



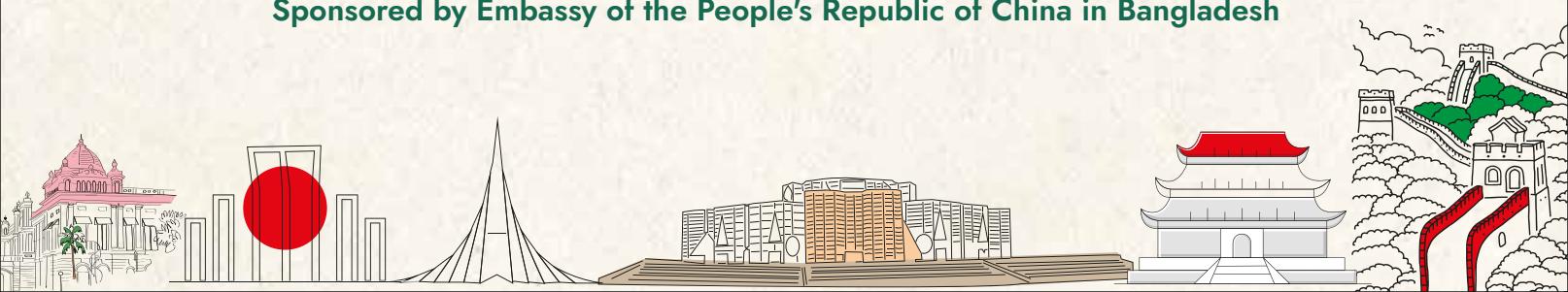
Seminar on
the Eve of Commemorating Fifty Years of
Bangladesh-China Relations

BANGLADESH-CHINA RELATIONS: A FUTURE OUTLOOK

Monday, 14 October 2024

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)
in collaboration with
Centre for China Studies (SIIS-DU)

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Seminar On Bangladesh-China Relations: A Future Outlook

Monday, 14 October 2024



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) and the Centre for China Studies (SIIS-DU) jointly organised an International Seminar on “**Bangladesh-China Relations: A Future Outlook**” on 14 October 2024 at the Inter Continental Hotel, Dhaka on the eve of commemorating 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Bangladesh. The seminar was sponsored by the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Bangladesh. **Md Touhid Hossain**, Honourable Adviser for Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. **H E Mr Yao Wen**, Ambassador of China to Bangladesh and **Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya**, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Chair, Committee on White Paper on the State of Bangladesh’s Economy were present as Special Guests. **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General, BISS delivered the Welcome Address. **Dr Yang Jiemian**, Professor, Director of the Academic Advisory Council, SIIS made a special remark during the inaugural session. **Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BISS presided over the Inaugural Session. **Dr Md Nazrul Islam**, Additional Foreign Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was a Special Guest during the third and final working session.

There were three working sessions in the day-long international seminar. The first working session titled “**The Impact of Bangladesh's Changing Political Landscape on Regional Dynamics**” was moderated by **Ambassador Farooq Sobhan**, Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh. The second working session titled “**Bangladesh's Political, Economic, and Social Reforms and the Trends**” was moderated by **Dr Zhang Jiu'an**, Associate Research Fellow, Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies. **Professor Amena Mohsin**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka moderated the third working session titled “**Strengthening China-Bangladesh Cooperation and Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership.**”

Distinguished presenters of the working sessions were **Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas**, Professor, Department of International Relations (IR), University of Dhaka; **Dr Zhang Jiadong**, Professor, Director of the South Asia Research Center, Fudan University; **Dr Kazi Maruful Islam**, Professor, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka; **Dr Guo Na**, Director of the Bangladesh Research Institute, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences; **Dr Mao Keji**, Assistant Research Fellow, International Cooperation Center, National Development and Reform Commission, China and **Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**, Research Director, BIISS. Distinguished panellists of the working sessions were **Dr Liu Peng**, Associate Professor, Yunnan University; **Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman**; **Ms Deng Lan**, Associate Professor, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, **Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmad**, Executive Director, Center for Alternatives; **Dr Wang Xu**, Associate Professor, Peking University and **Dr Md Safiul Islam**, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Chittagong.

Inaugural Session Welcome Address



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

At the outset, **Major General Iftekhar Anis** welcomed all to the seminar organised to commemorate five decades of Bangladesh-China relations. He expressed his heartfelt reverence to all the students and youths who have made supreme sacrifices and incurred severe injuries during the July-August 2024 mass uprising against the fascist regime in Bangladesh. He also paid his deepest tribute to all the martyrs and freedom fighters who laid their lives during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

According to the Director General, Bangladesh-China relations have developed steadily over the past five decades and extended to cover all areas of cooperation - economic, political, military and security cooperation and, as one scholar remarked it has by now “acquired a life of its own”. He commented that economic cooperation is the cornerstone of the Bangladesh-China bilateral relationship and it has attained significant momentum since 2006, when China emerged as the largest trading partner of Bangladesh surpassing India. That momentum continued and the bilateral trade stands at US\$ 24 billion according to year 2023 data. However, the trade balance is in favour of China, but it has taken initiatives to address that and since June 2020, various

Bangladeshi products are receiving zero-tariff benefits in Chinese market. Recently, China announced 100 per cent duty-free access to products from Bangladesh. Chinese companies have also become increasingly involved in Bangladesh's development projects, contributing over US\$ 22 billion in goods and services over the last decade. Chinese investment in Bangladesh has also surged from US\$ 241 million to nearly US\$ 1.4 billion, with over 670 Chinese enterprises operating in Bangladesh by 2023. These companies are also playing a crucial role in the economy, creating more than 550,000 jobs and contributing to economic development and public welfare in Bangladesh.

Major General Anis mentioned another key area of Bangladesh-China relationship which is related to cooperation in infrastructure development and technological advancement. China's connectivity initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which extends to nearly every continent, highlight China's economic prowess and expertise in infrastructure development. China remains a major development partner of Bangladesh contributing immensely to



Bangladesh's infrastructure development and sharing technological know-how for mutual benefits and advancement. Since the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2016, China has provided tremendous support in building infrastructures in Bangladesh such as bridges, roads, railways, expressways, etc., but also infrastructures in the power, energy, and information technology (IT) sectors.

The Director General further discussed that Bangladesh-China relations also extend to areas of cooperation in water resource management for flood control, disaster prevention, river training, water resources utilisation and irrigation, technology transfer, connectivity, maritime security, and capacity-building of Bangladesh. The country also has longstanding defence cooperation that includes not only defence procurement but also military training, exercises, and high-level mutual visits and exchanges. Both countries also cooperate in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations by complementing each other's efforts and through contributing relative expertise.

Major General Anis opined that educational and cultural cooperation and people-to-people relations opined have also increased over the years as hundreds of Bangladeshi students are now studying in Chinese universities, particularly in fields like medicine, engineering, and IT. China has also invested in promoting cultural diplomacy, including offering scholarships and funding for cultural exchange programmes. Chinese language institutes, such as Confucius Institutes, have been established in Bangladesh to enhance people-to-people ties as well.

While addressing the forcibly displaced Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, the Director General opined that, in recent times, China has also been an important partner of Bangladesh and both countries have agreed that early repatriation is the only solution for the displaced Rohingyas from Myanmar's Rakhine State. Both countries advocate for all parties in Myanmar to resolve their differences through dialogue and consultation. He hopes that China will continue to play a constructive role in facilitating dialogue to achieve a peaceful resolution to the Rohingya crisis.

According to Major General Anis, Bangladesh now stands at an extraordinary juncture to get rid of old ideas, stereotypes and clichés and embark on a renewed and reinvigorated policy approach. The country needs to focus and accomplish the required political, economic and social reforms and for that, it needs the support of all the stakeholders including the long-lasting development partners like China. As Bangladesh looks towards the future, it is clear that both Bangladesh and China need to deepen and widen their relations to continue the shared prosperity of the two nations. As the two countries are on track to celebrate the golden jubilee in 2025, Bangladesh needs to reorient on examining the dynamics of Bangladesh-China relations. It is crucial to reflect on the bilateral issues but at the same time consider and appreciate how broader international and regional politics shape these ties. Keeping this in mind, he said that this seminar organised by BIISS in collaboration with the SIIS-DU is a timely initiative for providing a forum of deliberation and exchange of ideas and thoughts among the stakeholders. He commented that the fruitful deliberation and specific policy suggestions that came from the seminar will be useful for the decision-makers and in the future, will assist in taking Bangladesh-China relations towards a new height into a closer and more comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.

Special Remarks



Dr Yang Jiemian

Professor, Director of the Academic Advisory Council
Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS)

At the outset of his speech, **Dr Yang Jiemian** divided his talk into three “looks,” the first of which entails looking back into history; the second of which examines the present situation; and the third of which looks forward to the future. With the first look, by recapturing history, it is evident that the Bangladesh-China diplomatic relationship is based on a long history that can be traced back thousands of years. China and Bangladesh are two significant makers and promoters of mankind's civilisation. Dr Jiemian described Bangladesh and China being two neighbours, with frequent and various interactions, ranging from material traits and religious interchanges and now they are two important members of the global South. He mentioned the shared experience of colonial oppression and heroic fighting for national political independence and development by the Group of 77 countries which is now the Group of 77+ China and all of them belong to the Global South. The world in the past half-century witnessed China's Mao Zedong, the late Chairman, initiating the three-world theory and the then US President, Nixon, who advocated the emerging five power centres of the world: United States, Soviet Union, Western Europe, Japan, and China. There are similarities, but the big difference between the two late leaders is that the one only cared about power, the other, however, trusted in the people. The region of Asia also witnessed great changes in the past half-century. China moved out of the cultural revolution and entered into the time of reform and opened up. Dr Jiemian opined that this particular phase of Chinese history makes China what it is today.

According to Dr Jieman, Bangladesh also underwent various courses of history, sometimes with twists and turns for nation-building, economic and social advancements. At the time of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations in 1975, the GDP per capita of China was US\$ 175, and the GDP rate of Bangladesh was higher than that of China and it was only US\$ 280. With time, these two nations have come far. Similarly, Southeast Asia turned the fighting battlefield into a working ground for development. Asia has since become the engine of the world economy.



Dr Jieman discussed his second point, where he looked at the present situation, which he thinks consists of three perspectives: the first perspective is positive, the second is negative, and the third is binary potential. While discussing the positive trend, he compared his first visit to Dhaka in 2009 to his current visit. He feels there has been a massive change in terms of infrastructure and life standards of the people in the last 15 years. On this note, he argued that Asia continues to be the main contributor toward economic development and regional awareness and identity. Both China and Bangladesh are at a critical stage of development with encouraging signs of progress.

After talking about the positive trends, Dr Jieman discussed the negative trends which are equally, if not more prominent. The world is being obsessed with major power competition. The world economy is sluggish, and global risks are on the rise. Asia is witnessing a revival of the arms race and the block confrontation with the significant presence of hot spots. Asian regional cooperative architecture building initiatives suffer because of inter-regional differences and extra-regional interferences. While explaining the third perspective, Dr Jieman emphasised the “in-between” of the good and bad trends which provides opportunities to look for opportunities. Hence, the third perspective, the binary potential has at least three meanings here: one is that it is flexible and prevents all from trampling into an “either-or” dilemma, the mindset and the

action model. For him, only the “either-or” narrative is very exclusionary, demanding and much less coherent. Two is that the flexibility and the tenability of this grey zone and the transitioning areas give room to efforts for enlarging the positive factors and reducing the negative ones. Three is that it is always a wake-up call to make people realise how bad the current negative back washers could turn in to, if not checked and reversed.



While discussing the third point which is looking forward to the future, Dr Jieman described the work of an international studies scholar who is using history to better understand, present, and manage the future. In that regard, he believes cooperation and adaptability are the keywords to determine the future China-Bangladesh relations. Therefore, at first, Bangladesh and China must continue to focus on putting their own houses in order. Instead of arguing about who gets the smaller or larger piece of the cake, countries need to make the cake larger, bigger and better. Then it will be possible to think about fairer and meaningful distribution of the cake. To realise this, creating national conditions of a clean government, good and capable governance, fair and stable social environment is imperative.

As far as the second keyword is concerned, cooperation should be the basis for the future relationship between China and Bangladesh. In their endeavour for modernisation goals, they need to learn from each other and help each other.

While being inclusive and open to cooperation with each other, Dr Jieman believes in mutual benefits. In his view, complementarity is the solid basis for Bangladesh-China future relations. Regarding Bangladesh’s friendly relations with other partners such as the US, Japan, European Union (EU); he thinks, China is welcoming to such cooperation as the country believes cooperation should be the key to the future of international relations rather than confrontation. Furthermore, he argued that adaptability to fast changes which are taking place both at home



and abroad is the third most important factor for both countries as he refers to the establishment of the diplomatic relationship between China and Bangladesh. According to him, adaptability enabled this relationship through a joint communiqué by the two governments to set up diplomatic relations on 04 October 1975. Despite having a few mutual differences, joint wisdom guided this relationship to get formed and adaptability to reality has helped this diplomatic relationship to survive great changes and evolve into a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. He expressed his firm belief that such a partnership will be refined, updated and adapted to fit into the current day conditions, and in the same line, in the future, adaptability will certainly help the two nations to meet the challenges of green and blue economies, as well as the digital transition. At the concluding part of his deliberation, Dr Jiemian emphasised raising the living standard of the general people of the two nations who are not underprivileged and receive lesser opportunities and expand the horizon of cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Remarks by the Special Guests



Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya

Distinguished Fellow, CPD &
Chair, Committee on White Paper on the State of Bangladesh's Economy

Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya extended a warm welcome to the guests from the SIIS and other colleagues from China present on the occasion marking the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Bangladesh-China relationship. Reflecting on the Bangladesh-China relationship, Dr Bhattacharya recalled his presence in Kunming 25 years ago when the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) initiative was first established. His organisation, CPD, had been a founding initiator of that historic initiative. He also reminisced about organising the Kolkata to Kunming (K2K) Car Rally in Dhaka in 2013, which was another significant success. Additionally, he recalled his interactions with the Chinese ambassador at the World Trade Organization (WTO) during the Doha Development Round Negotiations, where he received significant support from Chinese colleagues.

Turning to the future, Dr Bhattacharya emphasised the importance of understanding the prospect of Bangladesh-China relations. He acknowledged that while the word "prospect" might be tricky to define, it was essential to distinguish between prognosis, possibilities, and the reality

of realising opportunities while addressing challenges. Dealing with the opportunities and challenges has to ensure a prospect which is mutually beneficial not only for Bangladesh and China but also for the region and the rest of the world. He said that the Bangladesh-China relationship is multifaceted, multi-tiered, and multi-dimensional, and it is crucial to recognise the benchmarks when assessing its future. China remains one of the largest providers of financial support to Bangladesh. In 2023, Bangladesh received almost US\$ 4 billion in financial aid from China, accounting for 9 per cent of the total financial flows to the country. China is also Bangladesh's largest source of foreign imports, with US\$ 25 billion worth of goods imported, comprising 23 per cent of Bangladesh's total imports. Additionally, China's investments in Bangladesh have reached US\$ 1.5 billion, creating 5.55 million jobs, including employment for Chinese nationals working in Bangladesh. In terms of human development, 20,000 Bangladeshi students are currently studying in China.



Looking to the future, Dr Bhattacharya highlighted why Bangladesh should continue to view China as a major source of development and economic cooperation. China is a key driver of global economic growth, contributing to 30 per cent of the world's growth, and boasts significant trade surpluses and foreign exchange reserves. He also emphasised China's rising per capita income, which creates new markets for exportable goods from developing countries like Bangladesh. In addition to that, he also stressed that it will be politically beneficial for a growing developing country like Bangladesh to have a closer tie with a neighbouring country which is a member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

While there are many opportunities, Dr Bhattacharya acknowledged the challenges that lie ahead. Trade with China is growing, but so is the trade deficit, which is increasing at a faster rate than the volume of trade. Despite China granting Bangladesh duty-free and quota-free access to its markets, he thinks it will not help reducing the deficit. For him, tariffs will not be an issue for Bangladesh-China trade relations, rather it is the non-tariff barriers like lengthy processes for

dispute settlement that need attention. Furthermore, Bangladesh's debt to China, which amounts to US\$ 5.6 billion or nearly 10 per cent of its total foreign debt, is an increasing challenge. Some of these loans have been structured with shorter repayment periods and higher commitment charges, prompting Dr Bhattacharya to call for closer scrutiny of these terms. Debt rescheduling may also become necessary in the near future to manage Bangladesh's debt repayment obligations.

In terms of investment, Dr Bhattacharya highlighted the need to integrate Bangladesh into the regional value chain, especially in the garment sector. He noted that Chinese investment in Bangladesh's Chinese Economic and Industrial Zone (CEIZ) in Anwara, Chattogram, is critical for making infrastructure projects like the Karnaphuli Tunnel economically viable. Moreover, China is a key player in Bangladesh's green energy transition, particularly in solar energy. Dr Bhattacharya also addressed the issue of financing imports from China, given Bangladesh's current foreign exchange constraints. He suggested the possibility of opening a credit line with China to finance these imports and reduce pressure on Bangladesh's balance of payments.

In conclusion, Dr Bhattacharya identified three key issues for the future of Bangladesh-China relations: the need for greater transparency in the relationship, the importance of refocusing the economic relationship beyond hardware to include social and environmental considerations, and the necessity of protecting the relationship from geostrategic concerns. He concluded by expressing optimism for the future of the Bangladesh-China relationship, emphasising that both countries should strive together to achieve mutual benefits, not only for themselves but also for the region and the world. Dr Bhattacharya expressed hope that China would continue to be a strong partner as Bangladesh graduates from the LDC group, accelerates the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and moves toward becoming a high-middle-income country.



H E Mr Yao Wen

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

H E Mr Yao Wen expressed his great honour for being invited to attend this international seminar. He acknowledged the establishment of the Centre for China Studies (CCS) under the leadership of the SIIS, in collaboration with renowned research institutions and universities from both China and Bangladesh. He emphasised its significance as the first comprehensive research centre in South Asia dedicated to China studies. Ambassador Wen also expressed his sincere gratitude to CCS and BIISS for their dedicated efforts in organising the seminar, recognising the importance of their work in fostering dialogue and cooperation.

In his speech, Ambassador Wen emphasised the significance of this seminar in the current political context of Bangladesh. He noted that Bangladesh is at a critical juncture following a major political transformation, unprecedented in the past 30 years. As a comprehensive strategic cooperative partner, China firmly supports the interim government of Bangladesh and its efforts to maintain law and order, promote economic development, and improve the livelihoods of its people. Focusing on the theme of the seminar, “Bangladesh-China Relations: A Future Outlook,” Ambassador Wen posed the question of how to define the China-Bangladesh relationship in the current context. Reflecting on the 49 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties, he highlighted that China has always placed great importance on the development of bilateral relations. The two countries, he noted, have continuously adhered to

the principles of mutual respect, equality, and win-win cooperation. In essence, China-Bangladesh relations not only serve the interests of both countries but also benefit both countries' citizens and are supported by them.



Ambassador Wen stated that defining and advancing China-Bangladesh relations in the current context requires a clear understanding of three key changes and constants. He noted that both countries are navigating significant shifts in their historical opportunities and external environments. The first change, according to him, is in the historical tasks of both nations. Bangladesh has achieved what he described a "second liberation," marking its commitment to building a new era of equality, freedom, and democracy. Meanwhile, China has eradicated absolute poverty and built a moderately prosperous society, by reaching its first centenary goal. China is now striving towards its second centenary goal which lies in the development goals which are similar to Bangladesh. For instance, in terms of Bangladesh, he remarked that the country is now focusing on restoring law and order, revitalising its economy, and preparing to graduate from the category of LDC. On the contrary, China is at a pivotal stage in its pursuit of national rejuvenation, advancing the construction of a strong nation through its unique path to modernisation. The third change pertains to global responsibilities. Ambassador Wen highlighted the increasingly complex international environment, marked by conflicts in global hotspots, great power competition, and escalating geopolitical tensions. As developing countries and members of the Global South, both China and Bangladesh must advocate for a multipolar world order, practice multilateralism, oppose hegemonism and power politics, and promote the democratisation of international relations.

Despite these changes, Ambassador Wen emphasised three constants in China-Bangladesh relations. First, the core principles of mutual respect, equality, and mutual benefits remain unchanged. Second, the deep-rooted friendship between the people of China and Bangladesh continues to be a strong foundation of the bilateral relationship. Finally, the determination of both governments and societies to support and advance bilateral relations remains unwavering.



In his recent interactions with Bangladesh's interim government, political parties, and various sectors of society, Ambassador Wen noted a strong commitment to China-Bangladesh friendship. He observed widespread support for developing bilateral relations, with many believing that both countries are now facing even greater historical opportunities to deepen cooperation and enhance their partnership.

Ambassador Wen reiterated China's deep respect for Bangladesh's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the development path chosen independently by the Bangladeshi people. He highlighted the strong alignment between the people-centered development approach of Professor Dr Mohammad Yunus, Honourable Chief Advisor of Bangladesh's Interim Government, and the governance principles of the Chinese Communist Party and government. Referring to President Xi Jinping's famous statement, "The country is the people, and the people are the country," he expressed confidence that the interim government would meet the expectations of the Bangladeshi people, overcoming current challenges and steering the country back to a path of unity, stability, development, and prosperity.

Ambassador Wen noted that, at the request of Bangladesh's interim government, China sent its National Emergency Medical Team to provide humanitarian assistance to treat students injured during recent movements, marking the first foreign medical team to respond. Additionally, as Bangladesh continues to face floods and dengue outbreaks, the Chinese Embassy staffs visited affected areas to convey their sympathies. Ambassador Wen announced China's provision of over US\$ 3 million worth of rescue facilities and equipment, including inflatable lifeboats, portable power generators, and drinking water purifiers, to support Bangladesh's efforts. Since the establishment of the interim government, Chinese enterprises have invested more than US\$ 85 billion in Bangladesh. Ambassador Wen shared that just two days after the formation of the interim government, China contributed over US\$ 1 million to Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) sector, representing the first-ever foreign investment under the new government. Additionally, China has committed around US\$ 150 million in grant aid for livelihood projects agreed upon by both sides.

In a significant step toward strengthening trade relations, China will unilaterally open its market to Bangladesh from December 1, 2024, offering a zero-tariff barrier on 100 per cent of taxable items. This move, according to Ambassador Wen will significantly increase the import of sugar, edible oil, rubber products, jute products, wood, paper, wool, and cotton from Bangladesh, before the country graduates from its status as a LDC. Ambassador Wen also announced that China would import fresh mangoes from Bangladesh starting next year, following the completion of necessary procedures, marking a major boost for the country's mango industry and farmers. Furthermore, China is committed to deepening pragmatic cooperation with Bangladesh in areas such as solar power, agriculture, and green and low-carbon development. These efforts demonstrate China's strong support for the interim government and will play a key role in advancing Bangladesh's economic and social development, bringing tangible benefits to its people.

Ambassador Wen emphasised China's commitment to cooperation based on mutual agreement, particularly in the context of projects funded by preferential loans from the Chinese government. He underscored that all such projects between China and Bangladesh are agreed upon by both governments, reflecting a spirit of mutual cooperation. China, as he stressed, never imposes conditions on any country, including Bangladesh. Instead, any request from Bangladesh is approached as part of a consensus-building process through open dialogue. He expressed his confidence in the efficiency of Chinese projects, noting that Chinese companies tend to complete contracts in the shortest possible time. Even during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese companies remained committed to continuing their work in Bangladesh, whereas many other foreign companies withdrew their management and labour forces. He highlighted the example of Huawei, a Chinese company that stayed in Bangladesh during the height of movements in July and August of this year, providing uninterrupted ICT services during that critical period. This steadfastness, as he pointed out, is a testament to China's dedication to standing with the people of Bangladesh through both challenging and stable times.

Ambassador Wen expressed his optimism about the future of China-Bangladesh cooperation under the new interim government, noting that there are enormous opportunities ahead. He acknowledged the trade surplus that China currently enjoys in bilateral trade with Bangladesh but emphasised that China does not seek to profit from this surplus. Instead, the surplus exists due to the structure of bilateral trade, with Bangladesh's exports being heavily reliant on the RMG sector, while Bangladesh imports around 80 per cent of its raw materials and equipment from China. He highlighted that while China has a surplus in its trade with Bangladesh, the latter enjoys a surplus in its trade with the US and European countries, primarily through its RMG exports. This creates a circular imbalance in the overall trade structure. To address this, Ambassador Wen stressed the need to break the cycle and diversify Bangladesh's export base beyond the RMG sector. To that end, Ambassador Wen explained that China is eager to invest in Bangladesh's manufacturing sector to enhance the country's competitiveness. This would allow Bangladesh to export a wider range of goods and reduce its trade deficit with China. He emphasised that this shift requires cooperation and support from Bangladesh to ensure mutual benefits. Looking ahead, China hopes to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Bangladesh before 2026. Ambassador Wen expressed hope that discussions on this matter could begin sometime this year, which would mark an important step in improving the structure of bilateral trade and fostering deeper economic ties between the two nations.

Ambassador Wen highlighted that, next year marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Bangladesh, and the former is committed to elevating its comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership to new heights. He outlined several key areas of focus for deepening the relationship and these are:

- First is the political trust and national development. China and Bangladesh will continue to support each other's development and revitalisation efforts. This will include maintaining high-level exchanges, fostering cooperation among political parties, aligning policies and development strategies, sharing governance experiences, and improving mechanisms for cooperation at all levels and across various sectors.
- Second is mutual benefits and economic cooperation. The two countries will emphasise win-win cooperation to promote economic development and social prosperity. Alongside ongoing infrastructure and major project collaborations, there will be a stronger focus on partnerships in education, healthcare, environmental protection, water resources, and other key livelihood areas. China and Bangladesh will also work to integrate their industrial and supply chains while exploring concrete measures to implement the "Three Zeros" concept introduced by the Honourable Chief Advisor Professor Dr Mohammad Yunus.
- Third is deepening people-to-people ties. As the upcoming year will be the China-Bangladesh Year of People-to-People Exchanges, the two nations will actively expand cooperation in certain areas such as education, media, think tanks, youth, women, sports, tourism, and film industries. These efforts aim to strengthen mutual understanding between the younger generations of both countries and solidify the foundation of China-Bangladesh relations.
- Finally, fairness, justice, and international cooperation where China will work closely with Bangladesh on international and multilateral affairs, supporting Bangladesh's aspirations to become a partner of the BRICS mechanism and a dialogue partner with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China also stands ready to assist in the early repatriation of Rohingya refugees and to strengthen cooperation within the United Nations (UN) and other multilateral frameworks. By advocating for fairness, justice, and the common values of humanity, China aims to contribute to building a community with a shared future for mankind. Through these measures, Ambassador Wen underscored China's commitment to fostering deeper political, economic, cultural, and international cooperation with Bangladesh as the two countries approach this significant milestone in their diplomatic relationships.

In conclusion, Ambassador Wen emphasised the importance of academic exchanges as a vital bridge for fostering communication and collaboration between China and Bangladesh. He acknowledged the distinguished guests present, all of whom have dedicated years to the study of international relations and possess valuable insights into relevant issues. He hoped that these experts would actively engage in research and exploration and continue to provide intellectual support for the China-Bangladesh partnership. By doing so, they can play a more significant and positive role in advancing the development of cooperation between the two nations. Through shared knowledge and collaboration, China and Bangladesh can further strengthen their ties and work together toward a prosperous future.

Remarks by the Chief Guest



Md Touhid Hossain

Honourable Adviser

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Md Touhid Hossain began his deliberation by paying deep respect to the martyrs of Bangladesh's Liberation War and those who recently sacrificed their lives during the July and August anti-fascist revolution. He also paid his homage to the memory of those who lost their lives and women who suffered during the War of Liberation.

He extended his gratitude to the organising team—BIISS, the Embassy of China in Bangladesh, and the SIIS—for hosting a timely seminar to explore the evolving dynamics and future of this crucial bilateral relationships. He noted that the cooperation between Bangladesh and China has progressed in several areas, including trade, defence, infrastructure, and technology. On economic matters, he acknowledged Dr Bhattacharya's insightful remarks and wished to avoid redundancy, reiterating only a few points. He mentioned non-tariff barriers as a widespread challenge impacting exports, not only with China but globally. For Bangladesh's current economic needs, he emphasised the importance of debt rescheduling and highlighted the missed opportunity to fully capitalise on China's duty-free access due to competitiveness and diversification issues.

Mr Hossain suggested that focusing on enhancing competitiveness and expanding export baskets is crucial, with China's increased investment in Bangladesh potentially supporting these efforts to boost exports. Shifting focus, he highlighted significant defence cooperation between Bangladesh and China, with the latter as a key supplier of defence equipment and a critical partner in Bangladesh's military modernisation efforts. He stressed the need for continued and expanded cooperation in defence training, which has strengthened Bangladesh's capacity, including in peacekeeping missions.

He then turned to the infrastructure sector, another key area of collaboration between the two nations, recognising the existing challenges and urging that overcoming them would make infrastructure cooperation more sustainable and beneficial. He emphasised the need for increased cooperation in the energy sector, focusing on both green and traditional energy sources. He noted that the ongoing projects in various areas would be more beneficial if expedited for timely completion, thus better serving the economy's needs.



Mr Hossain highlighted technological know-how and communication, especially ICT, as another key area for collaboration between Bangladesh and China. Recognising China's global leadership in these sectors, he suggested that Bangladesh's ICT sector could become a driving force for economic growth with China's support.

Moving to a critical issue for Bangladesh, he discussed the Rohingya crisis, referring to the Rohingyas as forcibly displaced people from Myanmar. Acknowledging China's past assistance with repatriation efforts, he stressed that the only viable solution is for these individuals to return to their homes. While there have been other suggested solutions, he asserted that none were feasible. He expressed the hope for continued support from the international community and specifically called for a more active role from China, given its significant influence in Myanmar.

Mr Hossain pointed out that the ongoing trilateral dialogues and other initiatives have not yet resulted in any meaningful repatriation. He urged China to use its influence in Myanmar to help ensure the Rohingyas' safe and dignified return, where their rights are respected, aiming to resolve this issue permanently. He called for creativity and continued cooperation between Bangladesh and China in addressing this pressing humanitarian challenge.

Mr Hossain reflected on the longstanding diplomatic relationship between China and Bangladesh, emphasising the mutual respect and equality that have characterised their partnership. Both nations, he noted, have consistently supported each other on matters of core interest, advancing along a shared path of development and cooperation. He highlighted that this diplomatic bond has become an example of harmonious coexistence and cooperative success. As they approach the 50th anniversary of these ties, he expressed enthusiasm for the upcoming celebrations in both countries.



Turning to the present context, Mr Hossain acknowledged the profound political shift in Bangladesh's history, noting that the future Bangladesh-China relations in a post-revolution era will require a more holistic approach. He observed that the trajectory of these relations may be influenced by factors like Bangladesh's political stability and shifting regional and global dynamics. While external influences might shape the bilateral relationship, Mr Hossain affirmed that the foundation of their cooperation—trade, investment, infrastructure, and technology sharing—remains strong due to mutual interests in economic growth and regional stability. He also identified potential areas for future cooperation, such as green energy, tourism, satellite technology, and climate change, underscoring the need to explore new collaborative opportunities.

In conclusion, Mr Hossain expressed confidence that the seminar would provide valuable insights into how the bilateral relationship might evolve amidst shifting national, regional, and global dynamics. He hoped these exchanges would support Bangladesh's post-revolution economic goals and adapt to the changing political landscape. He wished the seminar a successful outcome, expressed hopes for the enduring friendship between Bangladesh and China, and extended his thanks to all participants.

Concluding Remarks by the Session Chair



Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker

Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker articulated that Bangladesh needs China for enhanced cooperation, particularly in the domains of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)-Science, technology, and innovation as well as the two conventional sectors of jute and leather. He emphasised the point that between these two countries, people-to-people connectivity needs to be increased which was set up during the ancient period as a source of goodwill and positive gesture. He expressed his gratitude to the esteemed Chief Guest for his directions and highlighted the importance of improving the relationships between the two countries particularly in light of Bangladesh's evolving political landscape.

The Chairman then extended his appreciation to the Chief Guest Md Touhid Hossain, special guests Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya and Ambassador Yao Wen for sharing their thoughts and valuable contributions. He also expressed his deep appreciation to the delegates who came from China to join in this seminar. Finally, he acknowledged the efforts of BIISS and CCS (SIIS-DU) for making this arrangement and helping this event to be a success.

Working Session 1

The Impact of Bangladesh's Changing Political Landscape on Regional Dynamics

Presentation 1



Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Professor Niloy Ranjan Biswas began his presentation by expressing gramercy to the respected Chair of the session and honourable dignitaries. Reflecting on the concept of 'change', Professor Biswas emphasised the importance of understanding the shifts shaping Bangladesh's narrative, particularly in the context of its evolving worldview within South Asia and the wider Asian region. He noted that 'Bangladesh 2.0' has become a widely recognised term, especially after the transformative events of 05 August, marked by significant sacrifices. In reverence, he joined others in honouring those who lost their lives and became injured in the movement. On 08 August, an interim government led by the Chief Advisor Professor Dr Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Laureate, assumed leadership. Professor Biswas addressed this new leadership should underscore Bangladesh's commitment to democracy, good governance, economic stability, freedom, and rule of law drawing substantial attention both regionally and globally.

Professor Biswas mentioned the key focus of the interim government which is to reform the economic sector with an eye toward improving Bangladesh's global standing. The government has also had some development priorities since it will attempt to create a conducive environment for election.

He then emphasised the necessity of redefining "region" beyond geographic borders. In his view, geopolitical thinkers posit that regions can be constructed through shared values and economic networks as seen in the BRI which connects diverse nations through infrastructure and mutual interests. South Asia, he described, is a unique region where despite shared borders, nationalism often outweighs regional unity. Addressing regional differences, Professor Biswas highlighted South Asia's complexity includes India's extensive borders with neighbouring South Asian nations, the presence of two nuclear powers, and China's significant influence across various regional spheres. Additionally, he mentioned the region's population diversity and climate vulnerability which shape its geopolitical landscape. These issues indeed make the response to Bangladesh's changes crucial. Professor Biswas reiterated according to suggestions of various schools of thoughts that internal shifts influence its external relations.



Professor Biswas mentioned that, in Bangladesh, the present priorities should include national security, economic reforms, justice for victims of violence and ongoing commitments to defence modernisation and peacekeeping. Infrastructure development, he marked as a hallmark of the last decade, remains a priority with robust support from China—a partnership strengthened since 1975. He also addressed the Rohingya refugee crisis, a regional issue with substantial impacts on neighbouring countries which is needed to give more concentration.

In looking ahead, Professor Biswas underscored the importance of a diplomatic, multilateral approach to regional stability, highlighting ASEAN's role, China's influence and the need for partnerships that sustain peace. He rehearsed those relations with key powers including the US, Japan, and China which are pivotal in this context, especially within Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Lastly, Professor Biswas emphasised that Bangladesh must balance its regional and global relationships as per the national interests. He expressed that moving beyond outdated Cold War frameworks, Bangladesh's foreign policy must aim for mutual benefits with all partners. Finally, he advocated for institutionalising Bangladesh's foreign policy and ended his presentation with the hope of ensuring continuity across administrations as seen in many established countries as the future path ahead.

Presentation 2



Dr Zhang Jiadong
Professor, Director of the South Asia Research Center, Fudan University

Dr Zhang Jiadong began his address by expressing his honour to participate in the event. He acknowledged the significant economic transformations that have taken place in Bangladesh, highlighting the visible improvements in infrastructure, such as better streets and overall environmental enhancement. These changes, according to Dr Jiadong, reflect the positive trajectory of Bangladesh's development.

Dr Jiadong delved into China's economic history, noting that in 1773, China's financial reserves were in deficit at -81 million US\$, and by 1974, they had been restored to a neutral position of zero. This historical context, he argued, underscores the resilience and growth of China over time. Professor Jiadong went on to discuss the cultural ties between China and Bangladesh, emphasising that the Chinese people view Bangladeshis as friends. He elaborated on the current "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" approach that China has adopted in its relations with Bangladesh, stressing the importance of this diplomatic framework in strengthening the bonds between the two nations. In his view, Bangladeshis are not only culturally diverse but also economically capable, a trait that further solidifies the foundation of China-Bangladesh relations.

Addressing the broader context of global challenges, Dr Jiadong remarked on the rising prices of energy and other economic issues that are affecting international relations and diplomacy.



Despite these difficulties, he pointed out that the prices of certain goods have decreased, indicating a positive trend in economic growth, particularly in relation to China-Bangladesh cooperation. He recognised Bangladesh's participation in China's BRI as a pivotal moment in their bilateral relations. This partnership, he noted, has yielded significant success and continues to provide a roadmap for future cooperation between the two countries.

Dr Jiadong highlighted several of China's key advantages in sectors such as electric vehicles and energy where Bangladesh has substantial demands. He pointed out that China's competitive edge in technology and energy sectors positions it as a strong partner for Bangladesh. This mutual complementarity, according to him, has allowed China and Bangladesh to achieve a harmonious balance in their bilateral relations. He expressed optimism that this relationship could expand further, with the potential to extend its influence across the Indian Ocean region.

While speaking from an objective standpoint, Dr Jiadong clarified that his comments were not political but rather a reflection of the opportunities for deeper cooperation between China and Bangladesh. He noted that China is a partner to many countries in South Asia, and there remains considerable scope for improving collaboration with Bangladesh. To strengthen this partnership, Dr Jiadong proposed institutionalising the economic and trade relationships between the two countries. He also suggested promoting greater financial cooperation and fostering more frequent discussions on common issues. Such dialogue, he argued, should go beyond the framework of being "close partners" instead of focusing on a joint effort towards mutual growth and prosperity.

Lastly, Dr Jiadong reiterated the importance of continuing to build on the strong foundation of China-Bangladesh relations, with a vision of expanding cooperation in new areas and addressing shared challenges. He expressed his hope for the future development of this partnership and ended his speech on a note of optimism for the path ahead.

Panel Discussion



Dr Liu Peng

Associate Professor, School of International Relations, Yunnan University

At the outset of his deliberation, **Dr Liu Peng** said that he would limit his discussion to four factors. Despite recent political changes in Bangladesh, in terms of the regional dynamics, not much has changed as there are the same players in this region which are India, China, the US and so forth. In particular, there have not been many changes in terms of rules, regional cooperation and regional relations. He agreed with his previous speakers about the issues of commonalities that Bangladesh and China share in terms of regional cooperation and regional dynamics. For Dr Peng, the first factor that both countries share despite the recent political changes is mutual confidence towards each other. In many cases, it has become even stronger despite the recent changes. The second factor that both countries have in common in terms of regional dynamics or regional corporations is the non-alignment policies which have been there for more than 50 years and have been the guiding principles for both countries. The third factor that is common is that both countries try to pursue a peaceful neighbourhood. Considering what is happening in Ukraine and the Middle East, China and Bangladesh should feel lucky that the two countries continue to enjoy a peaceful environment. Such an environment will be crucial for the development of both countries. He identified regional cooperation as the fourth factor as he argued that both China and Bangladesh have benefitted for the last several decades due to the existent regional and global cooperation. Such cooperation enabled China to become the largest

trading partner in the world and Bangladesh has developed itself in terms of per capita GDP which surpassed India and Pakistan and this indeed, is a remarkable achievement. Therefore, in the future, regional and global cooperation will continue to guide the bilateral relations between China and Bangladesh.



Dr Peng was pleasantly surprised to see Dhaka get back to normalcy in less than a month despite the recent political turmoil. He argued that considering the recent political unrest, Bangladesh achieved most smooth transition which is great news for the locals and the foreigners as well. He highlighted four things that both countries can pursue in future to promote regional and bilateral cooperation. The first is to emphasise driving forward regional cooperation. Although he acknowledged there are difficulties in making the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) functional. However, in the last decade or so, initiatives such as Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) have been encouraged to pursue regional cooperation as the driver of change to improve the livelihoods of general people and economic development. Apart from keeping the continued momentum of regional cooperation, the second factor that both countries can pursue is industrial cooperation. Due to the comparative advantage, it is difficult to reduce the large trade deficits that exist between the two countries. However, as an alternative, industrial cooperation can be increased to bring in new investments in Bangladesh and enlarge the existing production chain. This will create sustainability and future areas of convergence for the bilateral relations of the two countries. Finally, at the concluding part of his deliberation, Dr Peng talked about increasing people-to-people exchange, contacts and cooperation in education and other sectors which he believes, will help China to understand the realities in Bangladesh and take the bilateral relations further.



Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman

Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to China

As a beginning note, **Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman** mentioned the profound depth of the China-Bangladesh bilateral relationships. Given the example of COVID-19, he mentioned that China has given Bangladesh a substantial number of vaccines (especially Sinopharm and Sinovac), as a testament to the robust level of cooperation during that crisis period. He further referred to China's future vision, which was articulated during the centennial celebrations of the communist party in 2021. During this time, China declared that, over the next 100 years, the country's ambition is to develop a modern and prosperous society by effectively eradicating poverty and hunger.

Ambassador Zaman echoed the views of Professor Biswas and other speakers and acknowledged the significance of the mass uprising of 05 August in Bangladesh, which has created avenues for massive transformation, reform, and institutional change. At present, people's power prevails, and this has generated new opportunities for the nation. Increasingly, people now are raising their voices against all kinds of discrimination and oppression. Ambassador Zaman also noted the Chief Adviser's recent address at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York further reinforced the principles of human dignity and mutual respect in contemporary discourse. This development, nonetheless, has brought new regional dynamics, and expanded scopes for external relations, prompting a realignment of priorities with the partner countries. This shift, as remarked by him, is positive since it fosters enhanced collaboration and promotes

sustainable economic growth. In this aspect, there is an increasing focus on the issues of connectivity and trade preferences which are leaning towards transboundary cooperation aimed at reducing trade gaps.

Ambassador Zaman further added the point that Bangladesh needs to diversify sources of cooperation in alignment with its national interests. There is no denying the fact that the country is going to face some challenges in meeting its goal of graduating from LDC by 2026. During this transitional phase, Bangladesh needs to go for productive changes and structural reforms, while actively seeking more trade preferences. The requirements to diversify its product offerings are pertinent as articulated by the previous speakers who also elucidated the point that Bangladesh needs to increase its productivity of labour, machinery and technology. According to him, if growth is a function of savings and productivity, enhancing the productivity of labour is an important component of the growth equation. Bangladesh is set to become the 38th largest economy by 2038. Hence, if the country tries to maintain its GDP growth rate near about 5-6 per cent, the country needs to be careful about stable growth and look for areas of cooperation with the outside world.

Ambassador Zaman referred to Professor Jiadong who evaluated the Chinese economy noting that during the Cold War period, the world was characterised by a bipolar structure. Now, in contrast, in the current global context, China is rising in the global economy, and many are focusing primarily on the economic aspects. So, competition has shifted from the West to the East, and strategic competition is mostly seen in the East Asian region. Therefore, many East Asian countries and even Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries focus on economic issues in their policies and strategies.

Ambassador Zaman also mentioned the importance of official development assistance (ODA) and the BRI which need to be observed in a careful manner. He noted that China gave a 10 percent loan, and the rest of the loans mainly came from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. Ambassador Zaman further discussed the unilateral trade concession available to Bangladesh since the country is graduating soon from LDC status. With regard to the trade scenario, he mentioned the importance of environmental impact assessment (EIA) rather than any other aspects of ensuring transparency in trade practices. About BRI, he agreed with the point of Dr Bhattacharya who remarked that Bangladesh needs to focus more on socio-economic development rather than infrastructural issues. He also addressed the nontraditional issues that are occurring on a global scale. In this aspect, Ambassador Zaman mentioned the Chief Adviser's comment on nontraditional aspects such as climate change, equitable resource distribution, natural disasters, and unemployment problems which are still inadequately addressed worldwide. Hence, these can pose significant risks, thereby, adversely affecting the domestic security scenario.

Lastly, in light of the changing political dynamics, Ambassador Zaman mentioned that the relations of Bangladesh and China will continue to grow at the same tempo. He emphasised that Bangladesh's aspirations to be a developed country need China's support.

Open Discussion



Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad

Former Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad began his remarks by expressing some scepticism over the theme of the working session. According to him, Bangladesh may be important in the regional geopolitical dynamics, but it should be reconsidered whether Bangladesh is important enough to impact the entire region due to this internal political change. He further highlighted that there are three reasons that warrant a continued harmonious relationship with China. First, Bangladesh's need for imports, technology, infrastructure, investment and development of the blue economy. Second, China's unique position as a suitable and affordable source for addressing those needs. And third, China's policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of the countries they work with. He concluded his remarks by highlighting the importance of doing proper cost-benefit analysis in going forward with Bangladesh's relationship with China and properly assessing the feasibility and necessity of the development projects Bangladesh may undertake in the near future.

Dr Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan

Registrar, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB)

Dr Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan expressed his curiosity over China's "Global Civilisation Initiative" (GCI), which essentially advocates respect for the diversity of civilisations, common values of humanity, the importance of both the inheritance and innovation of civilisations, as well as robust international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. He pointed out, while such claims are objectively crucial, they remain abstract words, but a researcher requires proxy and tangible variables. As a researcher, Dr Khan posited that one such identifiable variable would be China's support for key UN principles or global norms. However, he pointed out that when it comes to the issues of sovereignty norms, China has been consistently supporting and voting "yes" on all such issues until the events surrounding Crimea and Ukraine. From 2016 to 2024, around 18 resolutions were placed in the UN special sessions, in which China voted 12 "against" and abstained much more than six. As a scholar of IR, Dr Khan expressed concern that such behaviour changed China's previous position of being



a sort of status quo power to that of a revisionist power. Therefore, he expressed apprehension over what stance China would adopt if the sovereign status of small states in the Global South like Bangladesh were to be jeopardised. Additionally, he expressed concerns over how China repeatedly voted against resolutions related to the Rohingya issue in the UNGA or United Nations Security Council (UNSC), even though Bangladesh is an affected state party and continued to vote in favour. He explained that such actions and behaviour can only be explained through the lens of the Realist school of thought in IR. He finds China's claims and actions to be inherently contradictory. Therefore, he subsequently posed the question to the panellists regarding how they would convince him, as an IR researcher, that China is not a regional hegemon but rather a benevolent power committed to promoting the Global Civilisation Initiative.



Major General Md Shahidul Haque (retd)

Former Defence Attaché to Myanmar and Former Ambassador to Libya

Major General Md Shahidul Haque (retd) expressed his concerns about the possibility of Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar economic forum—BCIM—ever seeing the light due to non-cooperation on the Indian side. As such, he posed a proposition to the Chinese panellists present to consider connecting the China-Myanmar economic corridor, which is around 200 kilometres (km) from Cox's Bazaar, with Bangladesh and create the Bangladesh-China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCMEC) since it would only include 200 km.

Lam-ya Mostaque

Research Fellow, BIISS

Ms Lam-ya Mostaque discussed the potential of cooperation between Bangladesh and China in the renewable energy sector. In that regard, she posed a question to the panellists regarding what steps Bangladesh ought to take in developing further collaboration with China in this sector. She also proceeded to express concerns over being too dependent on one source, as she points out that China is Bangladesh's largest partner in the clean energy sector.





Ambassador M Humayun Kabir

President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)

Ambassador M Humayun Kabir raised a question regarding how China expects Bangladesh to play a larger role beyond the Bay of Bengal. In this regard, he was curious to know how China would support Bangladesh while she pursued a dialogue partner with ASEAN. Secondly, he pointed out that Bangladesh is also interested in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Ambassador Kabir again posed the question of to what extent

would China be comfortable in supporting Bangladesh in these two regional collaborative frameworks. He concluded his inquiry with one final question pertaining to China's view of SAARC in the context of India's opposition to growing Chinese interest in the forum.

Advocate Hasan Tarique Chowdhury

Lawyer, Supreme Court of Bangladesh

Advocate Hasan Tarique Chowdhury forwarded a brief question regarding how the concept of Chinese modernisation on the premise of the shared development theory as espoused by President Xi Jinping be applied to the Bangladeshi context. He also posits another question regarding the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and this bank's role in shared development.



Response by the Panellists



Professor Dr Zhang Jiadong

During the open discussion session, Professor Dr Zhang Jiadong addressed a number of questions and provided a general remark. Regarding the question of China's respect for other countries' sovereign status, Dr Jiadong maintained that China fully respects the sovereignty of other states, citing how till today, China's official map of the world still depicts Crimea as part of Ukraine, and the fact that no Chinese officials ever claim in public that Crimea is a part of Russia.

He stressed that just because China does not publicly make any statement as such does not necessarily mean China does not respect the sovereignty or territorial integrity of other states. As for the question regarding China's support for Bangladesh, he emphasised that when a country is on the track towards development, naturally its international influence and status would be on the rise. Such countries will obviously be taken much more seriously by others. So, it is not a question of how China may support Bangladesh. Rather, Bangladesh must start thinking about its own future so that it can play a more important role in the region.



Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas

During this session, Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas subsequently addressed a number of queries. In response to the question regarding China's vote against the Rohingya resolution, Professor Biswas stated that the role of China in resolving the Myanmar crisis is one of the potential solutions at hand. In light of China's historical relations with both Myanmar and Bangladesh, he further added that engaging China in the Rohingya issue is a viable option which has now been gradually a complex problem for Bangladesh to effectively navigate within a short period.

Professor Biswas also mentioned there are alternative avenues to address the problem. For example, ASEAN is an important platform in resolving the Myanmar crisis where China might play a major role. He was also somewhat critical about the question of China's respect for sovereignty noting that China is a country with an ambivalent stance over sovereignty and UNSC issues. Therefore, it might be a little problematic to judge the country's position over its civilisational initiative solely based on that standpoint. He further remarked that, to date, China has never acknowledged or even alluded to being a regional hegemon, and in his opinion, China does not identify itself as one either.



Dr Liu Peng

Dr Liu Peng began by addressing the issue of the Rohingya crisis. He pointed out that this issue is a rather delicate and difficult problem. He also clarified that China has been playing a constructive role in finding a resolution to this crisis. However, due to its complex nature, the problem is longstanding, hence, it is difficult to show any clear results at the moment. He insisted that it is necessary for all and especially China to patiently explore this issue since it is a difficult problem to resolve in a short-term period. Regarding the question about shared development, Dr Peng remarked that because the international community is complex in nature, more often than not, there is no simple solution to any problems. Therefore, it is important for China to maintain realistic expectations based on the problems, situational context and a case-by-case scenario. Even in the case of international norms and international laws, there might be special situations that need to be taken into consideration.



Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman

Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman began his remarks by first clarifying the skepticism over China's role in addressing the Rohingya crisis. As he had been posted in Beijing at the time, he had witnessed firsthand that China's proactive role had played a crucial role in reaching the agreement for repatriation at the very least, even though there is room for more development in that area. He was also part of the fourth joint working group meeting on this issue. Therefore, Ambassador Zaman shared his experience that it was not so much China's reticence that left the Rohingya issue unresolved as it was non-cooperation from the Myanmar side. Like his previous speaker, he reiterated that the Rohingya crisis is a complex issue with no simple solution. According to him, the suggestion of ensuring citizenship for the displaced people is a difficult path to take and not sustainable on a long-term basis considering Bangladesh's resource constraints. Therefore, he concluded that the only permanent solution to this problem would be repatriation.

Concluding Remarks by the Session Chair



Ambassador Farooq Sobhan

Former Foreign Secretary, Bangladesh

In his concluding remarks, **Ambassador Farooq Sobhan** opted to answer some of the questions posed during the open discussion session. In response to the question posed by Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, he expressed his opinion that the theme of the topic is a timely one, especially following the revolutionary changes taking place within the country. According to his view, the reason Bangladesh is important now more than ever is due to the changing dynamics of its bilateral relations with both India and the US, which has significant regional implications. These changing dynamics will inevitably impact Bangladesh's engagement with other regional actors. Bangladesh's relations with China, however, have remained a constant factor in both scenarios. Ambassador Sobhan believes that these three countries and the changing dynamics of this "triangle" will be an important aspect for Bangladesh to take into consideration for going forward. After highlighting the recent developments in the region with China's involvement, Ambassador Sobhan stressed that Bangladesh needs to explore how it can play a much more proactive role rather than what he views as a reactive role in the changing geopolitical scenario because reacting to developments and taking the initiative are two entirely different things.

Owing to Bangladesh's Chief Advisor's recent performance at the UNGA, Ambassador Sobhan believes this is a good opportunity for Bangladesh to raise its profile internationally and it should consider taking advantage of distinct areas. Furthermore, he also remarked on the other unanswered queries. For instance, regarding the BCIM issue, he shared his experience of being tasked with the responsibility of persuading India to join the BCIM. He welcomed the proposal of initiating a Bangladesh-China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCMEC). However, he pointed out that before pursuing such a plan, it is necessary to resolve the situation within Myanmar first. He outlined how the major powers like China and India share differing viewpoints in addressing the challenges posed by changing geopolitical situation, and how they are trying to engage extra-regional powers into navigating these challenges. Having discussed so far, he concluded his speech by emphasising the necessity for Bangladesh to step up its effort to perform better in these evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Working Session 2

Bangladesh's Political, Economic, and Social Reforms and the Trends

Presentation 1



Dr Kazi Maruf Islam

Professor, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka

Dr Kazi Maruf Islam started his deliberation by saying that both Bangladesh and China have shared a deep-rooted friendship over the past fifty years, marked by mutual trust and collaboration in various sectors. As Bangladesh embarks on a new era of state-building and reform initiatives, it finds itself at a critical juncture where old governance models are being challenged, and new ideas are shaping the future. He argued that Bangladesh's political, economic, and social reforms provide a unique opportunity to strengthen its strategic ties with China, particularly in areas such as FDI, academic collaboration, technology transfer, and infrastructure development. In this context, applying the strategic choice approach is essential for navigating the complexities of reform and maximising their benefits while ensuring that Bangladesh's aspirations for a democratic, inclusive, and accountable state are realised.

This approach, rooted in political science, emphasises the importance of deliberate and informed decision-making by key actors in shaping the outcomes of political and institutional transformations. By strategically engaging domestic and international stakeholders, Bangladesh can create a favourable environment for reforms that align with both national interests and global partnerships, such as those with China, ensuring that the country's future development is sustainable and responsive to its citizens' needs.

Professor Islam added that, since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh has made notable progress in economic growth and social development. But at the same time, it has also faced enduring governance challenges, such as corruption, weak institutions, and restricted political participation. These issues came to head in 2024 with the July uprising, a mass movement initially led by students demanding reform of the existing quota system in the civil service, which gradually evolved into broader demands for justice and political reform. Years of frustration with economic inequality, political repression, and unemployment culminated in widespread protests, as the youth rallied against the autocratic regime that had concentrated power and eroded democratic freedoms. The protests, initially suppressed with force, gained momentum across the country and garnered international attention. Ultimately, the regime fell, marking a critical turning point in Bangladesh's history. The uprising not only dismantled the old political order but also marked a turning point, where the people of Bangladesh called for a complete overhaul of state institutions, politics, and governance to ensure that the state reflects the values of equality, accountability, and responsiveness to the needs of all citizens. This movement set the foundation for the current reform efforts aimed at creating a transparent, democratic, and inclusive state.

In terms of rebuilding state institutions, Professor Islam said that Bangladesh is now at a crossroads or transition. The country is now exposed to a new reality where old ideas and practices are being scrutinised. The country is at a critical point, tasked with rebuilding its state institutions to align with the aspirations of its citizens. The primary goal of the reforms is to create a state that is free from discrimination; responsive to the needs and demands of its people; transparent and accountable to its citizens; democratic, competitive, and participatory in its political system; open to all citizens equally, regardless of faith, ideology, or identity; and respectful of universal human rights. To address these challenges, the government has launched a series of reform initiatives across various sectors.

At this stage, Professor Islam discussed the six reform commissions and labelled these as the blueprint for change. He informed the audience that the government has initiated six major reform commissions to address key governance issues. The Electoral Reform Commission aims to ensure free, fair, and competitive elections by reforming the electoral process, making it more transparent and accountable. Judiciary Reform Commission focuses on enhancing the independence and efficiency of the judiciary, ensuring timely justice, and reducing corruption within the system. The Constitutional Reform Commission seeks to modernise the Constitution, reflecting the democratic aspirations of the people and ensuring the protection of fundamental rights. The Public Administration Reform Commission aims to restructure the bureaucracy, making it more responsive, efficient, and transparent. The Police Reform Commission focuses on professionalising the police force, improving public trust, and ensuring the rule of law. The Anti-Corruption Reform Commission works to curb corruption, improve institutional integrity, and ensure accountability at all levels of government.

Professor Islam, at this stage, brought the issue of economic reform. He said, in addition to governance reforms, the government has established a White Paper Committee to investigate corruption and irregularities in the economy over the past 15 years. This Committee will provide recommendations to ensure economic stability and foster sustainable growth. A Taskforce on Economic Stability and Investment has also been set up to develop strategies for job creation and stabilising the economy in the face of domestic and global challenges. However, the success of these reforms cannot solely depend on state's action, rather social forces must also take responsibility in shaping a more equitable and just society.



About the role of social forces in supporting reforms, Professor Islam opined that to achieve the aspirations of the July uprising, broader societal engagement is essential. Civil society organisations, academic institutions, and grassroots movements must play a critical role in promoting a culture of accountability and transparency; encouraging democratic participation at all levels of society; advocating for social tolerance and respect for diversity; and supporting marginalised groups in gaining access to justice and equal opportunities. For international partner like China, these reforms present both opportunities and challenges. Bangladesh's commitment to rebuilding its institutions and ensuring accountability opens new avenues for strengthening bilateral relations, particularly in the following areas:

- **FDI:** As Bangladesh seeks to create a more transparent and investor-friendly environment, Chinese investments in sectors like infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing can play a crucial role in boosting the country's economic development. Chinese companies can benefit from a more stable and predictable investment climate in Bangladesh as a result of these reforms.
- **Research and Innovation Collaboration:** The emphasis on inclusive and accountable governance aligns with the shared goals of fostering knowledge exchange. Joint research, student exchange programmes, and collaboration between academic institutions in

Bangladesh and China can contribute to the development of a more informed and skilled workforce, particularly in fields like science, technology, and policy studies.

- **Technology Transfer in Economic Production:** Since Bangladesh reforms its economic policies and governance structures, the country is poised to benefit from technology transfers that can enhance productivity and competitiveness in key industries. China's expertise in infrastructure development, renewable energy, and digital technology can support Bangladesh in becoming a more technologically advanced and economically resilient nation.
- **Infrastructure Development:** Chinese investments in infrastructure, including roads, bridges, and energy projects, have already had a significant impact on Bangladesh's development. The ongoing reforms will provide further opportunities for collaboration in building a sustainable and modern infrastructure network that supports Bangladesh's long-term development goals.

In conclusion, Professor Islam said that it is important to recognise that the ongoing reforms will usher in a new set of actors and establish a revised political settlement that will steer the future course of governance and institutional rebuilding in Bangladesh. As these changes take shape, it will be crucial for Bangladesh's international economic and strategic relations to adapt to this evolving landscape. The new realities of governance, driven by transparency, inclusivity, and accountability, must be reflected in various forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This includes fostering deeper partnerships that align with the country's reformed political and economic priorities, ensuring that international engagements, such as those with China, are mutually beneficial and supportive of Bangladesh's long-term development goals.

Presentation 2



Dr Guo Na

Director of the Bangladesh Research Institute, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences

In her presentation, **Dr Guo Na** expressed her deep honour in participating in the significant and high-standard academic conference, especially as the two nations prepare to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. Dr Na explained her choice of topic, climate change by referencing discussions she had in June and July with various Bangladeshi scholars regarding the current situation in Bangladesh. She noted that, regardless of political affiliations or demands, a common concern emerged: the pressing need for flood disaster relief. Recognising the vulnerability of humanity in the face of natural disasters, she deemed it essential to address this topic in her presentation.

As an ecological anthropologist, Dr Na expressed her passion for the topic of climate justice in countries along the Bay of Bengal, with a particular focus on Bangladesh. She emphasised that climate change has emerged as a global challenge, significantly impacting economic and social progress worldwide. The disasters resulting from climate change are already hindering global efforts to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Dr Na highlighted the importance of collaboration between China and Bangladesh to address the challenges posed by climate change and to develop effective strategies for disaster prevention and risk reduction.

Dr Na further discussed that, over the past five decades, China and Bangladesh have developed a profound friendship and engaged in fruitful collaborations across various domains. In addressing the global issue of climate change, the two countries share common interests and

aspirations, creating a solid foundation for strengthening their cooperation in disaster risk reduction. Both China and Bangladesh are among the Asian nations with significant coastal populations that are at risk during rare storm surges. Bangladesh, due to its geographic and climatic characteristics, is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change risks. Similarly, China has faced substantial impacts from climate change, exemplified by the recent Super Typhoon, which was labeled Cyclone Yagi in the Indian Ocean. With winds exceeding 17 meters per second and severe rainstorms, it caused significant damage in Hainan Province, leading to economic losses estimated at up to US\$ 4.7 billion. This typhoon is recorded as the strongest autumn typhoon to hit China in the last 75 years. In response to this disaster, the Chinese government acted swiftly, implementing a range of effective rescue measures. Likewise, Bangladesh has been grappling with continuous heavy rainfall since June 2024, particularly in its northeastern region, resulting in widespread flooding. In August, water levels in several major rivers rose to dangerously high levels, affecting over 5.4 million people and causing economic losses exceeding US\$ 1.2 billion. Overall, these serious threats posed due to climate disasters to the planet.



Given this context, Dr Na emphasised that it is imperative for nations to collaborate in order to mitigate these devastating impacts. In this critical situation, the cooperation between China and Bangladesh in disaster prevention and mitigation is not just important but necessary. She outlined the potential for collaboration between the two countries in various aspects of disaster prevention and mitigation. She highlighted China's extensive experience and technological advantages in this field, including satellite remote sensing technology, disaster warning systems, and emergency response mechanisms. She mentioned that, in terms of post-disaster recovery and reconstruction, China can share its successful experiences in rapidly restoring infrastructure and providing necessary support to Bangladesh. She further stated that such cooperation would not only enhance Bangladesh's ability to respond to current climate challenges but would also inject new momentum into its green transformation and sustainable development.

This collaboration could facilitate the development of new technologies and integrate scientific disaster response mechanisms, ultimately improving the resilience and competitiveness of Bangladesh's industries and businesses.

Dr Na also noted that as both countries work together to address climate change, they can explore significant topics such as ecological environmental protection and natural resource conservation, leading to meaningful achievements in sustainable development. For instance, she mentioned that enterprises from Yunnan Province are interested in investing in renewable energy projects in Bangladesh, including concentrated photovoltaics and agrivoltaics projects that utilise agricultural land for both food production and energy generation. They are also engaged in discussions with potential partners in Bangladesh regarding energy storage solutions. She asserted that the cooperation between China and Bangladesh in disaster prevention and mitigation would further strengthen the friendship and mutual trust between the two countries. She emphasised that when facing the common challenge of climate change, the citizens of both nations would unite to combat natural disasters. This shared experience of struggle would enhance mutual understanding and trust, laying a solid foundation for the long-term development of bilateral relations.

Dr Na presented four concise proposals aimed at enhancing cooperation between China and Bangladesh in disaster prevention and risk reduction.

- First, the establishment of a joint research institute focused on disaster prevention and risk reduction. This institute, hosted within universities or academic departments, could be developed under the framework of the China Studies Center. It would serve as a hub for scientific technology and policy research, facilitating the exchange of experts, joint research projects, and the development of innovative solutions tailored to specific challenges faced by both countries.
- Second, is emphasising the need for capacity-building and training programmes. She suggested organising regular training sessions and workshops designed to enhance the capabilities of frontline responders, policymakers, and researchers in disaster management. These programmes would cover essential topics such as emergency response, risk assessment, and the implementation of effective mitigation strategies.
- Third, recommendation is the development of sustainable infrastructure, noting that China could share its expertise in rapidly restoring and reconstructing infrastructure after disasters. This collaboration would help Bangladesh build more resilient and stable systems, incorporating eco-friendly materials and technologies, as well as disaster-resistant designs.
- Finally, the proposal of strengthening collaboration on community-based development projects. She highlighted the Meghna River region in southern Bangladesh, expressing admiration for the Sundarbans, one of the most attractive places in the country. She recounted her visit to small but impactful community climate resilience demonstration projects in these vulnerable areas, which aim to enhance local residents' capacity to cope with climate change. This initiative would provide technical support, resource investment, and knowledge sharing, guiding local communities in developing eco-tourism and environmental education programs. These efforts would actively promote the protection of mangroves and their biodiversity while enhancing the community's capacity for sustainable

development. Through these proposals, Dr Na underscored the importance of collaboration and innovation in addressing the challenges posed by climate change and enhancing disaster resilience in both China and Bangladesh.

In her conclusion, Dr Na emphasised that cooperation between China and Bangladesh in disaster prevention and risk reduction extends beyond the common interests of both nations; it also serves as a proactive response to the global challenges posed by climate change. This collaboration highlights the importance of united efforts in addressing environmental issues, ensuring a more resilient future for both countries and contributing to the global fight against climate change.

Panel Discussion



Dr Imtiaz Ahmed

Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives

Dr Imtiaz Ahmed began his speech by introducing the theme of the section, focusing on Bangladesh's political, economic, and social reforms, along with related trends. He suggested that one needs to be precise and up-to-date while discussing these topics. Reflecting on this theme, Dr Ahmed recalled a historical anecdote from 1971 involving Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, who met in Paris to negotiate China's entry into the international community and the end of the Vietnam War. During the discussion, Kissinger had asked Zhou Enlai about his views on the impact of the French Revolution, to which Zhou Enlai had replied that it was "too early to tell." This response, Dr Ahmed explained, was initially misunderstood by journalists who thought Zhou referred to the 1789 French Revolution, while, in fact, Zhou had meant the student revolt of 1968. This miscommunication underscored the complexity of assessing historical impact, which Dr. Ahmed likened to evaluating Bangladesh's recent reforms, observing that it was still "too early" to make a definitive assessment, given only two months had passed.

Dr Ahmed then elaborated on his plan to examine trends from political, economic, and social perspectives. Beginning with politics, he referenced Antonio Gramsci's notion that "everything is political," noting that political activity is an inherent aspect of life. From this viewpoint, he suggested that the absence of active politicians within the current interim government was a significant issue. While people may harbour negative feelings toward politicians and parties, it

remains their essential role to govern the nation, which is why politicians are needed. This absence, he argued, calls for reflection on how politics in the country would function going forward.



As an academic and social scientist, Dr Ahmed predicted that in the coming months, political actors and parties would grow increasingly restless, seeing it as their duty to maintain a constant connection with the people, rather than an occasional engagement. Reflecting on the previous administration, he observed that the political landscape had shifted, with the majority of parliament members being businesspersons, while only a small percentage were genuine politicians. This reliance on business people in politics, he argued, was problematic, as they often prioritised business over political responsibility, which contributed to the challenges faced by the political system. Although Dr Ahmed refrained from detailing potential solutions, he suggested that extensive work, energy, and creativity would be necessary to restore political integrity and professionalism. He alluded to literature, including his own, that explores these ideas in depth.

Dr Ahmed also cautioned against dismissing politicians entirely, as they remain essential to the governance process. He emphasised the importance of patience and time in enabling change, hinting that, by February—a significant month for Bangladesh—the political environment might show signs of revitalisation, with all parties resuming their activities.

Moving on to economics, Dr Ahmed anticipated that in the coming months, business actors would likely adopt a cautious approach. From a business perspective, he reasoned that business persons typically avoid high risks, focusing instead on profit as their primary motivation. Dr Ahmed highlighted that while artists—like painters, musicians, and fashion designers—are often willing to take creative risks, businesspeople typically avoid risks, as their primary focus is on profit, which thrives on stability. Globally, businesspeople are generally conservative, and only in industries like weapon production does profit sometimes come through instability, as instability drives demand in that sector.

Dr Ahmed then discussed a positive development initiated by the Chief Advisor regarding money laundering. He described this initiative as promising, although it remains to be seen how it will unfold, given that laundered money often flows to developed countries rather than developing regions. He emphasised that addressing this issue is complex due to the entrenched “political-business-bureaucratic-academic nexus” involved, which wields considerable power and influence. However, he noted this initiative as a positive step and recalled the Chief Advisor’s mention of it in a recent speech, signalling some progress.

Turning to social aspects, Dr Ahmed stressed the need for caution in understanding the modern state, which he broke down into three primary components: political society, which holds rule-making and coercive power; business society, which reproduces capital; and civil society, whose role is to foster consent without coercion. In Bangladesh, he observed that members of civil society are increasingly merging with political society, which he sees as problematic. A weakened civil society, he argued, undermines the foundations of democracy, as a strong, independent civil society is essential for a healthy democratic process.



Dr Ahmed then referred to Professor Yang Jiemian from the inaugural session, who advocated for reconnecting with civilisational roots in order to foster an alternative state model that is not merely an import of Western structures. He pointed to China’s development path as an example, asserting that Bangladesh, with its own deep-rooted civilisation, must likewise engage with its heritage rather than superimposing Western models. He cited the historical concept of “Jonoshongo” or “People’s Republic” as evidence of Bengal’s indigenous ideas of republicanism, predating Western influences.

Further elaborating on civil society, Dr Ahmed pointed out the multi-layered structure in Bangladesh, comprising Western-trained intellectuals with aspirations toward Western ideals, an Islamic layer reflective of Bengal’s long history under Muslim rule, and a traditional South Asian layer. He drew attention to how these layers, including influential groups like the Sufis,

remain part of civil society but are not fully engaged. According to Dr Ahmed, failing to understand and integrate these distinct civil society layers diminishes the true strength and depth of Bangladesh's socio-political landscape, which could otherwise enrich the country's political and social framework.

Dr Ahmed concluded his speech by emphasising the potential in Professor Yang Jiemian's suggestion to reconnect with civilisational roots. For Bangladesh's future, he believed attention should go beyond traditional areas like infrastructure, agriculture, and energy—fields where collaboration with China would likely increase—and also focus on health and education.

In the health sector, he pointed out the need for Bangladesh to develop its own healthcare system, a realisation highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Bangladeshi citizens currently seek medical care in India, which from a business standpoint, may not prioritise developing Bangladesh's healthcare infrastructure. China, however, could be a promising partner in this domain, as there is no competitive health tourism between the two nations. Dr Ahmed suggested that establishing ten pilot hospitals across Bangladesh, equipped with advanced technology, could be a significant step forward. He cited an example of Chinese doctors using telemedicine to conduct surgeries remotely, underscoring how technology could transform healthcare delivery in Bangladesh.

Dr Ahmed then turned to education as his final point, recommending an emphasis on primary education for fostering long-term ties with China. Rather than focusing solely on university-level exchanges, he suggested connecting ten primary schools in each country through pilot projects. Using available technology, young students could collaborate in real-time on shared projects, such as art or storytelling, helping build lasting friendships from an early age. He likened this approach to the European Union's strategy of bridging divides, as seen in the relationship between France and Germany. In this way, he saw a bright future for China-Bangladesh relations, and he concluded his speech with optimism.

Presentation 2



Ms Deng Lan

Associate Professor, Institute of Indian Studies, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences

Ms Deng Lan began by expressing gratitude to the organisers, noting the value of the opportunity to share her insights and observations. She introduced herself and briefly outlined her relationship with Bangladesh, explaining that, aside from India and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh is one of the South Asian countries she has frequently visited. She shared that she has visited Bangladesh three times: first in 2012 for an international seminar on food security organised by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which she found highly engaging; next in October of the previous year, when she conducted a field trip from Dhaka to Sylhet; and most recently on her current visit, which has offered new perspectives on recent changes in Bangladesh.

Although Professor Lan acknowledged that her observations are perhaps more localised, as she represents a provincial-level think tank within the academy, she underscored the close relationship between her province and Bangladesh. She noted that Kunming hosts the only Bangladeshi Consulate General among South Asian nations, a testament to strong diplomatic ties. Additionally, she highlighted the direct flight route between Kunming and Dhaka, which has bolstered people-to-people exchanges, as evidenced by her own fully booked flight.

Professor Lan also recounted a collaborative programme initiated in 2015, where six scholars from various Bangladeshi think tanks spent six months in Kunming for a training exchange. She mentioned that many of these scholars have since grown into established researchers, with one of them present at the current event. She emphasised the significance of people-to-people contacts, particularly at the provincial level, alongside national exchanges. While concluding her remarks, she affirmed her think tank's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations through continued collaboration, industrial cooperation, and mutual trust in the coming days.

Open Discussion



Ms Shittul Muna Orpi

Student, University of Dhaka

Ms Shittul Muna Orpi, a student at Dhaka University, posed a question to Dr Ahmed, raising concerns about the role of politicians in governance. Ms Orpi questioned why people without political ambitions should not be given a chance to lead, instead of politicians who often fail in their roles. She emphasised the recurring idea of “good people” while taking power and proposed that non-politicians with relevant knowledge should be considered for leadership roles.

Mr Zobaer Ahmed

China Railway Group Limited (CREC)

Mr Zobaer Ahmed from CREC asked two questions to Dr Ahmed. The first question was about a recent proposal by an Honourable Shipping Adviser suggesting that Bangladesh could be divided into five provinces for decentralisation. He asked for views on this idea in the current context. The second question was focused on the need for a high-speed railway between Dhaka and Chattogram. He referred to a previous government initiative for a high-speed train that was halted and inquired about the potential for reviving this project under BRI to accelerate Bangladesh's economic growth.



Mr Abhishek

Infrastructure Development Sector



Mr Abhishek raised the question about the slow pace of infrastructure projects in Bangladesh and its impact on industrialisation and unemployment. He also inquired about the challenges that Chinese investors face due to recent policy changes in the renewable energy sector by the interim government, and how Bangladesh could attract more FDI, especially in this sector.

Response by the Panellists



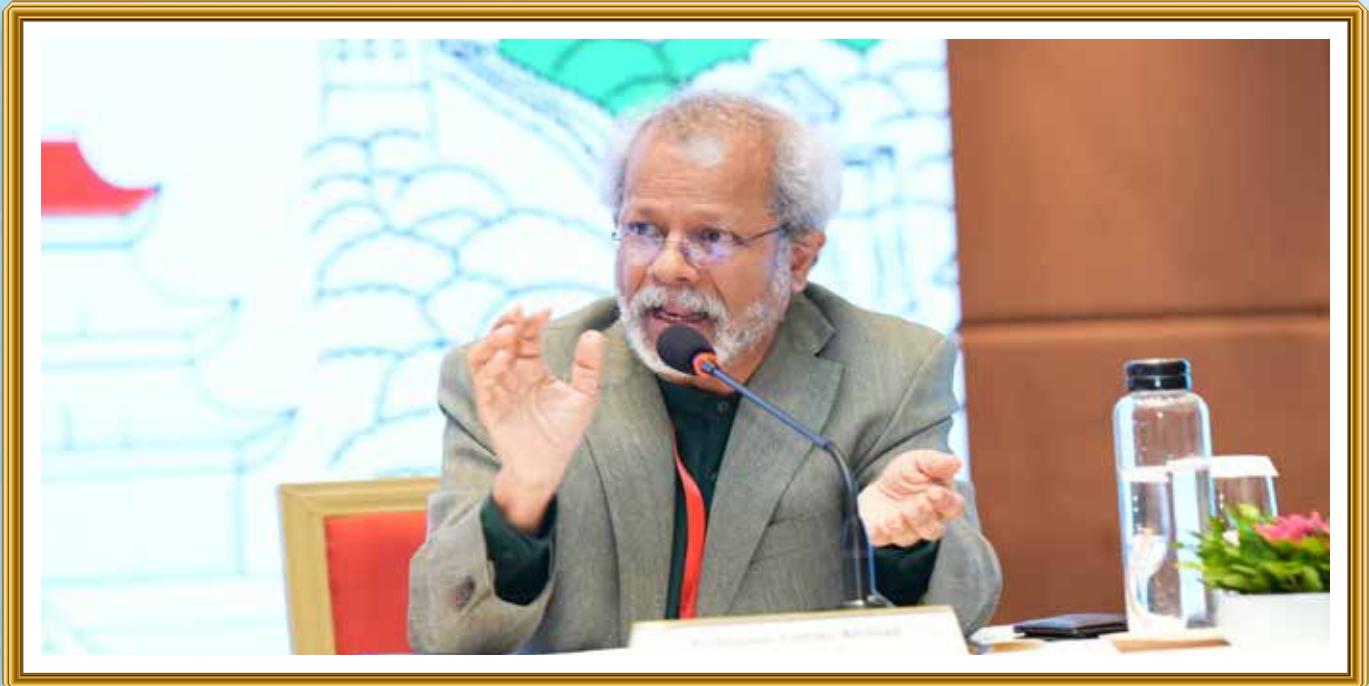
Dr Imtiaz Ahmed

In response to Ms Orpi's inquiry about the current state of politics in Bangladesh and its implications for governance and development, Dr Imtiaz Ahmed offered a critical perspective on the structural flaws in the political system. He said that the political landscape has been hijacked, not by genuine politicians, but by non-political actors, particularly businessmen, who have become deeply involved in the system. He pointed out that in Bangladesh, similar to India and Pakistan, the Westminster-style election system is largely to blame for this distortion.

Dr Ahmed highlighted the statistics from India, where over 44 per cent of Members of Parliament (MP) have criminal records, with 20 per cent facing serious charges. This, he noted, is not just an issue of individual morality but a systemic flaw in how elections and nominations are conducted under the Westminster system. He argued that this system, inherited from colonial times, has allowed non-politicians to dominate politics, turning governance into a business-oriented endeavour rather than driven by public representation and service.

To address this issue, Dr Ahmed suggested a fundamental reform of the election process. He stressed that merely replacing bad politicians with good ones will not solve the problem, as the nomination system itself is at fault. Even well-intentioned individuals, he warned, could become corrupt if forced to navigate the current political framework. Therefore, he advocated for a complete overhaul of the electoral system, proposing alternatives seen in other countries, such as the two-tier election systems in France, Turkey, or Iran. These models allow for a broader range of candidates in the first round, with only the top contenders proceeding to the final stage, thereby reducing the influence of nominations and financial power.

Dr Ahmed said that genuine political representation is crucial. In the current system, many who claim to represent the people, especially business elites, lack a true mandate from the electorate. He also said that a politician must truly represent the interests of the people, not just business interests. This failure in representation, according to Dr Ahmed, has created a crisis in governance, where businesspeople have taken over politics, further eroding trust in democratic institutions.



Finally, he stressed the need for Bangladesh to develop its own electoral system that reflects its unique social, political, and economic context, rather than relying on an imported model like the Westminster system. Only by addressing these structural flaws, he argued, can Bangladesh restore faith in its political system and ensure that politicians, not business people, are the ones steering the country forward.

In response to Mr Zobaer Ahmed's question on Bangladesh's governance and political structure, Dr Ahmed delved into the need for decentralisation and parliamentary reforms to accommodate Bangladesh's growing population and evolving political landscape. He emphasised that with a population of over 170 million, it is crucial to decentralise governance by transforming divisions into provinces, a step that would enhance local autonomy and make governance more accessible to the people. Dr Ahmed has long advocated for provincial or divisional parliaments, believing that decentralisation would distribute power more evenly and bring decision-making closer to local communities, improving governance efficiency.

He further suggested that Bangladesh should consider adopting a bicameral (two-house) parliamentary system, similar to the systems in India and Pakistan. Dr Ahmed proposed the creation of a lower house, or the "House of the People," and an upper house, or the "House of Representatives." In his model, members of the upper house would be elected by the lower house, and the upper house would include non-party representatives. This system could act as a balance to the more politicised lower house, ensuring more inclusive governance and creating a space for experts or non-political actors to contribute to national decision-making.

Dr Ahmed also suggested that this new structure could play a role in overseeing electoral processes, ensuring greater accountability and transparency during the elections that occur every four or five years. The proposed reforms would address existing challenges in the current electoral system and provide a more balanced and representative governance framework.

On the issue of infrastructure development, particularly the high-speed rail network, Dr Ahmed pointed out that improving Bangladesh's connectivity through high-speed trains could transform the country's geography. He advocated for the creation of high-speed rail lines connecting the eight divisions, arguing that such a network would significantly boost economic integration and development. This modernisation of infrastructure would not only speed up transportation but also enhance trade and connectivity within the country, fostering regional development.

In sum, Dr Ahmed's response emphasised the need for political decentralisation through provincial parliaments and a bicameral system, alongside strategic infrastructure projects like high-speed trains, to enhance governance and drive Bangladesh's economic growth.

In response to Mr Abhishek's concerns, Dr Ahmed expanded on the challenges facing Bangladesh's infrastructure development and the broader investment climate. He acknowledged that the slow pace of project implementation, as highlighted by Mr Abhishek, has significantly impacted industrialisation efforts and increased unemployment. This deceleration, he explained, is a natural consequence of political uncertainty, which creates hesitation among both local and foreign investors.

Dr Ahmed emphasised that the key to revitalising infrastructure projects and attracting FDI, particularly in the renewable energy sector, lies in ensuring political and economic stability. He argued that without a stable political environment, investors—especially those from China and other foreign entities—are unlikely to commit to long-term projects, as they tend to be risk-averse when faced with instability.

Drawing historical parallels, Dr Ahmed noted that during periods of instability, the only businesses that tend to thrive are those dealing in weapons and other conflict-related industries. For businesses focused on infrastructure or renewable energy, stability is a prerequisite for success. He mentioned that in the current context, the government's interim nature and policy changes have caused uncertainty, which has affected investor confidence.

He also highlighted the importance of engaging political actors to bring about the necessary stability. Political parties and leaders must play a proactive role in creating a secure environment that fosters business growth. Dr Ahmed suggested that this could involve reforming governance systems and ensuring that future projects align with broader developmental goals.

Lastly, Dr Ahmed touched upon the importance of having a clear and consistent policy framework to encourage investments, particularly in critical sectors like renewable energy. He advised that Bangladesh must develop a stable and predictable investment climate, with a focus on long-term growth, to attract FDI. Without such measures, he cautioned, the slowdown in industrialisation and infrastructure development would continue, limiting the country's economic potential.

Concluding Remarks by the Session Chair



Dr Zhang Jiuán

Associate Research Fellow, Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies

In his concluding remarks, **Dr Zhang Jiuán** expressed his enthusiasm about the collaboration between China and Bangladesh. He highlighted that their works in flood management and hydrological data sharing illustrate how regional cooperation can effectively address shared challenges. The partnership, he noted, not only enhances disaster response capabilities but also fosters mutual trust—a vital component for building regional resilience. Dr Jiuán emphasised the importance of continuing to build on this partnership to inspire collective efforts against the increasing impacts of climate change, with a focus on safeguarding communities and ensuring that today's actions benefit future generations. In the end, he thanked all participants for their contributions to this significant effort.

Working Session 3

Strengthening China-Bangladesh Cooperation and Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership

Presentation 1



Dr Mao Keji

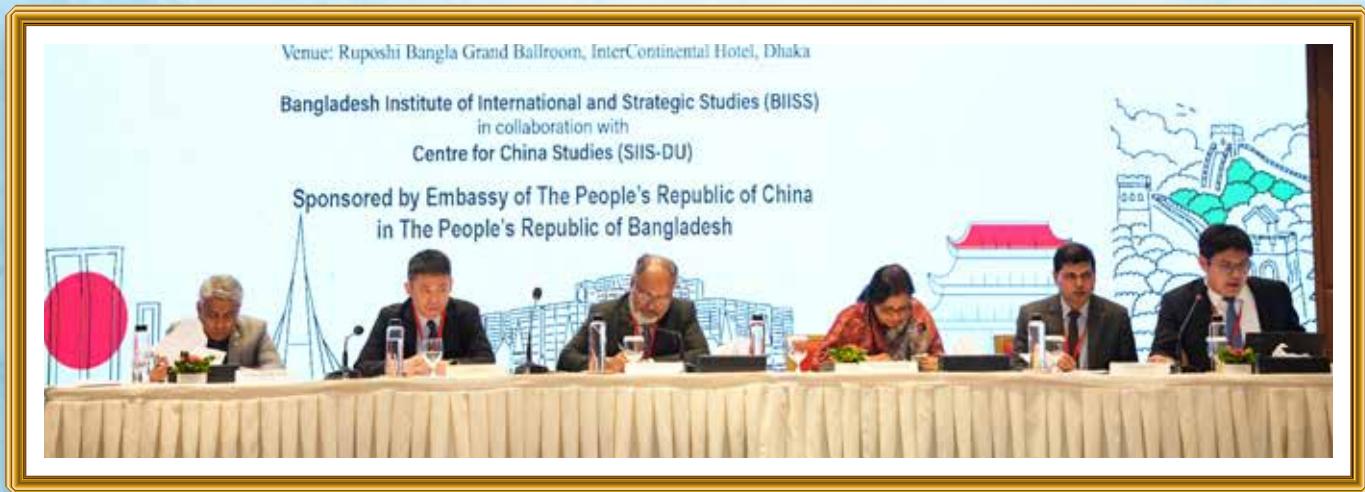
Assistant Research Fellow, International Cooperation Center,
National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China

Dr Mao Keji began his speech by expressing his deep admiration for Bangladesh. He confessed that he has long been a passionate supporter of the country, a sentiment that extends beyond his position on stage. Dr Keji's enthusiasm for Bangladesh, he explained, is rooted in his genuine belief in the country's potential, especially in the context of economic growth and industrial development. He highlighted Bangladesh's growing manufacturing sector, noting that the percentage of manufacturing has increased, and this is evident in the proliferation of 'Made in Bangladesh' products found in various countries. This, according to Dr Keji, is a testament to the country's commendable progress. He stressed that Bangladesh's rise in the manufacturing industry deserves recognition, as it reflects the country's increasing prominence on the global stage.

Dr Keji then discussed how Bangladesh could further strengthen its position in the South Asian region. China is more than willing to assist Bangladesh in areas such as energy and technology, sectors where Bangladesh has significant potential. The key differentiator for Bangladesh lies in

its manufacturing capabilities, which could offer a more meaningful impact than mere year-on-year growth in various sectors. He suggested that Bangladesh's manufacturing edge could play a transformative role in its regional standing.

Turning to the topic of trade deficits, Dr Keji outlined the different categories of countries in their trade relations with China. Most countries experience trade deficits with China but react differently based on their coping capacity. He divided these countries into three groups: those that complain about the deficit due to their lack of capacity to cope (such as the US), those that do not complain despite lacking coping capacity (such as Vietnam and Malaysia), and finally, those that possess the capacity to manage the deficit but occasionally raise concerns (such as Bangladesh). From Dr Keji's perspective, this positions Bangladesh as a highly promising economy with significant potential on the global stage. Bangladesh should differentiate itself from its neighbouring countries by expanding its manufacturing networks. This strategy could be pivotal in enabling Bangladesh to reach new heights in its economic development. Dr Keji praised Bangladesh as the "single best economy" capable of leveraging reforms in the manufacturing industry, asserting that the country is uniquely positioned to take full advantage of such opportunities.



While mentioning these opportunities, Dr Keji also pointed out certain challenges that Bangladesh faces. One such example is the rising land and labour costs, which could make trade less justifiable. Additionally, he mentioned India's lack of a welcoming trade policy towards China as another complicating factor in the region. Despite these hurdles, he remained optimistic about Bangladesh's future in manufacturing and beyond. He proposed that if Bangladesh succeeds in the manufacturing industry, there is no reason why it could not replicate this success in other sectors like consumer electronics. Furthermore, China could play a role in helping companies relocate to Bangladesh, creating opportunities for increased collaboration and investment. He expressed confidence that Bangladesh has the potential to achieve this and noted that China possesses the technical expertise necessary for such cooperation.

Finally, Dr Keji reiterated his belief that there is hope and substantial scope for Bangladesh to realise its potential. He encouraged deeper collaboration between the two countries, particularly in areas of technical cooperation, and expressed his willingness to support Bangladesh in its journey towards economic growth and development.

Presentation 2



Abu Salah Md Yousuf
Research Director, BIISS

Abu Salah Md Yousuf presented insights on China's potential role in mediating the Rohingya repatriation crisis, discussing how China's involvement could yield both diplomatic and strategic benefits for the nation. Mr Yousuf argued that China's role in facilitating repatriation could boost its influence and image regionally, aligning with its long-term diplomatic objectives in Southeast Asia.

Addressing the audience, Mr Yousuf highlighted the scale and challenges of the ongoing Rohingya crisis, emphasising the humanitarian and security burdens borne by Bangladesh. Currently, about 1.2 million Rohingyas are residing in southeastern Bangladesh, creating significant regional security concerns. He noted that rising tensions between host communities and the Rohingya population could exacerbate transnational security risks affecting neighbouring countries, including Myanmar and regions around the Bay of Bengal, as well as Southeast Asian countries with Rohingya communities such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

Mr Yousuf recalled China's earlier initiatives following the 2017 Rohingya exodus, such as the three-phase plan that included a ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine state, bilateral talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar with Chinese facilitation, and UNSC's support to create conducive conditions for repatriation. While China has consistently supported mediation efforts, Mr Yousuf acknowledged that the desired progress in Rohingya repatriation remains largely unmet.

despite various initiatives, including meetings facilitated by China in 2018, 2021, and subsequent years.

Examining the geopolitical dynamics in the Bay of Bengal, Mr Yousuf noted a shift in influence towards the US and other regional powers. He reasoned that China's long-standing relationships with both Bangladesh and Myanmar and its extensive investments in Myanmar's infrastructure, particularly in the southern Rakhine state, position China as a potentially powerful mediator. He further argued that regional stability, especially in Rakhine, aligns with China's economic and strategic interests in the BRI and broader regional investments, suggesting that a resolution to the crisis could secure Chinese interests and strengthen its image.

According to Mr Yousuf, China's diplomatic manoeuvring, aided by its strong connections with stakeholders within Myanmar, could facilitate negotiations and build a more favourable environment for repatriation. He suggested that, in addition to using international forums like ASEAN and the UN to raise awareness, China could encourage ASEAN to play an expanded role in resolving the crisis and engage other regional actors.



Mr Yousuf further proposed that China could employ its humanitarian responsibility as a growing regional power, which would enhance its influence and project a positive image. By aiding in Rohingya repatriation, he suggested that China could enhance its soft power in the region and showcase itself as a responsible and humane global power. He noted that these diplomatic efforts would be mutually beneficial, as they could deepen relations between China and regional countries, boost trust with Bangladesh, and position China as a reliable partner in humanitarian crises.

In conclusion, Mr Yousuf argued that China's potential contributions to Rohingya repatriation could foster regional security, promote stability, and amplify China's role and reputation. Furthermore, by establishing itself as a key mediator, China could improve its strategic influence and solidify partnerships with Southeast Asian countries, securing long-term regional engagement for future diplomatic endeavours.

Panel Discussion



Dr Md Safiqul Islam

Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Chittagong

In his deliberation, **Dr Md Safiqul Islam** discussed three crucial aspects of Bangladesh-China cooperation that are security and stability interests, connectivity, and river governance. Regarding security and stability interests, he informed that China adopted strategically important Peripheral Diplomacy in 2013 in order to make closer relations with neighbouring countries and establish peace and stability in the neighbouring region. A major purpose of this peripheral diplomacy is to secure peace and stability in the region. Chinese President Xi Jinping has outlined the major peripheral diplomacy guideline: friendship is the consistent principle of China's diplomacy with its neighbours and sincerity is the way to cultivate more friends and partners. Cooperation with neighbours should be based on mutual benefit and create a close network of common interests.

According to Dr Islam, to establish peace and stability in the neighbouring region, Bangladesh is strategically a significant country in South Asia as it has borders with Myanmar and Northeast India. Moreover, as for example, the British East India Company secured its control over the administration and lands of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha by winning the Battle of Plassey in 1757 against Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, the last independent Nawab of Bengal. After assuming power in Bengal, the company opened a larger portion of land for opium cultivation and made peasants bound to cultivate opium plantations. They found that the opium trade was more profitable than

other goods available in Bengal. Britain and other European nations undertook the opium trade because of their chronic trade imbalance with China. There was tremendous demand in Europe for Chinese tea, silks, and porcelain pottery, but there was correspondingly little demand in China for Europe's manufactured goods and other trade items. Meanwhile, Great Britain exported opium grown in Bengal to China. The British used the profits from the sale of opium to purchase Chinese luxury goods such as porcelain, silk, and tea and solved this chronic trade imbalance. Smoking opium created a social problem that posed a threat to the social security of China since levels of opium addiction grew so high that it began to affect the imperial troops and the official classes. From this example, it makes sense that instability and security threats to Bangladesh may have a certain impact on China. Thus, Bangladesh-China relations have been strategically significant to each other for a long time.



At this juncture, Professor Islam talked about connectivity issues. He said, Bangladesh and China can cooperate with each other to build connectivity between two countries. China proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. However, given India's reluctance, the BCIM Economic corridor cannot be materialised. Both countries may think about alternative options. He felt that there is an alternative option of connecting Chattogram of Bangladesh, Mandalay of Myanmar and Kunming by both road and railway that may be considered for implementation. Put differently, building the Bangladesh-China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCM-EC) may be considered as an alternative to BCIM-EC. In the South, it can be extended to Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore as a part of the Trans-Asian Road Network and Indo-China Economic Corridor. As for mutual cooperation and mutual development, this connectivity may enable the creation of a growth triangle. If it is possible to build this connectivity, he believed, other countries including India will join.

The South-Western region of China is close to the Bay of Bengal but has no road link to it, although the ancient Silk Road linked the region to the Bay through Bengal (Bangladesh) and

Burma (Myanmar). Its geographical position, therefore, puts limits and narrows China's geostrategic options in the Bay of Bengal. The new economic corridor will open the landlocked South-Western China to the region with South Asian and Southeast Asian markets, and the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh. For a long time, the communication system and the infrastructure of the region have been weak and the economy developed slowly since the region is landlocked and far from the center of growth in China. It will facilitate the building up of the basic infrastructure such as transport system, power generation, gas and oil pipelines, telecommunication system, and environmental conservation and attract private sector investment including FDI in the region. Bangladesh can export its goods by road to South-Western China and the Greater Mekong region on time, easily and with minimum transport cost. Its market will be widening. FDI will be attracted to invest in Bangladesh when investors see that it is possible to export the goods produced in Bangladesh to other markets.

About river governance, Professor Islam said that it may be one of the areas for strategic cooperation between the two countries. China has experience in controlling land erosion on the banks of rivers and adapting with natural disasters. In the winter and spring seasons, Bangladesh is suffering from water shortage but in the rainy season, the country is facing floods from heavy rainfall happening in the Indian and Himalayas. China may cooperate and invest in the river governance of Bangladesh.



Dr Wang Xu
Associate Professor, Peking University

Dr Wang Xu remarked that, although it was his first time visiting the beautiful country of Bangladesh, he felt a strong sense of familiarity upon entering the venue and recognising some of the faces he had met at the Dhaka University campus. Dr Xu explained that, while Beijing has many universities, Peking University is among China's top-ranked institutions.

Expressing his gratitude to BIISS and the CCS for the opportunity to share his views on strengthening China-Bangladesh cooperation and advancing their comprehensive strategic partnership, Dr Xu began with three core observations. First, he emphasised that think tank research and strategic planning play a leading role in China-Bangladesh cooperation. He noted that think tanks facilitate exchanges between specialised institutions, research bodies, and functional departments in both nations, focusing on areas like macroeconomics and industrial policies, and engaging in in-depth research to support regional cooperation and shared understanding. This collaboration provides both governments with intellectual support, policy recommendations, and decision-making references.

Dr Xu suggested that China and Bangladesh could benefit from establishing a structured mechanism for think tank collaboration, either formally or informally, to promote joint research, academic exchange, and shared knowledge between institutions. He proposed in-depth studies comparing the macroeconomic and industrial policies of each country to identify cooperation opportunities and challenges. Expressing honour of having welcomed delegations from Bangladesh to Peking University in the past, Dr Xu invited attendees to visit again, emphasising the importance of research on significant areas of China-Bangladesh

cooperation. He advocated for formulating cooperation plans based on research outcomes, defining goals, priorities, and programmes supported by both governments.

In addition, Dr Xu stressed the value of promoting policy dialogue and exchange, which can enhance strategic communication and coordination on international, regional, and economic issues, helping both sides better understand each other's policy environments and cooperation needs. He added that cultural and people-to-people exchanges are essential in fostering mutual trust and friendship between China and Bangladesh.

To achieve this, Dr Xu proposed creating platforms for educational exchanges, including teacher-student exchanges, academic seminars, and joint programs that would encourage knowledge sharing. He also suggested organising cultural festivals, art exhibitions, film screenings, and literary forums to promote cultural appreciation. Finally, he advocated for local governments to establish sister-city relationships to deepen the ties between the two nations. Dr Xu emphasised the significance of establishing sister-city relationships, noting that these connections could facilitate exchanges in local economies, culture, and education, providing valuable political cases and experiences for bilateral cooperation.



Dr Xu then discussed the importance of engaging youth, proposing activities like youth leader training, forums, and volunteer services to encourage idea exchange, friendship building, and the cultivation of a new generation dedicated to future cooperation. He also highlighted the role of scientific research, technological development, and innovation, especially in the context of the digital era, stressing the need for collaborative efforts between the two countries to foster knowledge exchange among researchers and technology experts.

Dr Xu expressed hope that future dialogues or similar events might include experts in technology, as collaboration in scientific and technological fields could facilitate shared progress in high-tech areas between China and Bangladesh. Moving to the topic of industrial cooperation, he noted that it is essential for realising mutual benefits, describing it as a core component of

China-Bangladesh collaboration that broadens the market space for both nations. He referred to Dr Mao Keji's insights, underscoring the importance of industrial cooperation for economic strength and competitiveness on both sides.

Dr Xu suggested setting up a structured China-Bangladesh industrial cooperation mechanism, comprising high-level dialogues and working-level mechanisms, to enable timely communication and resolution of cooperation-related issues. He recommended focusing on industrial collaboration in areas such as manufacturing, agriculture, tourism, energy, and infrastructure, observing that tourism remains an area of untapped potential. He mentioned witnessing Chinese tourists' interest in visiting Bangladesh, which highlighted the opportunity for collaboration in tourism.

Furthermore, Dr Xu emphasised the importance of enhancing cooperation in industrial and supply chains, encouraging companies from both countries to integrate upstream and downstream activities in sectors like textiles, where Chinese enterprises could support raw material supply and product sales for Bangladesh. He suggested establishing an efficient logistical system to reduce transportation costs and improve supply chain responsiveness and flexibility.

Additionally, Dr Xu stressed the importance of cultivating skilled professionals proficient in both cultures and languages, offering scholarships, vocational training, and internships to support industrial cooperation. He proudly noted that over 10 Chinese universities now offer Bangladeshi language and cultural studies as a major, reflecting increased cultural interest.

Towards the end of his speech, Dr Xu advocated for stronger policy support, suggesting that both governments could implement supportive policies, such as tax incentives, financial aid, and legal services, to create a favourable business environment for industrial cooperation. In closing, Dr Xu expressed his sincere gratitude and warmly welcomed all present. He concluded by conveying his best wishes for China-Bangladesh friendship, adding in Bangla, "Chirojibi hok" (i.e., "may it be everlasting").

Open Discussion



Dr Ashraful Alam

Member (Joint Secretary), Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA)

Dr Ashraful Alam raised a pertinent question related to renewable energy. He shared his recent conversation with a Spanish energy specialist, who revealed that Spain sources 55 per cent of its energy from renewable sources. Similarly, a Chinese colleague of him mentioned that China uses about 50 per cent of its energy from renewables. In stark contrast, Bangladesh utilises only 2-3 per cent of its energy from renewable sources, producing approximately 1,300 megawatts (MW) of electricity. Dr Alam emphasised the urgent need to increase this capacity to at least 10,000 MW over the next decade to meet SDGs and reduce carbon emissions. China, as a cost-effective source of photovoltaic cells, could be a strategic partner for Bangladesh in developing renewable energy. He urged BIISS and the SIIS to consider bilateral cooperation on renewable energy projects.

Mr Abu Sufian

Chief editor, Vromon Magazine

Mr Abu Sufian highlighted tourism as a significant yet underexplored avenue in the Bangladesh-China relationship. This sector could become a powerful platform for collaboration, benefiting both nations on multiple levels. Mr Sufian mentioned that tourism's economic impact spans 109 sectors with further associations extending into 1,100 sectors. Prior to mentioning China's strong position in global tourism, he suggested that if Chinese tourists began visiting Bangladesh, it could bring substantial economic and socio-economic benefits to both countries. He described Bangladesh as a largely untapped, underappreciated, and underrated destination with immense tourism potential. He portrayed the country as a "unique delta" of some major tourist attractions: rivers, seas, mountains, forests, culture, history, heritage, and seasonal variation. Despite this, Bangladesh remained largely unknown to the global and local community. To address this gap, Mr Sufian proposed strengthening tourism ties between Bangladesh and China, suggesting a relatively straightforward approach to promoting Bangladesh in China. He recommended starting with integrating Bangladesh's tourism offerings into platforms like the Xiaohongshu app, which would not require significant investments but could substantially boost tourism connectivity.





Dr Imtiaz Ahmed

Executive Director, Center for Alternatives

Dr Imtiaz Ahmed offered an analysis of the Rohingya crisis, sharing his thoughts in continuation of earlier discussions. Emphasising on a conceptual misunderstanding of Myanmar, he argued that Myanmar should not be seen as a classical Westphalian state with a unified sovereignty like Bangladesh or India. Instead, Myanmar has a history of fragmented sovereignty, where multiple ethnic communities—out of 135—possess a form of proto-sovereignty.

Several communities even have their own flags, military forces, and in some cases, their own currencies. This fragmentation, he suggested, complicates efforts to resolve the crisis. The international community's failure to recognise Myanmar's unique governance structure has hindered efforts to address the Rohingya issue effectively.

Building on this, Dr Ahmed questioned the effectiveness of a purely humanitarian approach, describing it as overly idealistic. He suggested that conventional strategies may not suffice. He proposed an untested approach: convincing both the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) and the Arakan Army stakeholders in the repatriation of the 1.1 million Rohingya refugees. He noted that pushing other countries for intervention might not yield significant results. Given the current power dynamics, where the Arakan Army controls about 70 per cent of the Arakan region, any solution would have to consider their influence alongside that of the Myanmar military.

To incentivise both parties, Dr Ahmed introduced the idea of a “Mini-Marshall Plan” for the region. Drawing parallels with post-World War II Europe, he highlighted the historical success of the Marshall Plan in transforming the relationship between France and Germany, which had once been adversaries. The plan had played a pivotal role in Europe's reconstruction, surpassing the significance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He suggested a similar initiative for the Arakan region, one that would integrate stability efforts with economic development. However, he acknowledged the challenge of determining whether to establish stability first or proceed simultaneously with economic initiatives and repatriation. He advocated for a dialectical approach, where both stability and productivity in the Arakan region are pursued together.

Dr Ahmed mentioned that countries such as Malaysia, Japan, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia had expressed interest in the idea of a Mini-Marshall Plan. He suggested that China or another regional leader may take the initiative to bring these countries together to explore the concept. Rather than beginning with official diplomatic channels (Track I diplomacy), he proposed initiating the process at a Track II or Track III level, involving universities or research institutions, such as Peking University or Yunnan University. This approach could help build momentum for a broader diplomatic initiative, ultimately transitioning to formal diplomatic engagement.

In his concluding remarks, Dr Ahmed reiterated the importance of exploring unconventional solutions beyond humanitarian aid. He warned of the risks associated with prolonged instability, as it could lead to increased militarisation and exploitation by actors who benefit from chaos. The Mini-Marshall Plan could offer an alternative path, one that might attract regional investment and create a win-win situation for all involved, including China.

Professor Zhang Jiadong

Director, South Asia Research Center
Fudan University



Professor Zhang Jiadong provided insights, particularly addressing the Rohingya issue. He began by framing the issue as a legacy of colonialism, clarifying that the Rohingya crisis was not caused by modern-day Bangladesh, or any recent events but rather has deep historical roots extending over many years. He emphasised on the complexities inherent in ethnic and religious issues, noting that such challenges exist across the spectrum, from developing countries to developed nations, including China and the US. These matters, he argued, are deeply sensitive and inherently difficult to resolve. He further illustrated the complexity of the situation by pointing out similar problems along Myanmar's borders. In northern Myanmar near the border with China, there are many minorities who do not possess Myanmar citizenship, including some ethnic Chinese. This adds another layer to the broader issue of citizenship and minority rights in Myanmar. Given these complications, Professor Jiadong cautioned against oversimplified approaches or assigning blame to any specific party, suggesting that such actions may not be constructive.

Highlighting the importance of stability, Professor Jiadong stated that when the government in Myanmar is stable, minority groups tend to experience peace and development. Conversely, during times of conflict and confrontation, minorities often become leveraged in political power-plays, a trend that has been observed frequently. Regarding the Rohingya issue, he underscored the significance of the relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar, noting that without a good bilateral relationship, discussions and negotiations would be challenging. He encouraged the Bangladeshi government to engage in dialogue with Myanmar and foster a better relationship, which he believed would pave the way toward finding a viable solution to the crisis. He lastly remarked that improved diplomatic relations between the two neighbouring countries would facilitate a more favourable resolution to this issue.

Response by the Panellists



Dr Mao Keji

In addressing the issues raised in the open discussion session, Dr Mao Keji spoke to the audience about the importance of sustainable energy and tourism for Bangladesh's sustainable development. He began by addressing Bangladesh's limited fossil fuel resources, and therefore, emphasising that spending a significant amount of foreign currency to import fossil fuels is an unnecessary expense in the current era. He argued that with modern technology available for harnessing solar, wind, and even oceanic wave energy, Bangladesh should focus on developing a dynamic sustainable energy sector utilising solar panels and wind turbines.

However, Dr Keji identified a significant obstacle: the reluctance of Chinese companies to invest in Bangladesh's sustainable energy sector. The primary reason is the country's relatively small domestic market, which does not justify investment purely for local consumption. Nonetheless, he saw potential in manufacturing in Bangladesh for the global market. In the long term, this approach could be viable, but current infrastructural conditions pose a challenge. The costs associated with transporting components to Bangladesh for assembly and then exporting the finished products are high due to inefficient transport facilities. As a result, production costs could double, making the investment less attractive. To overcome this barrier, he suggested a 'big push' to enhance Bangladesh's infrastructure, making it more competitive for local manufacturing. Improving transportation and reducing logistical costs would make it feasible to produce solar panels not just for Bangladesh, but for the international market. He assured that

China is willing to support such efforts through infrastructural development projects, aiming to lower manufacturing costs.

Shifting to tourism, Dr Keji identified this as the most promising business sector for Bangladesh. He pointed out that it takes only two hours to fly from Dhaka to Kunming, with travel costs being quite reasonable. Additionally, Chinese tourists can easily obtain a visa on arrival in Bangladesh, requiring no documentation beyond being legitimate tourists. This ease of access, coupled with the relatively short flight, presents a significant opportunity to attract Chinese visitors.

Dr Keji acknowledged that despite his own extensive knowledge of Bangladesh as a South Asia specialist, the average Chinese person would have limited awareness of the country. Bangladesh needs to create compelling narratives to promote its appeal to Chinese tourists. There are plenty of untapped stories to tell, he noted, citing the country's tigers, beautiful national parks, and world-class fishing spots as examples. He proposed assigning think tanks the task of developing these narratives to entice Chinese travellers. He emphasised that the potential of Chinese tourism market is vast, with a powerful consumer base. If Bangladesh could attract even a fraction of this market, the economic benefits would be substantial. If every Chinese tourist spent just one dollar in Bangladesh, the country could start with billions of dollars in revenue. Finally, he stressed the need to unlock this potential, suggesting that the real concern would not be a lack of tourists, but rather an overwhelming number of them.



Dr Wang Xu

Dr Wang Xu emphasised the importance of renewable energy, noting that while it is theoretically essential, it must be affordable, stable, and sustainable for practical use. He stressed that people are looking for reliable energy solutions, highlighting that mere theoretical discussions are insufficient without considering the practical needs of the population. Additionally, Dr Xu addressed the tourism sector, underscoring the necessity for joint efforts to educate the public, particularly the Chinese audience. The importance of clarifying the distinctions between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh and highlighting the unique characteristics of Bangladesh itself require immediate attention. Encouraging initiatives would inspire the Chinese public to explore and choose to visit Bangladesh more frequently.



Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf

Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf briefly articulated his perspective on China's influence, particularly regarding the Rohingya issue. He suggested that China has the potential to impact not only humanitarian efforts but also the military and various stakeholders involved in the situation. He acknowledged the importance of addressing all aspects of the issue to reach a sustainable solution. He emphasised that, viewed from a realpolitik perspective, China possesses significant leverage to influence all parties in Myanmar.

Remarks by the Special Guest



Dr Md Nazrul Islam
Additional Foreign Secretary (Bilateral East and West),
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Dr Md Nazrul Islam opened his remarks by reflecting on Bangladesh's historical challenges, acknowledging that growth has been stagnated in certain areas. He pointed to China as a potential partner that could assist in addressing these developmental hurdles. Dr Islam particularly highlighted the BCIM or BCIM-EC initiatives, acknowledging that progress in these areas has stalled. He noted that there is substantial scope for further work and cooperation in these regional connectivity projects, which could bring mutual benefits.

Turning to the issue of the Rohingya crisis, Dr Islam mentioned the insightful points raised earlier by Mr Yousuf. He acknowledged that while Mr Yousuf may not have had sufficient time to elaborate on all the intricacies of China's role in the Rohingya mediation process, he concurred with the idea that China's involvement in this issue should not be overemphasised. However, he recognised that China's diplomatic role in the region remains important and warrants continued dialogue.

Dr Islam also touched upon discussions that had taken place regarding the health sector, particularly the potential for collaboration on developing a hospital system in Bangladesh. He saw this as another area ripe for deeper cooperation between the two countries, particularly as Bangladesh seeks to strengthen its healthcare infrastructure.

One of the most significant points in Dr Islam's deliberation was the emphasis on agriculture. He described agriculture as a critical sector for Bangladesh, particularly in terms of ensuring food security and advancing agricultural transformation. According to him, China's expertise and assistance could play a vital role in helping Bangladesh achieve self-sufficiency in food production and modernise its agricultural practices. He expressed optimism that collaboration in this sector could yield significant benefits for Bangladesh.



Lastly, Dr Islam reiterated that Bangladesh has considerable potential to benefit from its partnership with China, particularly in areas like regional connectivity, healthcare, and agriculture. He expressed hope that these areas of cooperation would continue to grow, leading to positive outcomes for both countries.

Concluding Remarks by the Session Chair



Professor Amena Mohsin
Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

In her closing remarks, Professor Amena Mohsin expressed her gratitude to the participants and emphasised the significance of this session, particularly in exploring ways to strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Bangladesh. She highlighted a survey conducted in 2020 by the Centre for Genocide Studies at the University of Dhaka, which was supported by the Chinese Embassy, revealing that 60 per cent of the respondents held a positive image of China. She urged both Chinese and Bangladeshi policymakers to take this finding seriously and leverage it in their diplomatic efforts.

Addressing the changing geopolitics and geoconomics of the region, she underscored the importance of political culture and public perception. She noted that emotions and perceptions are crucial variables for the Bangladeshi people, and there often exists a disconnect between the elite and the general populace. She also labelled the Rohingya issue as a significant humanitarian crisis, stressing that China as a major power in the multipolar world, has a moral responsibility to engage in humanitarian efforts. She characterised this responsibility as pragmatic rather than idealistic. Throughout the session, discussions covered various critical topics, including Track II diplomacy, infrastructure, manufacturing, and energy issues. Professor Mohsin asserted that the youth would ultimately drive this partnership forward, advocating for inclusivity by emphasising the roles of women and people with special needs. She called for a holistic partnership that involves cooperation at different levels, particularly community engagement alongside top-level diplomatic efforts.

Vote of Thanks



Colonel Shahriar Jabed Chowdhury
Research Director, BIISS

In his concluding remarks, **Colonel Shahriar Jabed Chowdhury** extended his heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in making the seminar titled “Bangladesh-China Relations: A Future Outlook” a success, on the eve of the commemoration of 50 years of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and China. He acknowledged the presence of esteemed guests, including the respected Chairman and Director General of BIISS, representatives from the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, members of the Chinese delegation, and other distinguished guests.

Colonel Chowdhury expressed his sincere appreciation for the contributions of the honorable Chief Guest, Md Touhid Hossain, the Adviser for Foreign Affairs of the Government of Bangladesh for his invaluable insights during the seminar. He also recognised the special guests, including Dr Md Nazrul Islam, the Additional Foreign Secretary of MoFA, Dr Debapriya Bhattachariya, Distinguished Fellow at CPD, and Dr Yang Jieman from SIIS. He highlighted the thought-provoking discussions led by these individuals, that provided much to reflect upon for the future of Bangladesh-China relations.

The BIISS Research Director expressed gratitude to the chairs, speakers, and panelists, whose perspectives deepened the understanding of various aspects of the bilateral relationship. He specifically mentioned the participants of the first working session, chaired by Ambassador Farooq Sobhan, including Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas, Dr Zhang JiaDong, Dr Liu Peng, and Ambassador Mahbub Uz Zaman for enlightening the audience on the impacts of Bangladesh’s changing political dynamics on regional affairs.

In the second working session, chaired by Dr Zhang Jiu'an, panellists such as Dr Kazi Maruful Islam, Dr Guo Na, Ms Deng Lan, and Professor Imtiaz Ahmed shared useful insights into Bangladesh's political, economic, and social reforms. He noted that the discussions were both thought-provoking and enlightening.

In the third working session, chaired by Professor Amena Mohsin, panellists such as Dr Mao Keji, Abu Salah Md Yousuf, Dr Md Safiqul Islam, and Dr Wang Xu shared useful insights into way forward for strengthening China-Bangladesh Relations.

Colonel Chowdhury also expressed gratitude to the organisers, including BIISS and the CCS at the SIIS, for their tireless efforts in bringing the event to fruition. He thanked the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Bangladesh for their ongoing support, which allowed for such a meaningful dialogue on overarching issues.

Lastly, the BIISS Research Director acknowledged the audience for their engagement, participation, and enthusiasm, which contributed to making the programme dynamic and vibrant. He concluded by appreciating the Intercontinental Hotel for providing a splendid venue and ensuring a seamless experience for all attendees. He then invited everyone to give a round of applause for the participation of all involved.

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