



# Proceedings



Roundtable Discussion  
on

## ASEAN-Bangladesh Relationship: A Way Forward

17 February 2025



Organised by  
**Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)**  
in collaboration with  
**Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh**



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## Roundtable Discussion on “ASEAN-Bangladesh Relationship: A Way Forward”

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Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a roundtable discussion titled “ASEAN-Bangladesh Relationship: A Way Forward” at BIISS Auditorium on Monday, 17 February, 2025. **Ambassador Md Jashim Uddin**, Foreign Secretary, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, was the Chief Guest. **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General, BIISS, delivered the address of welcome. The Director General also chaired and moderated the session.

**Mr M Ashique Rahman**, Senior Research Fellow, BIISS, delivered the keynote presentation on “**ASEAN and Bangladesh: Enhancing Relationship and Bangladesh’s Roadmap to becoming ASEAN’s Sectoral Dialogue Partner**”. This has been followed by discussions from three distinguished panellists: **Dr A S M Ali Ashraf**, Professor and Chair, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, presented on “**Bangladesh’s Bid to become Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN: Opportunities and Way Forward**”, **Dr Oh Ei Sun**, Principal adviser at Pacific Research Center of Malaysia and Senior Fellow, Singapore Institute of International Affairs, spoke on “**Strengthening Bangladesh-ASEAN Ties**”, and **Dr Shahab Enam Khan**, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University presented on “**ASEAN’s Membership: Lessons Learned from Experiences of Newly Admitted Members**”. The roundtable discussion included an open discussion session where stakeholders/resource personnel from multiple sectors, including government officials, civil society members, academics, practitioners, the private sector and representatives of regional and international organisations contributed to the discussion.



## Welcome Address



### **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng** *Director General, BIISS*

**Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General, BIISS, welcomed the attendees to the roundtable discussion. He expressed his gratitude to the Chief Guest, Ambassador Md Jashim Uddin, Foreign Secretary, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, for his gracious presence in the roundtable. He also acknowledged the presence of an esteemed guest from Malaysia, Dr Oh Ei Sun, Principal Advisor, Pacific Research Center of Malaysia and Senior Fellow, Singapore Institute of International Affairs, along with the learned panellists and distinguished guests.

The Director General highlighted the significance of ASEAN's establishment in 1967 as a milestone in regional integration, which was aimed at promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in Southeast Asia. Over the decades, ASEAN has evolved into a dynamic regional bloc, expanding its partnerships beyond its ten member states to engage with countries worldwide, including Bangladesh. He noted that Bangladesh has actively participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum since 2006 and had been a signatory to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation since 2007, demonstrating its commitment to regional peace and cooperation.

He further mentioned that Bangladesh had sought to deepen its engagement with ASEAN in recent years through trade, investment, connectivity, security cooperation and economic exchanges. Referring to a statement by the Honourable Chief Advisor of the Interim Government of Bangladesh, Professor Dr Muhammad Yunus, at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2025 in Davos; he pointed out that Dr Yunus had advocated for Bangladesh's

inclusion in ASEAN and emphasised that ASEAN should redesign its approach rather than merely follow the path of the West.

Given the geopolitical and economic shifts in the Indo-Pacific, Major General Iftekhar emphasised the importance of exploring new avenues for collaboration. He stated that the roundtable discussion provided an opportunity to reflect on the progress made, identify challenges, and develop a roadmap for Bangladesh to become a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN. He highlighted Bangladesh's robust economic growth and strategic geographical location, which positioned the country as a valuable contributor to ASEAN's regional frameworks. He noted that Bangladesh offered an attractive market for ASEAN businesses and possessed a strong workforce to support industrial growth. Additionally, he underscored the potential for enhanced economic cooperation, particularly in the textile, pharmaceutical, and ICT industries, as well as digital trade.

The Director General further emphasised Bangladesh's commitment to connectivity initiatives, which are aligned with ASEAN's vision for regional integration. He also highlighted the potential for Bangladesh's integration into ASEAN's digital economy, fostering innovation and technological cooperation. On the socio-cultural front, he pointed out that Bangladesh's significant manpower exports to ASEAN countries, particularly Malaysia and Singapore, necessitated enhanced labour cooperation and skills development. He also mentioned shared concerns over climate change, sustainable development, and food security as areas for collaborative research and policy initiatives to strengthen relations with ASEAN nations.

However, he acknowledged the challenges Bangladesh faced in becoming an ASEAN sectoral dialogue partner. He pointed out that trade with ASEAN has remained imbalanced, making it necessary to diversify exports and reduce trade barriers. Additionally, he noted that Bangladesh's position as the host country for Rohingya refugees remained a sensitive issue, requiring diplomatic engagement with ASEAN member states for a sustainable resolution.

To address these challenges, he emphasised the need for a structured roadmap that included active diplomatic outreach, deeper participation in ASEAN-led initiatives, and sustained engagement with existing sectoral dialogue partners to learn from their experiences. By aligning national policies with ASEAN's strategic priorities, he believed Bangladesh could strengthen its case for sectoral dialogue partner status and eventually aspire to a more integrated partnership with ASEAN.

He remarked that the roundtable discussion served as a crucial platform for dialogue among key stakeholders from the government, academia, the private sector and civil society. He encouraged participants to actively engage in discussions, share insights from their respective fields and contribute to shaping a comprehensive roadmap for Bangladesh's enhanced engagement with ASEAN. He noted that the outcomes of the roundtable would serve as a reference for policymakers and guide future regional diplomacy initiatives. Expressing his gratitude once again to the guests, panellists, and participants, Major General Iftekhar looked forward to an insightful exchange of ideas that would take place in the roundtable discussion.



## Keynote Presentation

*“ASEAN and Bangladesh: Enhancing Relations and Bangladesh’s Roadmap to becoming ASEAN’s Sectoral Dialogue Partner”*



### **M Ashique Rahman**

*Senior Research Fellow,  
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies*

**M Ashique Rahman**, Senior Research Fellow at BIISS, delivered a keynote presentation titled “ASEAN and Bangladesh: Enhancing Relations and Bangladesh’s Roadmap to Becoming ASEAN’s Sectoral Dialogue Partner.” Mr Rahman noted that the primary objective of the roundtable discussion was to explore Bangladesh’s potential inclusion as a Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) of ASEAN. His presentation aimed at building a case for Bangladesh’s inclusion, covering various aspects such as ASEAN’s evolution over the past nearly six decades, its expansion, membership categories, and the rationale for Bangladesh’s participation. He outlined Bangladesh’s strengths, the roadmap for engagement, the associated challenges and a possible way forward.

Providing historical context, he explained that ASEAN was initially established in 1961 as the Association of Southeast Asia but became an organised institution in 1967 with five founding members: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Over time, ASEAN expanded, with Brunei joining in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999, bringing the total membership to ten. Mr Rahman also highlighted ASEAN’s significant milestones, including the 1971 declaration of ASEAN as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality, the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the 1992 ASEAN Free Trade Area Agreement, the establishment of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 and the 2007 ASEAN Charter.

He elaborated on ASEAN's engagement with external partners, noting that the ASEAN+3 process, initiated in 1997, included China, Japan, and South Korea, later expanding to include India, Australia, and New Zealand. ASEAN maintained free trade and economic partnership agreements with these six countries. Additionally, he mentioned that the ARF was formed in 1994, incorporating 27 countries, including the ten ASEAN members, ten dialogue partners, and observer states such as Papua New Guinea.

Mr Rahman then discussed ASEAN's evolving partnership frameworks, distinguishing between dialogue partnerships, sectoral dialogue partnerships and development partnerships. ASEAN had 11 dialogue partners, six of whom held comprehensive strategic partnerships (Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and the United States). Sectoral dialogue partnerships were introduced in 1993, with Pakistan as the first partner. Since 2015, more countries have joined this category. He noted that Bangladesh aims to join ASEAN through this sectoral dialogue partnership mechanism.

Explaining Bangladesh's motivations for joining ASEAN, Mr Rahman cited its strategic geographic position as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as cultural and historical commonalities, including climate, cuisine, and religion. However, he emphasised that economic factors primarily justified Bangladesh's interest. He noted that Bangladesh, currently ranked 34th in the global economy, was projected to rise to 23rd by 2050. Several international forecasts described Bangladesh as a stable emerging economy with strong growth potential.

He further detailed Bangladesh's trade relations with ASEAN, noting that Bangladesh exported approximately US\$ One billion worth of goods, mainly ready-made garments, agro-products, pharmaceuticals, and tobacco—primarily to Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia. Conversely, Bangladesh imported around US\$ 13 billion worth of goods from ASEAN, resulting in a total trade volume of approximately US\$ 14–15 billion, which justified stronger economic ties. He also pointed out that ASEAN accounted for around 12% of Bangladesh's total foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in 2022, indicating room for increased cooperation.

Mr Rahman elaborated on Bangladesh's investment-friendly policies, including liberal visa regulations, equal treatment of local and foreign investors, and incentives for foreign direct investment in sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, IT, agriculture, electronics and shipbuilding. He cited Malaysia's interest in joint automobile ventures in Chittagong as an example of potential investment collaborations.

Additionally, he highlighted Bangladesh's socio-economic strengths, including its relatively strong Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) performance, where it ranked ahead of four ASEAN countries—Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. He also noted Bangladesh's substantial contributions to ASEAN's labour markets, particularly in Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore, where skilled and semi-skilled Bangladeshi workers played a significant role.

Mr Rahman acknowledged Bangladesh's active engagement with ASEAN through the ARF since 2006. He pointed out that in 2021–2022 alone, Bangladesh participated in 29 ASEAN-related events, including all ARF meetings, the Annual Security Outlook, and the Senior Officials' Meeting. In 2025, Bangladesh presented a six-point proposal for economic cooperation,



focusing on investment, connectivity, climate action, marine resource development and energy collaboration. Moreover, Bangladesh and many of the ASEAN countries have converging membership in numerous organisations such as OIC, IORA, BIMSTEC etc., and it is in ASEM (Asian Europe Meeting) where Bangladesh and all the ASEAN countries are members. Therefore, lot of interactions and exchanges are also happening between Bangladesh and ASEAN member countries.

Regarding Bangladesh's official efforts to become a sectoral dialogue partner, he mentioned that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated the process in 2020 by sending formal requests to ASEAN. The ministry identified four key sectors for cooperation: fisheries, ICT, tourism and disaster management. In 2023, the ASEAN Secretary General also expressed that he will give his support for Bangladesh to becoming the sectoral dialogue partner. He emphasised the need for continued diplomatic engagement, particularly given ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making process, which requires the approval of all member states.

At this stage, Mr Rahman presented a roadmap for Bangladesh for becoming sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN, although, he noted that, it was a work in progress and he sought comments and inputs from the participants as they are more experienced and practitioners, and some of them were posted as head of diplomatic mission in many ASEAN countries. The first step of the roadmap is to identify the sectors for cooperation. Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs has identified four sectors as mentioned above but two more sectors can be added i.e., maritime dispute resolution and the energy cooperation. ASEAN countries like Malaysia and Indonesia are among the top ten LNG exporting countries and since, Bangladesh is venturing to diversity its LNG imports so there remains scope for cooperation. Moreover, both Indonesia and Brunei are big oil exporting countries and we also need to diversify our sources of oil imports. Therefore, energy trade and energy cooperation is a very prolific area.

The second step is to form the Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (JSCC). The third step is to have a PCA (Partnership Cooperation Agreement) after Bangladesh is admitted as a SDP of ASEAN. And the final step is the creation of funds and undertake projects for sectoral cooperation. However, there remains certain challenges and Bangladesh needs to address them. Many commentators and observers are highlighting certain issues such as political stability, economic resilience, and good governance. However, he expressed confidence that Bangladesh will be overcoming these challenges and remained committed to aligning with ASEAN's principles. However, the more critical challenge is to forge consensus among the ASEAN members regarding Bangladesh's admission as a SDP as ASEAN functions through consensus-based decision making process. Therefore, Bangladesh needs to communicate more with the ASEAN members and strive for creating consensus among all the members of ASEAN on Bangladesh.

While concluding his presentation, Mr Rahman discussed about the ways forward. First, he emphasised for further research as there is dearth of research in Bangladesh on Southeast Asia. Second, there is a need to understand the theoretical grounding of ASEAN as a regional organisation. Third, as there is politics involved in any regional organisation viz., the European Union or the MERCOSUR, there is also politics of regionalism in ASEAN. So, we need to understand that politics both among ASEAN members as a whole and politics between the

members of the ASEAN. Fourth, Bangladesh must have full appreciation about the ASEAN Way i.e., ASEAN norms, rules and regulations. Finally, Bangladesh needs to build an appropriate narrative regarding why it needs to join ASEAN. Some commentators mistakenly expressing that Bangladesh is joining ASEAN as SAARC is not functioning or Bangladesh is joining ASEAN to counterbalance certain countries. Such narratives are ill-informed and an appropriate narrative has to be disseminated that Bangladesh wants to further diversify in foreign policy choices, hence, it is a pragmatic approach for Bangladesh to grow economically as well as enhance its geopolitical relevance. Also joining ASEAN is in line with Bangladesh's 'Look East Policy' which remained dormant in the past one and a half decades.

Mr. Rahman noted that Bangladesh is poised to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026; consequently, its joining of ASEAN and the establishment of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) or Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with ASEAN would yield significant advantages for Bangladesh. Furthermore, Bangladesh's integration into ASEAN would also confer benefits upon ASEAN member states by facilitating their access to South Asia and, through South Asia, to Central Asia and beyond. He urged policymakers, diplomats, and researchers to engage collaboratively in enhancing Bangladesh's standing within the ASEAN framework.



## Panel Discussion One

### *Bangladesh's Bid to become Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN: Opportunities and Way Forward*



#### **Dr ASM Ali Ashraf**

*Professor and Chair,*

*Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka*

**Dr ASM Ali Ashraf**, Professor and Chair, Department of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, stated that his presentation would focus on the opportunities and ways forward, complementing the points made by Mr M Ashique Rahman. While Mr Rahman had emphasised the economic rationale for Bangladesh's inclusion, Dr Ashraf mentioned that his discussion would concentrate more on the security rationale. He pointed out that as countries integrate economically, there are transnational criminals, terrorists and other actors who attempt to exploit regional integration, which needs to be addressed.

Dr Ashraf explained that his presentation would first discuss the significance of sectoral dialogue partnerships, followed by a theoretical perspective from International Relations (IR). He highlighted that various academic theories define ASEAN differently, with some scholars viewing it as a site for power competition, while others consider it an identity-based institution. He noted that since Mr Rahman had already provided an overview of ASEAN, he would focus on the opportunities for Bangladesh and the path forward.

Regarding methodology, Dr Ashraf stated that ASEAN's evolution as a regional institution required a research method called process tracing. He explained that data was collected from two major sources: archival research, which involved analysing official documents available on ASEAN's website, and interviews with foreign policy practitioners, particularly Bangladeshi



diplomats, to understand their perspectives on ASEAN and Bangladesh's potential role as a sectoral dialogue partner. He emphasised that Bangladesh views sectoral dialogue partnerships as a stepping stone toward deeper engagement with ASEAN, as full membership is not an option at the moment. ASEAN has set a precedent that aspiring partners must first establish sectoral dialogue partnerships before enhancing their relations.

Dr Ashraf elaborated that ASEAN's sectoral dialogue partnerships were based on four dimensions of connectivity: political-security cooperation, economic cooperation, socio-cultural cooperation, and cross-pillar cooperation. Political-security cooperation addressed issues such as transnational crime, drug and arms smuggling, human trafficking, money laundering, cybercrime, maritime security, and peace building efforts. Economic cooperation focused on trade, investment, and digital economy initiatives. Socio-cultural cooperation involved education, tourism, human rights, child labour, and environmental protection. Cross-pillar cooperation encompassed areas like connectivity, smart cities, sustainable development, and digital transformation.

Dr Ashraf then provided an analysis of ASEAN's sectoral dialogue partnerships, highlighting that Bangladesh could position itself effectively by examining the experiences of other countries. He presented data on eight existing sectoral dialogue partners and analysed their contributions. He mentioned that Bangladesh had a strong case for becoming a sectoral dialogue partner, given its geographical proximity and robust trade relationships with ASEAN nations. He pointed out that countries like Pakistan and Turkey had secured sectoral dialogue partnerships with ASEAN despite having lower bilateral trade volumes with ASEAN nations—Pakistan with US\$ 11 billion and Turkey with US\$13 billion—whereas Bangladesh had a significantly higher trade engagement with the region.

Further, Dr Ashraf noted that sectoral dialogue partners typically contributed in areas such as technology transfer, capacity building, and policy innovation. He highlighted Bangladesh's strengths, including its Foreign Service Academy, which offered a professional master's program in international relations and diplomacy in collaboration with the University of Dhaka. The program had already trained foreign diplomats, mainly from Africa, and he suggested extending this opportunity to ASEAN member states. He also proposed partnerships with institutions like the National University of Singapore and Rajaratnam School of International Studies to foster academic exchange programs.

Dr Ashraf then outlined the security benefits of Bangladesh's engagement with ASEAN, emphasising counterterrorism cooperation. He pointed out that countries like Indonesia and the Philippines had faced significant terrorist threats, such as the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005. He noted that Bangladesh had developed effective counterterrorism and deradicalisation programs, which could be shared with ASEAN member states. He suggested that think tanks and academic institutions could collaborate through Track two diplomacy to exchange best practices in countering violent extremism.

Additionally, he discussed Bangladesh's expertise in cybersecurity, referencing the Bangladesh Bank heist case, where cybercriminals stole funds that were later traced to the Philippines. He suggested that Bangladesh and ASEAN nations, particularly the Philippines, could collaborate on cybercrime prevention and financial security measures. Furthermore, he mentioned that

maritime security was another area of potential cooperation, particularly in addressing piracy and protecting strategic choke points in the Asia-Pacific region. Bangladesh's experience in resolving maritime boundary disputes through international legal mechanisms could provide valuable insights for ASEAN countries facing similar challenges.

Dr Ashraf also highlighted migration management as an area of cooperation, noting that Malaysia and Singapore were top destinations for Bangladeshi migrant workers. He pointed out that the Philippines had a well-established reputation for high-skilled migrant labour and suggested that Bangladesh could learn from the Philippines' best practices in workforce development. He also acknowledged the Rohingya refugee crisis as a sensitive issue but proposed framing it within the broader context of durable solutions, considering that ASEAN nations like Indonesia and Malaysia also hosted Rohingya refugees.

Concluding his presentation, Dr Ashraf emphasised that Bangladesh had multiple avenues for contributing as a sectoral dialogue partner. He reiterated the importance of economic, security, and diplomatic cooperation and encouraged policymakers to leverage Bangladesh's strengths in counterterrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security, migration management, and regional diplomacy to make a compelling case for ASEAN engagement.



## Panel Discussion Two

### *Strengthening Bangladesh-ASEAN Ties*



#### **DR OH EI SUN**

*Principal Adviser, Pacific Research Center of Malaysia and  
Senior Fellow, Singapore Institute of International Affairs*

**Dr Oh Ei Sun**, Principal Adviser at the Pacific Research Center of Malaysia and Senior Fellow, Singapore Institute of International Affairs, expressed his gratitude for inviting him to speak at the roundtable in front of distinguished audience. He acknowledged the tremendous development Bangladesh has undergone over the past 17 years. He emphasised the importance of positioning for Bangladesh, referring to a seminar folder he had seen at BIIS from 1979, which discussed Bangladesh's role as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. He reiterated that even in the early days of its nationhood, Bangladesh had foresight in positioning itself as a crucial link between these two regions. He underscored the significance of maintaining this positioning, noting that Southeast Asia has had the highest growth rate in the world and that South Asia has also been emerging as a key market. Bangladesh could be positioned as the lynchpin connecting these two prosperous regions, making itself indispensable in terms of socio-economic and technological development.

Dr Sun identified several key areas where ASEAN and Bangladesh could work more closely, particularly in trade and investment, energy and infrastructure, education and human resources, tourism, food security, and disaster mitigation. Regarding trade, he stressed the importance of concluding as many bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements as possible between Bangladesh and other countries or associations such as ASEAN. He acknowledged that



Bangladesh has not yet established many FTAs and encouraged speeding up the process while maintaining a firm political stance against protectionism. In addition, he highlighted the need to address non-tariff barriers, citing examples from ASEAN where trade barriers remained high despite agreements. Import and export processes for perishable goods were often hindered by extensive quarantine and phytogenic examination requirements, discouraging merchants from participating in cross-border trade.

Discussing Bangladesh's unique selling points, Dr Sun noted its strategic location between Southeast and South Asia, its large domestic market of over 170 million people, and its emerging middle class. He pointed out that Malaysia's 'My Second Home' project had seen numerous applicants from Bangladesh, indicating a growing middle class capable of attracting foreign investment. He commended Bangladesh's efforts in expanding beyond the garment industry, mentioning developments in automobile assembly and shipbuilding. He emphasised the need to enhance service industries, leveraging the country's large English-speaking population. He suggested expanding beyond call centres, drawing parallels with India and the Philippines, which had developed strong outsourcing industries.

Regarding energy and infrastructure, Dr Sun supported closer collaboration between ASEAN and Bangladesh. He emphasised the need for diversification in energy procurement and noted that Malaysia and Indonesia could supply more oil and gas to Bangladesh. He shared his own experience of brief power outages in Dhaka, indicating a need for stable electricity and energy sources. Additionally, he recommended investing in renewable energy, including biomass from palm oil waste, wind, and hydro energy. Simultaneously, he stressed on the importance of infrastructure development, particularly in urban management, electricity, clean water supply, stable telecommunications and transportation links. He encouraged leveraging Bangladesh's strategic location by enhancing rail and highway connectivity between South and Southeast Asia, attracting investments from ASEAN countries.

In discussing air linkages, Dr Sun cited examples of how Middle Eastern cities had transformed into major flight hubs and suggested that Dhaka could follow a similar path, serving as a transit hub for flights between South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. He also highlighted opportunities for investment in oil and gas pipelines, undersea cables, and satellite communications. He also acknowledged the significant role Bangladesh played in providing human resources to Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Singapore. He pointed out the growing presence of Bangladeshi students in Malaysian universities and recommended inviting ASEAN universities to establish branch campuses in Bangladesh. Additionally, he encouraged Bangladeshi universities to establish campuses in Southeast Asia. He also emphasised the importance of technical and vocational education, given Bangladesh's role as a major human resource supplier.

Dr Sun concluded by reiterating the immense potential Bangladesh has as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. He urged the country to capitalise on its geographical advantage, enhance trade and investment ties, strengthen infrastructure and develop human resources to reinforce its positioning in the region.

## Panel Discussion Three

*ASEAN's Membership: Lessons Learned from Experiences of Newly Admitted Members*



### **Dr Shahab Enam Khan**

*Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University*

**Dr Shahab Enam Khan**, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, expressed his gratitude and pointed out that BIIS had played a crucial role in the development of two significant regional institutions- SAARC and BIMSTEC, making this institution a hub for regional cooperation. BIIS's contribution extended beyond bilateralism to multilateralism and highlighted its historical significance in shaping these institutions. He focused particularly on the role of Bangladesh in stabilising ASEAN and the lessons that could be learned from Timor-Leste. He underscored the often overlooked contribution of Bangladesh in maintaining stability in ASEAN by sheltering 1.1 million FDMNs, thereby preventing a potential humanitarian catastrophe in Myanmar.

Professor Khan recalled a key diplomatic meeting in Bangkok, attended by representatives from Thailand, China, India, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, where discussions centred on stabilising Myanmar. He highlighted that it took eight years for Bangkok to take such an initiative and that a recent survey from a Singapore-based think tank had revealed that many ASEAN nations shared similar concerns about Myanmar's stability. Most respondents in the study believed that Myanmar needed to be stabilised through inclusive discussions and engagement, while a significant portion also argued for a more assertive approach to resolving the crisis. Bangladesh had played a fundamental role in preventing further humanitarian crises in the region.



He further elaborated on his experience as the Chair of the ASEAN Regional Forum Conference on Preventive Diplomacy and Early Warning in Timor-Leste. The consensus reached at that forum emphasised the importance of strong communication among nations to prevent crises, whether security- or climate-induced. He emphasised that India and Bangladesh are crucial players in maintaining geopolitical stability and preventive diplomacy in the region. Referencing the visit of Bangladesh's Foreign Advisor to Bangkok, Professor Khan mentioned that three key issues were discussed—crime, gambling, and border stability. He noted that, for the first time, Bangladesh was dealing with new border actors beyond the traditional state actors, like Myanmar's Border Guard Police (BGP) and Indian border authorities. This, he argued, signified a rapid geopolitical shift that needed further attention.

Professor Khan spoke about his participation in a Preventive Diplomacy Conference in Hawaii in 2022, where participants emphasised the need for stronger regional cooperation. Additionally, as a member of the CSIS regional study group on Myanmar, he had engaged in discussions about how ASEAN's economic stability could benefit from Bangladesh's integration into regional frameworks. He cited data from the World Bank and Wilson Center discussions in Washington, highlighting Bangladesh's economic resilience despite political fluctuations. He presented statistical evidence indicating that ASEAN's biggest challenges were unemployment and economic recession (57% of respondents) and climate change (53%). He argued that these concerns were interconnected across South and Southeast Asia and that closer economic cooperation between Bangladesh and ASEAN could provide resilience for countries like Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. He recalled that discussions had been ongoing between key BIMSTEC members—Bangladesh, Thailand, and India—about establishing an economic corridor through Myanmar, as well as between China and Myanmar regarding multimodal economic cooperation.

Professor Khan pointed out that Bangladesh's demographic advantage, particularly its booming IT industry and entrepreneurial sector, had been largely overlooked in diplomatic discussions. He also highlighted Bangladesh's success in countering terrorism and extremism, which had been recognised by global institutions like the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF). Bangladesh's security and economic resilience made it a valuable partner for ASEAN. With this note, Professor Khan finally emphasised the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal, arguing that it remained an untapped resource and a key arena in global geopolitics. He pointed out that Bangladesh had set a positive example through its peaceful maritime demarcation agreements with Myanmar and India, reinforcing its commitment to international law and multilateral cooperation. He concluded by emphasising the need for sustainable and collective governance of shared regional resources, particularly in the face of climate change and future global crises.



## Open Discussion



### Ambassador Shameem Ahsan

*Former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Brunei Darussalam*

Drawing from his experience as a practitioner, **Ambassador Shameem Ahsan** reflected on whether Bangladesh's initial positioning had truly evolved over time or had merely turned into posturing. Given that decades had passed since 1971, he posed the question of how far Bangladesh had progressed. He emphasised that Bangladesh had immense potential, opportunities, and possibilities that had not been fully realised. The idea of Bangladesh as a bridge to Southeast Asia, a close neighbour of ASEAN, and an important neighbour to Myanmar has been a significant issue for all Bangladeshis. However, despite discussions in various think tanks, there had been little effort to systematically document past dialogues and outcomes. He questioned when ASEAN was last discussed, what insights had emerged, and whether those discussions had served as a foundation for future engagements. In this context, he reiterated the importance of adding value to ongoing conversations rather than merely repeating past discussions. He agreed with Dr. Ashraf's point about the need to determine Bangladesh's role in its aspiration to become a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN. He suggested that the Foreign Service Academy could play a pivotal role in advancing such discussions, as it has already undertaken promising work.

On the topic of infrastructure, he highlighted that connectivity was crucial but questioned whether Bangladesh has been efficient in this regard. He pointed out that construction costs in the country has often been a subject of concern, particularly when compared to other nations. Addressing tourism and education, he reminisced about a time when Malaysian students

studied in Bangladeshi medical colleges—something that would now be difficult to imagine due to concerns about educational quality. He suggested that this issue warranted attention, as soft-power tourism and academic exchanges could be valuable avenues for engagement.

He also reflected on Bangladesh's growing global reputation in architecture, citing examples such as the Bait Ur Rouf Mosque, the Friendship Projects, and urban river spaces in Jhenaidah. These instances of community-driven architecture, which have gained international recognition, could serve as a means of showcasing Bangladesh's socioeconomic advancements to the world. Before concluding, he posed a question regarding maritime boundary delimitation, noting that a decade had passed with little progress on the issue. He pointed to Indonesia's 'Bubble ME' project as an example that could have been replicated in Bangladesh for greater benefit. Incremental steps such as these, he argued, would enhance Bangladesh's credibility as a prospective partner for ASEAN.



### **Ambassador Nazmul Quaunine**

*Former Ambassador of the Government of Bangladesh*

**Ambassador Nazmul Quaunine**, drawing from his experience as an ambassador in four ASEAN countries—Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Turkey—shared his insights on ASEAN-Bangladesh relations and the way forward. Upon his posting in Indonesia, he discovered that Bangladesh had not yet appointed an ambassador to ASEAN. Recognising the significance of such representation, he brought the matter to the attention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which subsequently appointed him as the first Bangladeshi ambassador to ASEAN. In this capacity, he presented his credentials to the ASEAN Secretary-General and explored potential pathways for Bangladesh to become a sectoral dialogue partner and, eventually, a full dialogue partner. However, at the time, ASEAN had imposed a moratorium on new sectoral and dialogue partnerships, making it challenging to advance Bangladesh's position within the organisation.



He observed that ASEAN operated as a highly bureaucratic and multilayered organisation. Over the years, it had positioned itself as an exclusive and elite club, becoming increasingly restrictive in allowing new members or partners. Even Timor-Leste, despite its persistent efforts over the past decade, had struggled to secure full membership. Given this reality, he questioned whether the primary focus should be on ASEAN as a whole or on strengthening Bangladesh's bilateral relations with individual ASEAN member states.

Having served in Indonesia and Thailand, two of the largest economies in the region, he found that Bangladesh could benefit more from deepening its engagement with these countries rather than focusing solely on ASEAN as a bloc. He noted that Myanmar presented a different case due to its unique political and humanitarian challenges. He also recalled that, during his tenure, Bangladeshi passport holders could travel to Indonesia and receive a visa-on-arrival, one of the few countries offering such a facility apart from Nepal and Bhutan. However, this privilege has been revoked in recent years, highlighting the need for Bangladesh to negotiate better mobility arrangements for its citizens.

Discussing broader engagement, he emphasised the importance of facilitating not only outbound travel for Bangladeshis but also encouraging visitors from ASEAN countries to Bangladesh. He noted that while external perspectives were valuable, Bangladesh needed to take responsibility for improving its own positioning. He argued that the key question is what Bangladesh has to offer politically, socially, and economically. The country's global image—shaped by its economic stability, human rights record, and political environment—played a crucial role in determining how it is perceived internationally.

He stressed that these issues should not be confined to government discussions only, but should also be actively debated in think tanks, academic institutions and universities. He observed that such discourse has often been absent in Bangladesh and highlighted the need to speak openly about the country's realities. While Bangladesh has significant potential and a reputation for hospitality, it is equally important to address internal challenges transparently.

Regarding investment, he pointed out that ASEAN countries are primarily focused on attracting foreign investment rather than investing abroad. Except Singapore, most ASEAN nations share economic aspirations similar to Bangladesh, relying heavily on exports and labour migration. Indonesia and Thailand, for example, had development models that closely resemble Bangladesh's economic strategy.

He also raised concerns about capital outflows from Bangladesh, noting that significant sums of Bangladeshi wealth have been held abroad, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia. Despite Bangladesh's efforts to gain sectoral dialogue partner status within ASEAN, large amounts of capital are already flowing from Bangladesh to these countries.

He mentioned a recent government initiative to introduce an online visa system, which could potentially facilitate travel for foreign visitors. With the foreign secretary present at the session, he underscored the importance of addressing other barriers to investment and economic cooperation. Concluding his remarks, he emphasised that Bangladesh need to confront its challenges with honesty and pragmatism. Only by acknowledging the realities and taking concrete steps, the country can build a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship with ASEAN.



### **Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman**

*Former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Singapore*

**Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman** began by emphasising that ASEAN-Bangladesh cooperation presents a clear case of a positive-sum game, with significant opportunities for mutual benefits, particularly in trade, commerce, investment, and economic collaboration. While the three pillars of ASEAN cooperation—economic, socio-cultural, and political-security—have been highlighted by previous speakers, he choose to focus on the political-security aspect, which he considered particularly important.

He noted that Bangladesh holds a strategic advantage in this area, as it is already a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a key security-related platform. The political-security dimension also encompasses transnational challenges such as counterterrorism, cross-border threats, and human security concerns—including climate change and environmental challenges. He recalled how Professor Yunus had repeatedly underscored the significance of human security at the UN General Assembly, reinforcing the relevance of this issue for Bangladesh's engagement with ASEAN. Given this context, he saw immense potential for cooperation within the framework of Bangladesh's sectoral dialogue partnership with ASEAN.

Addressing key challenges, he referred to Dr Khan's observation regarding gaps in mutual understanding and perception between Bangladesh and ASEAN nations. He identified several pressing issues that required attention, including migration, corruption, governance, and the Rohingya crisis. However, he pointed out that the recent developments, particularly the July mass uprising and subsequent UN engagement, have shifted the global narrative. He believed that Bangladesh is now in a stronger position to clarify its stance, educate international stakeholders, and engage the global community more effectively on these matters.

Reflecting on his tenure as High Commissioner to Singapore, he observed that Singapore played



a central role in ASEAN affairs. He recalled one notable initiative—a regional cooperation convention on anti-piracy—which was intended to be an active and impactful platform. However, he noted that Bangladesh’s participation in such high-level ASEAN forums had not been as prominent as it could be. He suggested that Bangladesh could play a more proactive role in these security-focused initiatives and extend similar engagement to other ASEAN countries.

On the topic of migration, he echoed previous speakers’ remarks on the importance of systematic, orderly, and formal migration, particularly for skilled and semi-skilled labour. He highlighted Bangladesh’s advantage in this area, noting the significant presence of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore. With targeted training and skill development programs, he believed that Bangladesh could expand labour migration opportunities to other ASEAN countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia.

He concluded by emphasising the need for a coordinated and strategic approach to ASEAN engagement. In his view, ambassadors and high commissioners in ASEAN member states had a crucial role to play in fostering constructive and forward-looking relations. Given the increasing importance of economic diplomacy, he stressed that diplomats should focus on clear objectives and strategic priorities. With strong support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government, he believed that Bangladesh could make significant strides toward securing a sectoral dialogue partnership with ASEAN as a first step toward deeper regional cooperation.



**Humayun Rashid,**

*President, Bangladesh-Philippines Chamber of Commerce and Industries*

**Mr Humayun Rashid**, President of the Bangladesh-Philippines Chamber of Commerce and Industries, expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the private sector. As a key player in Bangladesh’s energy and power industries, he highlighted that his

company alone has created employment for 10,000 people—a contribution he takes great pride in as a Bangladeshi entrepreneur. However, he noted with concern that the private sector has not been sufficiently encouraged or included in discussions. He expressed hope that the current government would take proactive steps to engage private sector representatives, allowing them to share their insights and contribute to shaping policies that benefit future generations.

As part of the Bangladesh-Philippines Chamber of Commerce and Industries' agenda for 2025, he outlined three key focus areas. First, he emphasised the importance of the upcoming new airport and its potential for enhancing connectivity. He believed that greater attention should be given to maximising its utility, particularly in facilitating the transport of goods and passengers to key destinations such as North America, Australia, Japan and ASEAN countries. He viewed this as a significant opportunity to boost exports and economic linkages.

The second issue he raised was the concern about employment generation, particularly for non-university graduates. He pointed out that approximately 3 million young people enter the job market annually in Bangladesh, yet only about 1.4 million find employment, leaving 1.6 million unemployed. This challenge is particularly acute in rural areas due to scarce job opportunities. To address this, he highlighted the critical need for skill development programs. He saw immense potential for Bangladesh to collaborate with the Philippines in technology transfer and vocational training, particularly in areas such as forklift and excavator operation, welding and shipbuilding. Strengthening such partnerships, he argued, would allow Bangladesh to build a more skilled workforce and support its economic growth.

The third area of focus is agro-processing. He pointed out that Bangladesh wastes large quantities of agricultural byproducts, such as banana trees and pineapples, whereas countries like the Philippines have successfully added value to these resources through processing and technology. He questioned why Bangladesh has not yet embraced such practices, attributing the gap to the lack of technology transfer and innovation in the sector.

He concluded by emphasising that private sector stakeholders should be included in dialogues on ASEAN-Bangladesh relations. Their participation, he argued, would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in job creation and economic growth. By fostering collaboration between the public and private sectors, Bangladesh could better position itself to harness regional opportunities and create sustainable employment for its people.





### **Ambassador Shahed Akhtar**

*Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to Thailand and Cambodia*

**Ambassador Shahed Akhtar** began by drawing attention to Bangladesh's 53 years of independence and reflected on the country's historical connections with the Southeast Asian region. Before independence, Bangladesh was well-integrated through maritime links, including associations with the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. He recalled that, in the early years following independence, there had been discussions about Bangladesh joining ASEAN. However, at that time, the authorities were hesitant, considering such alignments contrary to the country's foreign policy priorities. As a result, Bangladesh distanced itself from ASEAN, even though other countries, such as Sri Lanka, had also been invited to join. He noted that while this aspect of history is well-documented in archival research, it has not been widely discussed by scholars. He emphasised that Bangladesh's entry into the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) had been a challenging diplomatic endeavour. Despite Bangladesh's goodwill and intent, certain friendly nations were initially reluctant to support its inclusion. Consequently, Bangladesh had to navigate through diplomatic hurdles carefully, relying on its foreign ministry and ambassadors to advance its position. Ultimately, Bangladesh succeeded in securing membership in ARF and was welcomed into the forum.

He argued that integrating further with ASEAN should not be overly difficult, given Bangladesh's longstanding engagement with the region. Bangladesh shares a border with Myanmar and has linkages to both Myanmar and Thailand through BIMSTEC. He also recalled that, in the past, travel within the region had been far easier, with Bangladeshis able to visit countries like Thailand and Malaysia without requiring visas. While policies and circumstances have changed, he expressed optimism that regional mobility and cooperation could improve again in the future.

Regarding Bangladesh's aspiration to become a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN, he pointed out that the country has already developed close relationships with several ASEAN nations. Given that other, more geographically distant countries have achieved sectoral dialogue partnership status, he sees no reason why Bangladesh should not be able to do the same. He acknowledged the presence of the foreign secretary, who has a deep understanding of the region, and anticipated further insights from him on this issue.

Finally, he emphasised that while the path ahead would not be free from challenges, the goal is achievable with time and sustained diplomatic efforts. He encouraged patience and persistence, expressing confidence that progress would be made.



### **Harunur Rashid**

*Research Manager, Bangladesh Foreign Trade Institute (BFTI)*

**Mr Harunur Rashid** acknowledged the insightful presentations on the potential for deeper ties between Bangladesh and ASEAN. He noted that much of the discussion has centred on political and economic perspectives. Given Bangladesh's upcoming graduation from LDC status in 2026, he emphasised the urgency of addressing the economic challenges that would arise. After this transition, Bangladesh would lose preferential market access and various special and differential treatments under World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements.

In light of these concerns, he suggested that discussions should prioritise the possibility of securing FTAs with ASEAN or specific ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Such agreements would enable Bangladesh to expand its export opportunities and facilitate smoother trade. He also pointed out that non-tariff barriers has become a significant challenge in both bilateral and multilateral trade, particularly concerning Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT). ASEAN has already



standardised regulations in these areas, meaning that Bangladeshi exporters must comply with international guidelines such as Codex Alimentarius for food safety and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) for plant health to access these markets.

Given this reality, he stressed the need for ASEAN countries to provide technical assistance to Bangladeshi exporters to help them meet these international standards. Such support would enhance Bangladesh's ability to increase exports to ASEAN markets. Highlighting trade statistics from recent years, he noted that Bangladesh's exports to ASEAN stood at US\$ 841 million in 2021-22 but declined to US\$ 758 million in 2023-24. In contrast, India had successfully expanded its exports to ASEAN by adhering to globally recognised standards. Bangladesh, therefore, needs to focus on similar compliance strategies to improve its market access.

He also addressed the importance of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) for Bangladeshi workers seeking employment in ASEAN countries. Many Bangladeshi migrant workers currently lack specialised skills, which limits their earning potential. He suggested that Bangladesh could benefit from establishing vocational training institutes modeled after Malaysia's MDET, which could help develop a skilled workforce and enhance engagement with ASEAN economies.

Furthermore, he pointed out that Bangladesh's export basket to ASEAN remains limited, consisting primarily of agro-processed products, light engineering goods, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and ceramics. Given ASEAN's massive US\$ 1.5 trillion economy, Bangladesh's current exports of US\$ 758 million represented a marginal share. He stressed the need to bridge this gap by expanding export categories and ensuring greater market access.

To achieve these objectives, he reiterated that Bangladesh should explore FTAs or Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with individual ASEAN members as a stepping stone toward deeper engagement with ASEAN as a whole. If direct membership in ASEAN is not immediately feasible, Bangladesh could follow a phased approach—first securing sectoral dialogue partnership status, then full-fledged dialogue partnership and eventually aiming for deeper integration. Such agreements would not only enhance Bangladesh's trade prospects but also encourage greater ASEAN economic engagement with the country.

He concluded by emphasising the importance of proactive efforts to secure trade agreements, develop human capital and ensure compliance with international standards to maximise Bangladesh's economic opportunities in ASEAN markets.



### **Dr Delwar Hossain**

*Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka*

**Professor Dr Delwar Hossain** expressed his appreciation to BISS and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for organising the roundtable discussion on such a crucial topic for Bangladesh's foreign policy. He noted that Bangladesh has been making consistent efforts to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) of ASEAN, aiming to strengthen both regional and bilateral ties. He highlighted that the Chief Adviser has been particularly vocal about two key priorities: enhancing Bangladesh's relations with ASEAN by at least securing an SDP status and revitalising SAARC in South Asia. This renewed emphasis on regionalism and multilateralism, he noted, was not new in Bangladesh's foreign policy but is now receiving fresh attention and strategic focus. He considered the discussion highly relevant to the country's national priorities and praised the four distinguished speakers for presenting a compelling case for Bangladesh's deeper engagement with ASEAN.

Reflecting on the presentations, Professor Hossain remarked that they provided clear and focused insights into Bangladesh's relations with ASEAN, particularly in terms of future prospects. He believed Bangladesh has a strong case for becoming an SDP of ASEAN and emphasised that the country deserved immediate consideration for this status. Drawing comparisons with ASEAN's recent decisions, he pointed out that South Africa and Morocco were granted similar recognition in 2023. Given Bangladesh's geopolitical and economic significance, he argued that the country should be accorded due priority.

Professor Hossain also recalled historical perspectives, citing past discussions about Bangladesh's regional positioning. He referred to previous research and diplomatic observations indicating Bangladesh's deep geopolitical linkages with Southeast Asia, which should naturally translate into stronger ASEAN ties. However, he observed that a key challenge remained,



implying a significant knowledge gap between Bangladesh and ASEAN nations. Based on his academic research and personal discussions with ASEAN policymakers, Professor Hossain noted a general lack of understanding about Bangladesh within ASEAN countries. This “self-knowledge deficit”, as he termed it, worked both ways. While Bangladeshis were generally familiar with ASEAN in terms of trade, business and tourism, there is limited understanding of the region’s history, culture and broader economic and political landscape. ASEAN’s perception of Bangladesh is still influenced by outdated narratives from the 1970s, focusing on poverty, LDC status and natural disasters. This misconception, he believes, needed to be addressed through stronger academic research, documentation and increased Track II diplomacy initiatives.

Professor Hossain further emphasised that Bangladesh had no major disputes with ASEAN countries. Bangladesh shares historical and cultural connections with the region and has the potential to strengthen ties through soft power diplomacy. To overcome existing barriers, he advocated for sustained and time-bound diplomatic initiatives. If Bangladesh is serious about securing SDP status, he argued, it should set a clear deadline and build on its existing achievements in ASEAN relations. Professor Hossain also pointed out that Bangladesh’s trade volume with ASEAN stood at US\$ 15 billion, a significant figure compared to Morocco, which secured SDP status with just US\$ 1.1 billion in trade. While acknowledging that other factors might have influenced ASEAN’s decision, he stressed that Bangladesh needs to be more assertive in presenting its case at both policy and negotiation levels.

Finally, Professor Hossain suggested that Bangladesh should also explore Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), whether bilaterally with ASEAN member states or even directly with ASEAN itself. While acknowledging that such a move might seem ambitious, he argued that Bangladesh’s growing economy and prospects justified taking bold initiatives. He concluded by emphasising that securing SDP status is only one step in a broader strategy to enhance Bangladesh-ASEAN ties and that the country should actively pursue multiple avenues to deepen this relationship.



**M S Siddique,**

*Non-government Adviser, Bangladesh Competition Commission*

**M S Siddique** began by acknowledging the insights shared by Dr Oh Ei Sun and highlighted key themes from his discussion, including Bangladesh's positioning, bilateral and free trade agreements, political will, tariff and non-tariff barriers, strategic location and the potential for business initiatives such as call centres. Regarding bilateral trade agreements, he pointed out that ASEAN membership, at its core, is an economic partnership extending beyond conventional trade agreements. However, he observed that Bangladesh has been reluctant to engage in free trade agreements (FTAs), citing the country's hesitation in signing such agreements despite widespread interest from other nations. Drawing on his 15/16 years of experience in FTA negotiations within the Ministry of Commerce, Mr Siddique argued that the reluctance stemmed not just from political considerations but also from bureaucratic resistance. According to him, bureaucrats often hold more influence than politicians and have been unwilling to move forward with FTAs. He noted that Dr Yunus have previously instructed the Ministry of Commerce to initiate the process of joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). However, he expressed uncertainty about the current status of that initiative within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). He further recalled a recent conversation with a Director General overseeing FTA matters in MoFA. While the official personally supported free trade agreements, he emphasised that broader political and bureaucratic will would remain key obstacles.

Discussing tariff and non-tariff barriers, Mr Siddique argued that Bangladesh's internal policies are inherently protectionist. While some countries prioritised national economic interests—such as the “America First” policy—Bangladesh follows an unspoken “Bangladesh First” approach, making it one of the most conservative economies in the world. He noted that the country imposed extensive trade barriers and remained largely disconnected from regional economic frameworks despite being a WTO member. Many WTO agreements, he observed, have not been effectively implemented in Bangladesh.



Mr Siddique identified taxation as a major concern, stating that the government's primary focus is on revenue collection to sustain bureaucratic salaries, primarily through custom duties rather than income tax. He also pointed out that non-tariff barriers have deeply been embedded in the mindset of policymakers, further complicating trade integration efforts. Regarding Bangladesh's strategic location, he acknowledged its geographical advantage between South and Southeast Asia. Historically, Chattogram had served as a major international port, similar to Singapore. However, he noted that Bangladesh has deviated from that role over time. The country's location also placed it between the two largest global markets—China and India—presenting immense trade and investment opportunities. He argued that Bangladesh could attract foreign investors looking to establish a foothold in parts of India and China. However, restrictive policies and unwillingness to facilitate re-exports have prevented Bangladesh from capitalising on this potential. He emphasised that even within existing free trade zones, re-exporting to India and China remained largely restricted, despite their clear economic benefits.

Mr Siddique then pointed out that India, once a highly conservative economy, has liberalised its markets, allowing its trade zones to export goods that Bangladesh could have supplied. As a result, products that were once sourced from Singapore are now being exported from India to Bangladesh, reversing what should have been Bangladesh's opportunity to expand its exports. He praised Dr Sun for highlighting Bangladesh's weaknesses diplomatically, particularly in areas such as political will, trade barriers, and economic policies. He also referenced Dr Sun's suggestion that Bangladesh could develop small-scale business initiatives, such as call centres, as seen in other ASEAN countries. However, he expressed scepticism about Bangladesh's ability to implement such initiatives due to unreliable and slow internal services.

Mr Siddique further mentioned a recent development concerning efforts to introduce satellite internet services in Bangladesh, particularly involving Elon Musk's Starlink project. While such an initiative could significantly improve internet connectivity, he noted that certain policymakers are resistant to allowing its entry, raising concerns about uninterrupted internet access. This, he argued, is yet another example of Bangladesh's internal policy challenges preventing economic progress.

In conclusion, Mr Siddique stressed that Bangladesh's primary obstacle is not external but internal. The country faced its own set of tariff and non-tariff barriers that restricted economic openness. Without addressing these domestic challenges, he cautioned, Bangladesh would find it difficult to integrate into ASEAN or any other economic bloc. He suggested that the country first engage in internal discussions to determine its economic strategy before formally seeking membership in ASEAN or any other regional framework.



### **Major General (Retd.) Jiban Kanai Das**

*Former Director General of BIISS*

**Major General (Retd) Jiban Kanai Das** began by expressing his appreciation for the insightful discussions and excellent presentations that took place. He reflected on his time in Kuala Lumpur in 1980, where he was influenced by the ASEAN way of life. At that time, rather than focusing on Bangladesh joining ASEAN, he wondered why the country couldn't replicate some of ASEAN's successes. He recalled how President Ziaur Rahman had initiated the idea of SAARC, though, in his view, SAARC did not progress as hoped, which he considered a disappointment.

While discussing Bangladesh's potential to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) of ASEAN, General Das noted that Bangladesh could be in a stronger position than many countries that had already joined. However, he noted that the foundation of any relations is built on mutual benefit and that Bangladesh must consider what it could offer ASEAN and how it could present itself as an attractive partner. He then pointed out an issue that needed attention—Bangladesh's export of manpower. He highlighted the large number of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia and how the system for sending workers abroad is sometimes seen as problematic, tarnishing the country's reputation. He shared an example from 2017, when he sent a representative to Manila, where he discovered that the Philippines had a highly organised system for exporting workers, where individuals were trained at various levels in a 15-story building before being sent abroad. He noted that a Bangladeshi was managing this operation, and he felt that Bangladesh needed to improve its own system.

General Das also mentioned the significance of military exchanges with ASEAN countries. He proudly stated that Bangladesh's military training institutes, such as the National Defence College and the Staff College in Mirpur, are of high standards and have been hosting personnel



from ASEAN countries since the 1980s. He believed that these exchanges represented a valuable opportunity to strengthen Bangladesh's relationship with ASEAN. On the subject of agriculture, he acknowledged that many ASEAN nations, including Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia, are agricultural countries, and Bangladesh shares a similar reliance on agriculture. With Bangladesh's population continuing to rise, he suggested that there would be an increased demand for agricultural products, creating an opportunity for mutual collaboration and learning with ASEAN countries. In closing, General Das expressed his support for Dr Sun's idea of "making farming great again," believing it could significantly improve both Bangladesh's agricultural sector and its relation with ASEAN.



**Major General (Retd.) Nazmul Kabir**  
*Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to Indonesia*

**Major General (Retd) Nazmul Kabir** began by expressing his gratitude to the session chair and the dignitaries who had spoken before him. He stressed the importance of being honest and realistic about Bangladesh's current position, suggesting that before making any decisions or taking any steps forward, it is crucial to conduct a detailed study and base actions on informed decisions. He emphasised the need for Bangladesh to give due attention to ASEAN as a whole and to Indonesia in particular. Drawing from his own experience as an ambassador to Indonesia, he shared insights from his tenure. He highlighted that Indonesia is the largest country in ASEAN and played a key role in establishing the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. He raised the question of whether Bangladesh had given Indonesia the necessary importance in the past, acknowledging that the authorities best understood the answer.

General Kabir also mentioned a few proposals he had sent during his tenure, which he suggested might be worth revisiting. He recommended that the foreign secretary should take a look at them, even though the foreign secretary was not in office at the time the proposals were made.

He pointed out that the current chair of ASEAN plays a significant role, and Bangladesh could not gain much when Indonesia held the chairmanship. While he acknowledged Malaysia's importance, especially as a major destination for Bangladeshi workers, he also emphasised that Malaysia and Singapore, as key ASEAN members, required intense diplomatic engagement from Bangladesh's ambassadors to secure positive outcomes for the country. He urged that Bangladesh's diplomatic efforts be honest and robust, and he humbly requested that some of Bangladesh's most skilled diplomats be assigned to ASEAN countries, rather than focusing solely on North America, Europe and Australia. He stressed the importance of identifying the specific needs of each ASEAN country and assessing whether Bangladesh could contribute meaningfully to those needs, making this the primary responsibility of the embassy and its ambassador.

Lastly, General Kabir recalled sending a proposal in collaboration with Ambassador Nazmul Quaunine, suggesting the establishment of a mission dedicated specifically to ASEAN. He believed that such a mission, distinct from the general diplomatic mission, would demonstrate Bangladesh's commitment to ASEAN and enhance its presence in the region. He urged the foreign secretary to review this proposal and take appropriate action.



### **Dr Mohammad Iftokhar Alam**

*Senior Assistant Director (Planning), Department of Fisheries, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock*

**Dr Mohammad Iftokhar Alam** shared that, following the suggestion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, three sectors have been identified for working towards the SDP (Sectoral Dialogue Partnership), namely fisheries, ICT and tourism. He was pleased to mention that the Department of Fisheries was the first to design a project under this initiative. The project, titled “ASEAN-Bangladesh Cooperation Project on Aquaculture and Fisheries,” was something he had the honour of working on as the project director. As part of this project, he and his team attended



two workshops—one in Bangladesh on Good Aquaculture Practices and another in Jakarta, Indonesia, focused on training and workshops.

During their meeting in Jakarta, he highlighted that they met key figures in the ASEAN community. This included Astanah Abdul Aziz, Deputy Secretary-General (DSG) of ASEAN for Political-Security Community and Satvinder Singh, DSG of the ASEAN Economic Community. He noted that these individuals had a very positive impression of Bangladesh. Ms Astanah specifically mentioned that they hoped Bangladesh would become a sectoral dialogue partner, and she suggested three areas where further collaboration could take place, like disaster management, the blue economy and ecosystem-based solutions for the fisheries sector. Ms Astanah had mentioned how ASEAN countries handle disaster management, and she encouraged Bangladesh to invite ASEAN representatives to observe how the country manages such activities.

Dr Alam was also happy to share that, after his meeting with the ASEAN counterparts—whom he has previously worked with—he had made good progress in implementing the project. They have designed a second phase for the “ASEAN-Bangladesh Cooperation Project on Aquaculture and Fisheries.” In this phase, they incorporated the suggested areas, such as disaster management, especially for coastal fishermen, acknowledging that Bangladesh is a disaster-prone area. Furthermore, the project included the incorporation of disaster management for coastal fisheries, the blue economy, and nature-based solutions for the fisheries sector. Dr Alam was pleased to report that the Planning Commission had given its consent to implement the project in the upcoming economic year. He made a humble request to the foreign secretary, expressing his ministry’s strong interest in working closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This collaboration would aim to secure Bangladesh’s position as a sectoral dialogue partner with ASEAN in the future and Dr Alam expressed his eagerness to continue working together towards this goal.



### **Dr Sajjad Jasimuddin**

*Senior Professor and Head of Geopolitics Lab at Kedge Business School*

**Professor Dr Sajjad Jasimuddin** began by expressing his insights on how Bangladesh could position itself as a sectoral dialogue partner with ASEAN. He emphasised the importance of creating a strong narrative to convince ASEAN members of Bangladesh's value as a partner. Drawing from his experience working on the Brexit issue, particularly in London and France, he highlighted that positioning Bangladesh on the ASEAN platform requires a well-crafted, solid narrative that ASEAN members would find convincing. Dr Jasimuddin explained that the narrative should be developed through thorough research and preparation. He pointed out that the homework for such a narrative must be done at two levels: sectoral and country-specific. At the sectoral level, he suggested that Bangladesh should clearly outline the benefits it can bring to ASEAN, ensuring that these benefits are communicated effectively to ASEAN members. The goal would be to present a win-win situation, where both Bangladesh and ASEAN stand to gain significantly from the partnership.

On the country-specific level, Dr Jasimuddin stressed the importance of learning from other nations that have already become sectoral dialogue partners with ASEAN. He mentioned Pakistan as an example, noting that Pakistan has already gone through the process and Bangladesh should seek to understand how they did it. He also pointed out the importance of engaging with Myanmar, given their proximity to Bangladesh and suggested that Bangladesh could leverage its position as a neighbouring country to ASEAN. He shared his own experience in geopolitics and multinational companies, particularly his work with Shell and Total in Myanmar, and how his recommendations, along with those from various NGOs, had influenced corporate decisions in Myanmar.



Furthermore, Dr Jasimuddin recommended engaging with Cambodia, as it is the latest member to join the ASEAN and could provide valuable insights. He reiterated the importance of having a comprehensive approach that includes both sectoral and country-specific narratives, which would be supported by inputs from scholars and experts.

## Remarks by the Chief Guest



### **Ambassador Md Jashim Uddin**

*Foreign Secretary*

*Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

**Ambassador Md Jashim Uddin**, Foreign Secretary, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh expressed his pleasure in addressing the distinguished gathering and acknowledged the keen interest and collective will present in the room regarding Bangladesh's aspiration to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) of ASEAN. He commended the excellent discussions and analyses presented by the distinguished panellists, including Dr Oh Ei Sun, Professor Shahab Enam Khan, Professor Ali Ashraf, and keynote presenter Mr M Ashique Rahman. He also recognised the presence of representatives from ASEAN embassies, as well as former Bangladesh ambassadors who had served in ASEAN capitals, acknowledging their past contributions in strengthening Bangladesh-ASEAN relations. Ambassador Uddin emphasised that BIISS has long been a platform for discussion regarding regional cooperation, including SAARC and BIMSTEC, and now it is facilitating discussions on Bangladesh's potential engagement with ASEAN. He extended his sincere appreciation to BIISS for bringing together policymakers, scholars, and experts to deliberate on enhancing Bangladesh-ASEAN relations. He reflected on the rewarding discussions that had taken place over the past three hours, which provided valuable insights into the opportunities and partnerships for a robust Bangladesh-ASEAN relationship.

Highlighting Bangladesh's current transformative phase both nationally and globally, Ambassador Uddin referred to the July-August Revolution as an opportunity to build a new



Bangladesh founded on justice, democracy and equality. He noted that the evolving geopolitical realities necessitate enhanced global and regional partnerships, with ASEAN being a significant economic and innovation hub that can support Bangladesh's journey towards sustainable economic growth. Ambassador Uddin elaborated on the historical linkages between Bangladesh and Southeast Asia, emphasising shared history, culture, religious beliefs and economic ties. He pointed out that these commonalities provide a strong foundation for meaningful partnerships and rationalise Bangladesh's pursuit of ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partnership status. ASEAN, being one of the largest economic blocs and Bangladesh, as one of the fastest-growing economies, share mutual interests in trade, investment and technology cooperation. He emphasised the need for greater market access, investment facilitation and technological collaboration in key sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, ICT and renewable energy. Additionally, he reiterated Bangladesh's readiness to contribute to ASEAN in the areas of food security, energy and trade, leveraging its strong agricultural and manufacturing capabilities.

The Foreign Secretary reaffirmed that achieving SDP status of ASEAN is a top foreign policy priority for Bangladesh's interim government and has been under discussion for a considerable period. Bangladesh has been implementing a multi-sectoral roadmap, including diplomatic engagements, institutional efforts and strategic programmes to ensure progress on this front. He highlighted Bangladesh's close engagement with ASEAN countries at multiple levels, noting that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been working with ASEAN members and coordinating diplomatic efforts through Bangladesh's embassies in ASEAN capitals. He mentioned that the visit of the Malaysian Prime Minister to Bangladesh, following Malaysia's assumption of the ASEAN chairmanship, was a testament to Bangladesh's keenness for deeper engagement with ASEAN. The Foreign Secretary stated that Bangladesh's bid for ASEAN SDP status has received significant support from the Honourable Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus, who has made it a priority. Since the status requires consensus from all ASEAN members, Bangladesh has been engaging with each member state individually to address their concerns and gather necessary support. He acknowledged the valuable suggestions provided by ASEAN members during these interactions and assured continued efforts from Bangladesh's diplomatic missions to ensure progress.

Addressing challenges in the process, Ambassador Uddin acknowledged the Rohingya crisis as a critical issue requiring collective efforts for a durable solution. He noted that the internal conflict in Myanmar remains a concern for regional stability, affecting its neighbours, including Bangladesh. He expressed gratitude to ASEAN for its continued support on this matter and urged for sustained cooperation to find a resolution. Recognising the declining global attention and financial support for the Rohingya crisis, he underscored the importance of renewed international focus and informed the audience about Bangladesh's plans to convene an international conference to revive global attention and explore innovative solutions to the crisis, as proposed by the Honourable Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus.

Ambassador Uddin also clarified Bangladesh's position regarding regional organisations like SAARC, stating that the country is not seeking ASEAN membership as an alternative to SAARC but rather as a complementary engagement. He noted that Bangladesh remains committed to SAARC and has been advocating for the revival of its mechanisms. He cited discussions between

Bangladesh's Foreign Affairs Adviser and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on convening the SAARC Standing Committee at the foreign secretary level to enhance regional cooperation. He suggested that reviving SAARC through non-political channels might pave the way for greater collaboration at a political level. He further noted that both SAARC and BIMSTEC remain important platforms for regional cooperation and development alongside ASEAN. Regarding Myanmar, Ambassador Uddin concurred with Professor Shahab's assertion that stabilising Myanmar is crucial not only for Bangladesh but for the entire region. He warned that if the situation remains unresolved, it could escalate beyond a localised crisis, affecting broader regional stability. He reiterated the need for diplomatic engagement and constructive dialogue to push forward the Rohingya repatriation agenda.

In the concluding segment of his remarks, the Foreign Secretary expressed appreciation for the diverse perspectives shared during the discussion, particularly acknowledging the insights of the keynote presenter on the opportunities that ASEAN presents for Bangladesh. He also appreciated Dr Ashraf's strategic suggestions on the roadmap for ASEAN SDP status and Dr Oh Ei Sun's historical perspective on Bangladesh's engagement with ASEAN over the past four decades. He noted Dr Sun's acknowledgement of Bangladesh's progress and his candid assessment of the country's strengths and challenges in its bid for ASEAN SDP status. The Foreign Secretary concluded by urging all stakeholders to work together in transforming aspirations into reality. He reaffirmed his commitment to supporting Bangladesh's bid for ASEAN SDP status and expressed optimism about its eventual success. He emphasised that Bangladesh's integration with ASEAN aligns with its geographical, historical and economic logic, making it a mutually beneficial partnership. Finally, he expressed gratitude to BISS for organising the roundtable discussion and acknowledged the efforts of all participants, panelists and organisers in making the event a success.



## **Concluding Remarks by the Session Chair**



### **Major General Iftekhar Anis BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**

*Director General*

*Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)*

**Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General, BISS, concluded the session by observing that the discussion had thoroughly addressed the evolving landscape of relations between ASEAN and Bangladesh. He emphasised that the session highlighted both the promising potential for collaboration and the challenges that lie ahead, while also outlining strategic pathways to strengthen ties. He noted that the esteemed panelists and participating delegates have collectively underscored the critical importance of sustained political dialogue, a responsive and efficient bureaucracy, and deeper economic partnerships in cultivating a more robust and resilient relationship between the two sides.

He further emphasised that, by embracing meaningful dialogue and harnessing collective strengths, the ASEAN countries and Bangladesh will work in unison toward shared aspirations grounded in sustainability, inclusivity, and mutual growth. The future of ASEAN-Bangladesh relations hold the promise of a brighter and more prosperous tomorrow, not only for their respective parties but also for the broader region as a whole.

In conclusion, Major General Iftekhar extended his sincere gratitude and appreciation to Ambassador Md Jashim Uddin, respected Foreign Secretary, for taking time out of his demanding schedule to grace the roundtable as the Chief Guest. He also offered heartfelt thanks to the distinguished keynote presenter and the panelists for sharing their invaluable insights, reflections and expertise, which greatly enriched the session. He further acknowledged the

contributions of the esteemed participants, who, through their thoughtful remarks, opinions, and suggestions, added depth and substance to the discussion. Finally, he expressed special appreciation to the dedicated staff and officers of BISS for their tireless efforts and meticulous coordination in making all necessary arrangements to ensure the successful execution of this significant and timely event.





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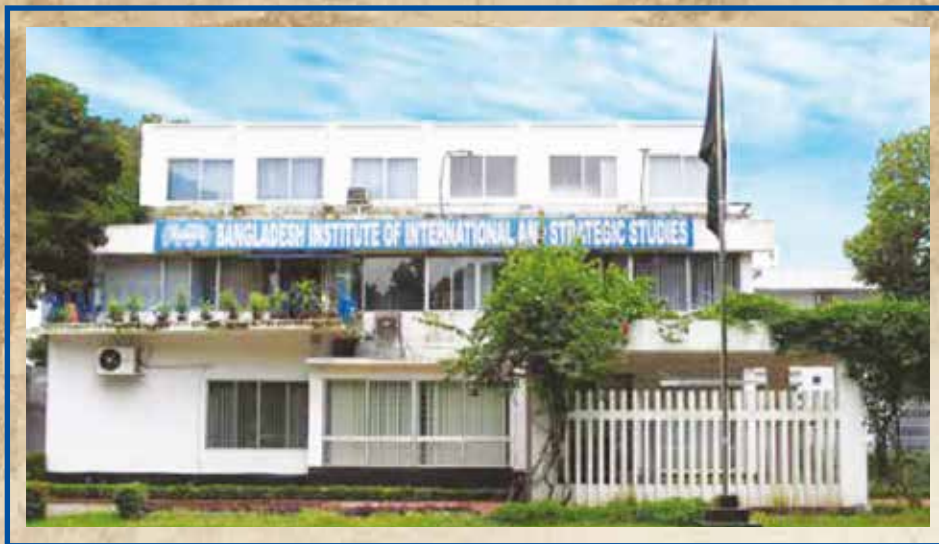
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