian bonding needed in this part of the world, given that minds become rigid in adulthood and are seldom open to transformation and new things. Instead, he stressed that educational linkages at the primary level are essential. This could create a model of regional cooperation that extended beyond national boundaries.

Bangladesh faces a serious challenge in retaining its youth, especially the brightest ones, leading to corruption and money laundering issues. As the Governor of Bangladesh Bank, Dr Ahsan Mansur, noted, many politicians, bureaucrats, and businesspeople laundered money as their children studied abroad. According to a December 2024 White Paper, US\$ 16.7 billion was laundered annually from Bangladesh. Professor Ahmed suggested that innovation hubs supported by China could make Bangladesh more attractive to its youth and stem this brain drain.

He further noted that most of the developed Western countries are diasporic and are, therefore, structurally forced to hunt talent throughout the world, particularly in developing countries. As a result, instability, misgovernance, and poor infrastructure in developing countries are often blessings for them. He highlighted that in Bangladesh, very few youths, including their parents, possess the tenacity and the patience to realise their future in the place of their birth. Professor Ahmed paraphrased Thomas Hobbes to describe the place of birth as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

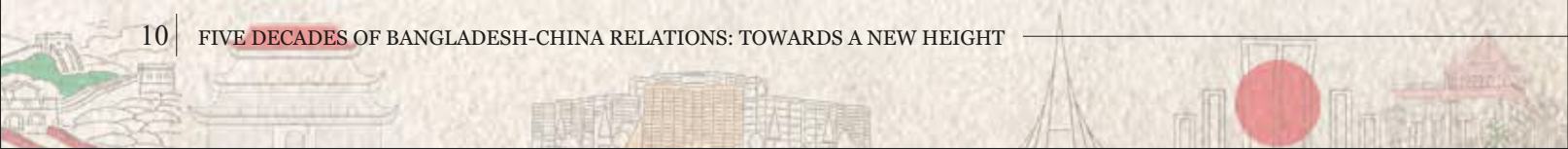
IV. Infrastructure Development

Professor Ahmed briefly discussed infrastructure development, noting China's significant role in Bangladesh's mega-projects, including the Padma Bridge, Karnaphuli Tunnel, Elevated Expressway, and various power supply projects. He addressed concerns from some economists who opposed mega-projects. He compared their perspective to that of a Luddite (opposed to new technology), cautioning policymakers and citizens about the futility of investing in mega-projects. The professor argued that while such projects might not meet global ‘mega-project’ standards, they were just ‘infrastructure projects’ and were essential for national development. He questioned how a country could develop without such infrastructure projects, how engineers could gain employment, what would happen to the professionalism and technological knowledge that came with infrastructure development, and the local army of workers employed when building a road or bridge. To amplify his point, Professor Ahmed quoted the famous Chinese saying, “if you want to be wealthy, build a road first”.

Professor Ahmed advocated for connecting all eight divisional headquarters of Bangladesh - Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Khulna, and Barisal - with high-speed trains, which would transform the country's landscape and connectivity. With trains capable of running 300 km/h, travel between Dhaka and Sylhet (228.3 km) would take just 48

minutes, allowing people to live in one city and work in another, even go for lunch and return to work. As an unintended consequence, this would reduce population pressure on Dhaka and Chattogram while developing rural towns and villages. He highlighted that China had already achieved this with its 48,000-kilometre high-speed rail network and was helping other Southeast Asian countries build similar infrastructure. This was another area where Bangladesh-China relations could reach new heights in the not-so-distant future.

Professor Ahmed concluded that the foundation for reaching a "new height" in Bangladesh-China relations already existed. Surveys on the "Image of China in Bangladesh" conducted since 2022 consistently showed that Bangladeshis had a positive impression of China. When asked which country came to mind first when thinking about Bangladesh's development partners, the response was consistently "China"! Professor Ahmed stated that as People's Republics and civilisational entities, Bangladesh and China were destined to cherish and pursue the ideal of friendship, mutual respect, and a global community with a shared future.



Country Lecture



H E Mr Yao Wen

*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the People's Republic of China to the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

H E Mr Yao Wen began by expressing gratitude to the event's organisers and participants, saying it was a privilege and profound honour to be invited as the guest speaker. He noted that the Lecture was a significant opportunity to reflect on five decades of friendship between Bangladesh and China and envision an even brighter future for their bilateral relationship. He thanked BIIS for hosting the event and acknowledged the support of attendees for the continued development of China-Bangladesh relations.

Referring to establishing diplomatic ties on October 4, 1975, he observed that the relationship had since flourished across political, economic, military, and cultural dimensions. He stated that mutual understanding and people-to-people exchanges had elevated the partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, which reflected the commitment and trust shared by both nations.

Ambassador Wen highlighted three key characteristics of the bilateral relationship over the past 50 years: equality, development, and people-centeredness.

He explained that the relationship was based on equality, emphasising President Xi Jinping's position that all countries, regardless of their size or strength, were equal members of the international community and had the right to determine their social systems and development paths. China, he stated, had always respected Bangladesh's sovereignty and supported its

independence and development. In return, he mentioned that Bangladesh had firmly adhered to the one-China principle and supported China's positions on core issues such as Taiwan, Xizang (Tibet), human rights, and the South China Sea. He noted that this mutual respect had helped the relationship withstand global and domestic political changes.



On the second point, he said the relationship had been development-driven. He described the last five decades as a chapter of joint development, with Bangladesh being the first South Asian country to join the BRI. He said this cooperation had significantly enhanced Bangladesh's infrastructure and economic growth. He cited specific contributions by Chinese enterprises, such as creating over 550,000 jobs and constructing major transport and power infrastructure. He also referred to Bangladeshis' comments describing China as a trustworthy development partner. He added that China had remained the largest investor in Bangladesh since the interim government was formed, and had provided tariff-free access to Bangladeshi exports until 2028. He detailed recent investments and trade agreements, and expressed optimism about future economic ties, especially with the arrival of more Chinese companies and the expansion of agricultural exports such as mango, jackfruit, guava, and possibly Hilsa fish to China.

Ambassador Wen stated that over 100 Chinese investors would visit Bangladesh later that month, led by the Chinese Minister of Commerce, and emphasised that this marked the largest Chinese business delegation to the country. He expressed confidence that these initiatives would elevate the economic relationship to a new level.

Thirdly, Ambassador Wen described the relationship as people-centred. He stated that enduring friendship between the two nations' people had always been a foundation of bilateral ties. He noted the increasing number of Bangladeshis travelling to China for education and business, and a growing Chinese presence in Bangladesh. With 68 flights operating weekly between the two countries and a new route from Kunming to Chattogram underway, he said connectivity had been significantly strengthened. He recalled a memorable drone show on April 14, 2025,

celebrating Bangladesh's history and China-Bangladesh friendship. He also mentioned the upcoming launch of a Bengali version of "Xi Jinping: The Governance of China" and a "China Book Corner" initiative.

Ambassador Wen mentioned several humanitarian and health collaborations, such as joint efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency aid during Bangladesh's Dengue outbreak and last year's floods, and the delivery of advanced rehabilitation equipment. Chinese experts, he said, were already in Bangladesh to install the equipment and train local staff.

He referred to the Chief Adviser's recent visit to Beijing as a significant milestone. This visit, he noted, marked the first high-level bilateral interaction since the formation of the interim government and led to over 10 cooperation outcomes. He stressed that now was the time to implement the leaders' consensus and further strengthen the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership.

Ambassador Wen outlined key goals for the future, including building a community with a shared future, supporting Bangladesh's development, and enhancing strategic coordination. He reiterated China's readiness to assist with major development projects, such as the BRI, Mongla Port, the Chinese Economic Zone in Chattogram, and the Teesta River project. He added that China welcomed industrial relocation and sought to promote deeper integration of supply chains and modernisation for both countries. He emphasised the importance of fostering closer people-to-people ties, especially in education and healthcare. He announced plans to offer Bangladeshi students more scholarships and launch youth exchange programmes. He said special visa facilitation would be provided to Bangladeshi citizens seeking medical treatment in China, and that various new initiatives would be introduced to deepen mutual understanding.

Turning to global affairs, Ambassador Wen addressed international trade tensions. He criticised the US administration for imposing unilateral tariffs that disrupted the global economic order and said China had taken countermeasures. He noted that China was open to dialogue, with Vice Premier He Lifeng scheduled to meet the US Treasury Secretary in Switzerland. He stated that compromise should not replace fairness and that China would stand firm in defending its rights.

He also expressed concern over escalating tensions between India and Pakistan following military strikes. He urged both sides to exercise restraint and avoid actions that might worsen the situation. As a neighbour to both, China, he said, opposed terrorism and called for an impartial investigation.

Ambassador Wen concluded that the world was experiencing instability and uncertainty, but China remained committed to standing on the right side of history and promoting peace and human progress. Finally, he said the ancient Silk Road had long connected Bangladesh and China, and the two nations would walk side by side on the path to modernisation. Reaffirming China's commitment to strengthening traditional friendship, strategic communication, practical cooperation, and people-to-people bonds, he called for joint efforts to usher in a new "golden 50 years" of China-Bangladesh relations.

Open Discussion



Lieutenant General M Harun-Ar-Rashid (Retd)

Former Chief of Army Staff of the Bangladesh Army

Lieutenant General M Harun-Ar-Rashid expressed his appreciation to the Chair and gratitude to all the presenters, especially the Chinese Ambassador and Professor Ahmed, for their insightful and comprehensive presentations, which enriched the audience's understanding of China and its relationship with Bangladesh. He remarked that the presentations were lucid and informative, and the participants were deeply grateful for the perspectives shared.

Reflecting on the long-standing and deepening friendship between Bangladesh and China, General Rashid noted that this relationship had evolved based on mutual understanding and shared aspirations. He observed that Bangladesh and China stand as strategic partners and Bangladesh sincerely acknowledges the contributions of its partners, particularly China, in the country's development journey.

Referring to various sectors of cooperation highlighted in the presentations, he expressed that while infrastructure development is vital, human resource development is the most crucial area requiring investment. He pointed out that a significant portion of Bangladesh's population, around 40 per cent of its 180 million people, is under 30. While this represents a large potential workforce, he regretted that a significant segment of this group had not been transformed into skilled human resources and instead remained underutilised as the general workforce.

General Rashid emphasised that development would remain elusive without empowering people with the necessary skills and capabilities. Citing a Bangladesh Bank statistics from the previous year, he mentioned that approximately US\$ 4 billion had been spent on paying foreign experts working in Bangladesh. He argued that this reflects a pressing need for domestic capacity building.

General Rashid proposed that, alongside infrastructure investment, China and Bangladesh should prioritise technical and vocational education to develop local expertise. With around one million students qualifying from higher secondary levels each year, only a small fraction of whom enter universities, a significant opportunity exists to enhance technical training.

General Rashid suggested that China could lead in this area, given its experience and partnership with Bangladesh. He invited the Chinese Ambassador to share his thoughts on how this potential collaboration in human resource development could be realised.

Rear Admiral A S M A Awal (Retd)

Senior Fellow, Cosmos Foundation



Rear Admiral Awal extended his greetings to His Excellency Mr Yao Wen on the golden jubilee of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and China. He referred to the findings of a multi-year survey conducted by the Centre for Alternatives, which yielded several noteworthy insights about public perceptions of the Bangladesh-China relationship. Admiral Awal noted with appreciation that a significant majority of the respondents, 61.4 per cent, expressed positive views about the bilateral ties, with an additional 23 per cent maintaining a neutral stance. He interpreted this to mean that as relations deepen, overall public approval could exceed 80%, a highly significant figure.

While acknowledging China as Bangladesh's preferred trading partner and a reliable and friendly country, he emphasised that a critical area still needs further attention: the Rohingya repatriation issue. He recalled that during the recent visit of Bangladesh's Chief Advisor, assurances were made that China would take more proactive steps in facilitating the repatriation process. Admiral Awal welcomed China's stated position that repatriation remains the only viable solution to the Rohingya crisis.

He also referenced the earlier tripartite agreement involving China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, which, according to him, failed to produce results, a fact also reflected in public opinion data. Citing the survey, he highlighted that in 2022, 56 per cent of respondents were "not at all satisfied" with China's role in repatriation. However, he noted with optimism that this figure had dropped to 15.25 per cent, indicating a shift in public perception and a window of opportunity.

He further pointed out that when respondents were asked which country they believed could make the most difference in resolving the repatriation issue, 57.14 per cent identified China. He said this demonstrated a substantial burden of expectation placed on China by the Bangladeshi public.

Admiral Awal concluded by acknowledging China's long-standing policy of non-interference in Myanmar's internal affairs. Nevertheless, he urged the Chinese Ambassador to consider whether China's efforts to protect its strategic and economic interests in Myanmar, particularly in the Rakhine state, could align with Bangladesh's urgent priority of repatriating the Rohingyas. He proposed that such alignment could lead to a mutually beneficial, win-win resolution for all parties involved.



Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman

Senior Trustee, BRAC

Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman began by expressing his appreciation to the Chair, His Excellency Mr Yao Wen and Professor Imtiaz Ahmed for their insightful presentations. He acknowledged that both speakers have reaffirmed the strong and enduring foundation of the Bangladesh–China friendship, and he conveyed confidence that this relationship would continue to flourish.

Marking the occasion of five decades of bilateral relations, Dr Rahman took the opportunity to emphasise a dimension he felt deserved greater attention. While much of the cooperation between Bangladesh and China has understandably focused on economic engagement and people-to-people ties falling within both hard and soft power domains, he believed there remained significant untapped potential in ideas and intellectual exchange.

He noted that the world is undergoing a profound transformation, with countries across the globe engaged in efforts to rebuild state institutions and reimagine governance structures. In this context, he observed that Bangladesh draws disproportionately from Western models in governance reform, economic management, and institutional development. He suggested that Bangladesh could benefit by engaging more deeply with Chinese intellectual and policy experiences.

Dr Rahman referred explicitly to the work of His Excellency Wang Huning, a member of the Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China, whose academic writings on meritocracy and practical governance offer valuable insights. He believed such ideas represented a new frontier for Bangladesh-China cooperation, moving beyond economic transactions to a more idea-driven partnership.

He also addressed the mega projects in Bangladesh, noting that these often suffer from being implemented as isolated initiatives. Drawing on the Chinese experience, he stressed that infrastructure must be developed as part of integrated systems that produce broader social and economic impacts. In this regard, he suggested that Bangladesh could learn from China's approach to system-wide planning and coordination.

Dr Rahman concluded by expressing his hope that the next fifty years of Bangladesh-China relations would continue to be grounded in strong economic ties but would also deepen in the domain of ideas, particularly those related to governance, decentralisation, and institutional reform. He sees great promise in learning from China's success in leveraging local governments as platforms for driving economic transformation and in fostering merit-based administrative systems.

Professor Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir

Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka



Professor Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir in his remarks offered three substantive comments, seeking reflections from the Ambassador in his response.

Firstly, he referred to the Ambassador's earlier reference to a “new kind of modernisation” tailored to Bangladesh’s context. Professor Titumir noted that such modernisation, particularly when driven by Chinese investment in infrastructure, necessarily hinges on robust connectivity. He highlighted the importance of regional connectivity initiatives, such as the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor and potential linkages involving Korea. He expressed some surprise that these frameworks had not been emphasised in the earlier remarks and suggested that if Professor Ahmed’s work on regional corridors is taken seriously, such connectivity should be a central guiding vision. He invited the Ambassador and Professor Ahmed to share their perspectives on how these regional initiatives fit into broader visions of modernisation.

Secondly, Professor Titumir turned to international financial architecture. He acknowledged China’s instrumental role in this domain, particularly on the 10th anniversary of the New Development Bank (NDB). However, he observed that many Chinese-led initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and NDB, still tend to follow traditional financing models. In this context, he posed a critical question: What does China envision when it speaks rhetorically about the solidarity of the Global South? Drawing inspiration from Dr Rahman’s remarks, he emphasised that China has pioneered structural monetary and fiscal policy reforms through institutions like the People's Bank of China and the Ministry of Finance. Bangladesh appears to lack similar support in policy-level reforms, especially concerning fiscal and monetary strategies. He asked how China views the possibility of deeper collaboration with Bangladesh in this sphere, especially in strengthening linkages between the People’s Bank of China and the Bangladesh Bank.

Thirdly, Professor Titumir addressed the ongoing discourse around the diversification of Bangladesh's defence procurement. He questioned how China would respond to the perception that it currently holds a monopoly over Bangladesh’s defence imports. Additionally, he asked how China envisions the future of bilateral defence cooperation, especially in light of strategic dynamics in the Bay of Bengal region.

Finally, acknowledging that Ambassador Yao Wen was nearing the end of his diplomatic tenure in Bangladesh, Professor Titumir invited him to share his reflections on his time in the country and what memories or experiences he would cherish the most.



Dr Bulbul Siddiqi

Associate Professor, North South University

Dr Bulbul Siddiqi commented and followed it with a question directed to Professor Imtiaz Ahmed. He noted that, based on his ongoing research at the Confucius Institute, there has been a growing promotion of the Chinese language among Bangladeshi youth, with efforts to expand its teaching to the school level. He suggested that this initiative could be taken to the next level, considering the vast opportunities available in China for students

who acquire proficiency in the language. He highlighted the potential for Bangladeshi youth to access higher education and degrees from globally leading Chinese universities. He emphasised the need to strategically utilise these opportunities, especially given the strong bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and China.

In his question, Dr Siddiqi reflected on China's significant modernisation since the 1949 revolution, which had been referenced multiple times during the discussion. He asked Professor Ahmed why, despite undergoing substantial transformations, particularly since its liberation in 1971, Bangladesh has not been able to effectively learn from neighbouring countries like China in addressing poverty, hunger, and other persistent development challenges. He requested Professor Ahmed's perspective on what lessons Bangladesh could draw from China's experience after all these years.

Mir Mustafijur Rahman

Special Correspondent, The Financial Express

Mr Mir Mustafijur Rahman inquired about China's stance on the aid corridor to Rakhine, questioning whether it was an aid corridor or aid channels. They also asked about a meeting certain political parties had with the Chinese ambassador, during which they allegedly proposed creating an independent territory for Rakhine in Myanmar and requested an update on the Teesta project.



Lieutenant Colonel Md Shahadat Hossain (Retd)



Lieutenant Colonel Shahadat established his credentials by noting his 38-year engagement with China-Bangladesh relations. He emphasised continuous study and communication with Chinese counterparts. He highlighted his particular contribution in promoting informal diplomacy and his unique perspective gained from serving as an interpreter during bilateral meetings.

Addressing the seminar's theme of people-to-people contact, he acknowledged the valuable insights already shared by previous speakers, including Professor Imtiaz Ahmed and Ambassador Yao Wen. Based on his extensive experience, he expressed strong confidence in the Bangladesh-China friendship. He noted that, according to estimates, 300,000 to 500,000 Bangladeshis had visited China over the past five decades, with most returning with favourable impressions. He observed that China had maintained a consistently friendly diplomatic approach despite various changes in Bangladesh's government.

Colonel Shahadat then outlined several proposals for enhancing bilateral ties. He suggested leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative more effectively by shifting focus from mega infrastructure projects to grassroots engagement. Specifically, he proposed establishing eight comprehensive educational institutions across Bangladesh's divisions, from kindergarten to university level, where citizens of both nations could learn together. He further recommended developing eight hospitals, eight high-speed rail connections, and a significant training centre to prepare Bangladeshi youth for employment in Chinese projects domestically and internationally.

He expressed concern about experienced professionals, including interpreters from previous mega projects, who are now unemployed due to decreased project activity. He urged Chinese authorities to consider engaging these workers in Bangladesh or other BRI participating countries. He emphasised the importance of the Chinese language and vocational training to integrate Bangladeshi workers into Chinese-led initiatives better.

Colonel Shahadat reiterated his long-standing recommendation for establishing a Bangladesh-China Complex to serve the scattered Chinese community in Bangladesh, complete with accommodations, hotels, and recreational facilities. He also suggested joint oceanographic exploration to help address the trade imbalance between the nations.

In conclusion, he offered a comparative perspective on the two countries, noting China's substantially larger population and landmass that proportionately increased Bangladeshi hopes for mutual development. Emphasising the principle of a win-win relationship, he concluded his remarks with gratitude to all attendees.

Responses



H E Mr Yao Wen

*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
People's Republic of China to the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

Ambassador Yao Wen expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the open discussion session and shared that he was inspired by the spirit of enthusiasm demonstrated by the audience. He appreciated the suggestions and recommendations to enhance China's cooperation with Bangladesh further.

Addressing the issue of Rohingya repatriation, the Ambassador acknowledged it as one of Bangladesh's top concerns and commended Bangladesh for the significant sacrifices it had made in sheltering more than 1.2 million Rohingyas. He reiterated that repatriation was the only viable solution to the crisis and emphasised China's consistent and firm stance.

He stated that Bangladesh and Myanmar maintain good relations with China and look to China to facilitate dialogue between them. He said China has actively facilitated several trilateral meetings at the senior official and foreign minister levels. Since arriving in Bangladesh, he has spent considerable time on this issue. He highlighted that efforts were made in 2023 to initiate a pilot repatriation project, aiming to return approximately 6,000 to 7,000 Rohingyas to Rakhine State.

However, Ambassador Wen noted that despite significant progress, the repatriation process was stalled due to the outbreak of internal conflict in Myanmar in 2023. Given the ongoing unrest, he stated that the current circumstances were not conducive to restarting the process.

Nonetheless, he affirmed that China would not give up its efforts and would continue to work toward a ceasefire arrangement, particularly between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, which he identified as essential to creating the conditions necessary for repatriation.

Ambassador Wen mentioned that China had already facilitated a few peace talks between conflicting parties, including ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar military, but acknowledged that a lack of mutual trust had hindered concrete progress. He reaffirmed China's commitment to continue its role as a facilitator. He stressed that a concerted effort by all stakeholders, including ASEAN, neighbouring countries, the United Nations, and Western nations, was needed to reach a sustainable solution.



Regarding responsibility, he stated that repatriation should not be seen as China's sole responsibility. Rather, it requires all relevant parties' collective effort and political will. He noted that while China remained committed, some actors might not support repatriation due to strategic or other interests.

Addressing soft power and governance cooperation questions, Ambassador Wen highlighted that while current cooperation between China and Bangladesh primarily focused on economic, trade, infrastructure, and investment, there was room to deepen collaboration in the governance and experience-sharing domains. He reflected on China's successful transformation since 1979, attributing it to a modernisation path aligned with its national conditions. He suggested that at a critical juncture in its development, Bangladesh must find a path that suits its context and challenges, rather than unquestioningly adopting Western models. He assured that China would be willing to share its experiences if Bangladesh desired to do so.

Ambassador Wen emphasised that stability, development, and reform were the key elements of China's model, stating that without stability, development could not be achieved, and without reform, progress would not be a driving force. He encouraged Bangladesh to explore and experiment with its development model and offered China's support.

Responding to a question from Professor Titumir, he acknowledged that defence cooperation was indeed a component of China-Bangladesh relations. He said such cooperation was consistent with maintaining Bangladesh's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Although he admitted he was not a financial expert, he agreed that enhanced cooperation between the People's Bank of China and the Bangladesh Bank was essential. He emphasised that as the global economic architecture undergoes transformation, China and Bangladesh should work together to ensure it becomes more balanced and supportive of the interests of poor and developing countries. Finally, Ambassador Wen reiterated China's commitment to deepening cooperation with Bangladesh across multiple sectors and stressed the importance of inclusive, collaborative efforts in addressing shared challenges.

In response to Mr Mir Mustafijur Rahman's questions, the Ambassador clarified that China was not involved in the corridor issue, explaining that it was an initiative by United Nations agencies to provide humanitarian supplies to Rakhine State and those affected by the conflict. He noted that Bangladesh, Myanmar, and some economic entities were involved, but China was not. He stated that China's position was to respect all countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity and not interfere in their internal affairs. China hoped that Bangladesh and Myanmar would properly resolve the Rohingya issue through peaceful dialogue and promote the repatriation process.

Regarding the second question about an independent state inside Rakhine State, the Ambassador mentioned that he had no information about such a proposal. He noted that Jamaat-e-Islami had clarified after reports emerged, which contradicted the alleged statement.

On the Teesta River project, the Ambassador referred to the joint press release following the Chief Advisor's visit to China, which indicated that Bangladesh welcomed China's participation in building this project. He confirmed China's willingness to offer assistance. He emphasised that it was ultimately Bangladesh's decision whether to proceed and how to do so through cooperation with China or an international consortium. China would respect Bangladesh's decision but hoped the project would start soon.



Professor Imtiaz Ahmed

*Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka
Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives*

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed limited his remarks to a few key issues. On the Rohingya situation, he shared his experience meeting young Rohingyas during visits to Cox's Bazar. When asked about their plans, while some expressed their desires to move abroad for education, most of them wanted to work for their community and eventually return to Myanmar. However, upon repatriation, they lacked concrete plans for essential services like healthcare, education, and agriculture.

Drawing from his personal experience during Bangladesh's liberation in 1971, he emphasised the need for a comprehensive "Marshall Plan" for the Rohingyas. He explained that repatriation alone was insufficient without addressing what would happen the day after their return, which schools they would attend, and which doctors they would visit. No one worked on these practicalities at the Track II or III levels.

Professor Ahmed suggested that China could contribute significantly to such a plan, stressing that it must include incentives for Myanmar's military (Tatmadaw), including the Arakan Army, to see benefits in repatriation. Humanitarian grounds alone would be insufficient as Myanmar needed to perceive economic and developmental advantages. He compared this to how the Marshall Plan helped reconcile France and Germany despite their historical enmity.

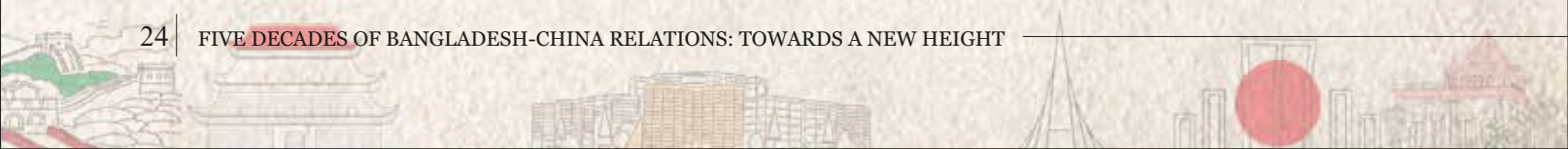
He argued for an "out-of-the-box" approach, noting that all existing bilateral, multilateral, and trilateral repatriation strategies had merit. He suggested involving other countries like Japan and India that maintained good relationships with both Myanmar and Bangladesh, creating a

win-win situation for all parties.

On the issue of meritocracy raised by a participant, Professor Ahmed described it as a “chicken and egg” situation that required the simultaneous development of soft and hard power. He referred to Deng Xiaoping’s approach when opening up China, particularly his vision after visiting Singapore, to illustrate how infrastructure development and human capacity building needed to occur in tandem.

Regarding language and cultural exchange, Professor Ahmed advocated for two-way linkages starting at the primary school rather than tertiary education, arguing that young minds were more receptive to transformation. He suggested using technology to connect children across countries through interactive platforms for painting, poetry, and other collaborative activities. This approach would foster deeper cultural understanding and relationships from an early age.

In Conclusion, he cited the example of the Franco-German Curriculum Board, which successfully removed hate literature from history books and facilitated student exchanges between families in both countries, helping transform historical enemies into allies.



Concluding Remarks



Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker

Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker acknowledged that the guest speaker, the keynote presenter, and participants from the floor had covered wide-ranging ideas and relevant points, making the seminar exciting, interactive, and enlightening. He highlighted several vital areas discussed, including soft power domain reforms, human resources development, and South-South cooperation. He emphasised that Bangladesh was interested in land-based collaboration and developing the blue economy in its part of the Bay of Bengal, where China's cooperation would be valuable.

The Chairman stressed the importance of technological cooperation, civilisational, cultural, and physical connectivity, suggesting these areas could yield numerous concrete and mega projects to be pursued both bilaterally and regionally. He expressed optimism about bringing together the synergy of regional stakeholders in this new area.

He noted that reforms were being taken seriously, with reform agendas underway, particularly after the student-led movement. They needed to explore how to intensify and advance cooperation in this context. The Chairman concluded by thanking the ambassador for his time and brilliant talk, the keynote presenter for his illuminating presentation and response, the BIISS for organising an excellent seminar, and the distinguished guests for their contributions that made the event rich and insightful.

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