



**PROCEEDINGS**

**Seminar on**

# **Strengthening Bangladesh's Foreign Relations with Neighbours in the Evolving Global Order**

**24 January 2023**



**Organised by**

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



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# Seminar on Strengthening Bangladesh's Foreign Relations with Neighbours in the Evolving Global Order



The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised a seminar on “Strengthening Bangladesh’s Foreign Relations with Neighbours in the Evolving Global Order” on Tuesday, 24 January 2023 at the BISS Auditorium. **H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP**, Hon’ble State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh was the Chief Guest. **Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc** delivered the welcome address. The Session Chair of the event was **Ambassador M Humayun Kabir**, President of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI). Four presentations were made in the Seminar on different important topics. **Dr Lailufar Yasmin**, Professor and Chairperson, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, **Mr A T M Rokebul Haque**, Director General (SA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, **Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BISS, and **Mr M Ashique Rahman**, Senior Research Fellow, BISS presented papers in the seminar. An interactive Open Discussion session took place after the presentations.



## **Strengthening Bangladesh's Foreign Relations with Neighbours in the Evolving Global Order**

Senior officials from different ministries, ambassadors, high commissioners, former diplomats, senior military officials, media, academia, researchers, teachers and students, and representatives from diverse international organisations participated in the seminar and enriched it by presenting their valuable opinions, comments, suggestions and observations.



## Welcome Address



**Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc**  
Director General, BIIS

At the outset of his speech, **Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc** mentioned that, the evolving global geopolitical and strategic order has signaled the new reality of Asia's reemergence as the global pivot. The reemergence of China and India as the major powers in the regional and global power architecture have relocated the geostrategic gravity towards Asia. Strategic initiatives like Asian Rebalancing strategy of the US, China's Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) promoted by different regional and extra-regional powers, QUAD and AUKUS alliance etc. appeared around the Indo-Pacific and created a more complex regional order. Those strategic initiatives are aiming at addressing the issues of security threats, norms and alliance building, infrastructure and economic development. However, such power politics in this region has created more geopolitical hotspots, overlapping political and economic partnerships, and risks of conflicts. As Indo-Pacific on its way to becoming a critical ground for collaboration and competition, both the regional and global powers have made this region a ground for convergence of their interests and for divergent approaches; and thus, Indo-Pacific gained geostrategic, economic and geopolitical

centrality. Therefore, balancing the emerging realities, and enhancing cooperation by minimising competition within great power rivalry would be the major challenge for the countries of this region in the near future.

After the shock of pandemic, global economy has started to regain its momentum. But Russia-Ukraine war in Europe has brought disruptions again in global supply chains, compelling the other developing and middle-income countries to embrace another shock of potential global recession. Hence, ensuring cooperation and peaceful relations among the countries of the world is a sine qua non to achieve the stability of the global economy and save the humanity.

Bangladesh, being a key littoral of the Bay of Bengal, bears a great geostrategic significance in the Indo-Pacific region. It is considered as the gateway to South and Southeast Asia, making itself a hub for regional and interregional trade and commercial activities. Nevertheless, in this globalised world, no country can remain aloof from the impacts of the tensions arose from the events happened around the world. He believed that any potential escalation of tension in the Indo-Pacific region would have far greater implications for Asian countries as well as for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh promotes peace and stability. It has become a pioneer of global peace and a role model for growth in the Asian region. Article 25 of the constitution of Bangladesh reflects the key tone of the nature of the country's foreign policy behavior. Bangladesh always follows the policy of respecting international norms and laws, and maintains warm relations with the global community through its famous dictum coined by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, that is "Friendship to all, malice towards none".

Bangladesh always welcomes partnerships and promotes regional cooperation for its own development interests and peace for the region and beyond. General Pasha stated that the country prioritised its own vision of achieving regional peace and development. It promotes multilateralism to find peaceful and sustainable solution of the regional problems which is highly reflected in the remarks of our Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, as she mentioned, "any initiative in the region should include the creation of an environment of peace, harmony and stability of all countries, should focus on all aspects of sustainable development, engage countries based on mutual trust and mutual respect for mutual benefit". To keep its development momentum intact, Bangladesh is emphasising on engaging and strengthening economic cooperation with all stakeholders like India, China, the USA and the European countries, and other regional neighbours. Bangladesh is also promoting its development agenda through the active participation in the multilateral arrangements like BIMSTEC, BBIN, IORA, ARF etc.



Another priority area of Bangladesh is peaceful repatriation of the Rohingyas in Myanmar which has become a major regional security concern. As geopolitics surrounding Myanmar and the Rakhine region have further complicated the Rohingya issue, Bangladesh is focusing on engaging major regional and global powers to come forward to solve the crisis and ensure stability in the region. Besides, Bangladesh is emphasising on strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations with both close-door neighbours and extended neighbours to enhance maritime cooperation to tap potentials from the marine resources and tackle non-traditional security threats in the maritime space; ensuring supply of energy resources to meet the energy demand, and ensuring supply of food and food security etc.

In the concluding part of his address, he reiterated that Bangladesh pursues a policy of mutual respect and benefit, principle of tolerance and peace, solving problems with dialogue and negotiations; and thus, Bangladesh become a role model for peace in the region and beyond. However, changes in the regional order and new strategic realities bring both challenges and opportunities. Bangladesh needs to balance and navigate those challenges strategically to uphold its national interests.







**Dr Lailufar Yasmin**

Professor and Chairperson

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

**Dr Lailufar Yasmin**, Professor and Chairperson, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, made a presentation on “**Navigating Bangladesh’s Foreign Relations with the Neighbours in the Evolving Global Order**”. She stated that foreign policy cannot be made in isolation. It must be a reflection of domestic consensus on how Bangladesh would like to project itself Bangladesh. Therefore, it is necessary to provide evidence of why Bangladesh is important and bring Bangladesh into the global discourse. In today’s world, politics is taking place in a different manner where it is no longer a black-and-white world. There is a distinctively grey zone there. The countries which did not have a voice in the 20th century, have managed to find their voice. She referred to the book titled “Bangladesh: The Test Case of Development” published in 1976 where it was argued “If development could be made successful in Bangladesh, there can be little doubt that it could be made to succeed anywhere else. Often negatively portrayed in the international media due to political turmoil, and also being a disaster-prone country—Bangladesh is still struggling to graduate itself from being boxed in as a ‘small’ state. The scenario, however, is in a swift transition. Since its 50th anniversary, a number of foreign policy observers have taken a keen interest in the changes that have taken place slowly but surely. Bangladesh has gained not only stability in terms of its political and economic bases but has also turned itself into a country whose policies are based on pragmatic choices.

She said that Bangladesh started its journey as an independent and sovereign country with zero foreign reserves. Its sustainability as an independent country was questioned by many at the beginning. The country that started with foreign aid for its recovery and reconstruction has emerged as one of the fastest economies in the world within the span of 51 years. Bangladesh has been able not only to achieve a miraculous economic development but also political stands on international politics. Bangladesh has followed a unique model of development. It has not followed the textbook case of the western model of development. Bangladesh no longer relies on foreign aid, rather its strong economic condition has provided an opportunity to

be assertive in its foreign policy endeavors and gradually turn itself into 'a country that can say no'. Bangladesh's foreign policy dictum is "Friendship to all, malice towards none". Scholars have questioned whether it can be followed in the 21st century. She commented that Bangladesh has opened its door to all the countries of the world given it serves the country's national interest. It is embodied in the country's perspective that the door is open to all who are interested to be a partner.

While talking about development diplomacy, she noted that Bangladesh followed a distinct path of development diplomacy instead of limiting itself to the realm of economic diplomacy only. Bangladesh, not only undertook a comprehensive analysis of international demand and supply chain and became a part of it using its own resources, but also later on targeted its economic relations keeping in mind its particular development goals and objectives. During the pandemic period, although the global supply chain was severely disrupted, Bangladesh has been one of the few countries where there was not a single death due to Covid-19 related mismanagement. Bangladesh has been able to ensure a steady food supply during the Covid-19 pandemic to its 170 million people as well as to keep the economy moving.



She then briefly discussed the climate diplomacy of Bangladesh. The former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has identified Bangladesh as one of the climate leaders. Bangladesh has created its identity as a Climate Leader by working in three

particular areas —mitigation, finance and Adaptation. It has been able to address climate change from a local perspective where the country has developed climate-resistant crops. The success has been phenomenal as Bangladeshi scientists have been able to grow salt-tolerant rice and vegetables.

While talking about Bangladesh's neighbours, she mentioned that one cannot choose one's neighbour in the Westphalian principle. Countries sharing the border are defined as neighbours. So, there is a land-centric disposition and understanding of neighbours. From this perspective, Bangladesh has two neighbours i.e., India and Myanmar. However, the 21st century is referred to as the maritime century. The gaining of a large sea territory has led the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to adopt a sea-based approach in redefining Bangladesh's neighbourhood where the Bay of Bengal is widely attributed as Bangladesh's third neighbour. India and Myanmar being Bangladesh's neighbour have both disadvantages and advantages. Bangladesh is India's Neighbour with enormous strategic disadvantages about how to settle contentious issues between two neighbours. In the case of Myanmar, the Rohingya refugee issue is the prime issue of contention. The country is now hosting 1.2 million Rohingyas and the priority is sustainable and safe repatriation. However, Myanmar is a corridor to connect with Southeast Asia and ASEAN. There is potential to work with Myanmar along with resolving the contentious issues.

She stated that “evolving” is the best way to describe the present world order. From bi-polar world order in the 20th century to unipolarity for a period and now to a plurilateral system. There is an emergence of issue-based regionalism, alliances, pacts and cooperative frameworks. She gave the example of AUKUS. It brings opportunities but also challenges of new kinds of arms races. The current period is often referred to as the “Cold War”. However, she opined it is neither a “Cold” nor a “War” as there is no ideological rivalry between US and China. A new kind of neutralism or non-aligned movement is emerging based on assertion, agenda-setting capacity, and the ability and willingness to engage with “all”. Indonesia is one of the forerunners of a new type of non aligned movement. Bangladesh is one of the significant countries which pursues this particular agenda-setting role.

The last part of her presentation focused on the choices of Bangladesh. She commented that it is a tumultuous time, to say the least. The second decade of this century started off with a number of suppositions like this “Bangladesh is the standard bearer of South Asia”; “the Great Game is coming to Bangladesh”. The beginning of this decade saw Bangladesh as a ‘Rising Middle Power’. It is no longer a ‘small state’ in a typical international relations sense. Bangladesh needs to learn to carefully tread through the murky water of uncertainty.



**Mr A T M Rokebul Haque**  
Director General (South Asia)  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**Mr A T M Rokebul Haque**, Director General (SA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh presented the paper titled **“Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy Towards Her Neighbours: Friendship with Shared Prosperity”**. He began by describing neighbours of Bangladesh: starting from north, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. However, Myanmar is not a neighbour from South Asia. On the other hand, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, both island nations, are two neighbours in the South belonging to this region. Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides having over 4,000 kilometres of border with that country and remains a very important aspect in determining (Bangladesh’s) foreign policy towards the neighbourhood. There is a saying that history and geography are parents of diplomacy. Bangladesh was part of India till 1947. It shares the fifth largest border in the world with India, which is around 4,100 kilometres and 54 common rivers. There are close borders with Bhutan and Nepal but those are landlocked. Religious connections exist with Afghanistan and Pakistan but the version of Islam practiced in Bangladesh is different from those in the two. Island countries, i.e., Sri Lanka and the Maldives are far from Bangladesh. Mr Haque elaborated on how the Bangladesh Foreign Office determines its neighbourhood diplomacy, the tools and policies used with neighbours. First comes the vision, the cardinal principle as formed by the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, “Friendship to all, malice towards none”. Second is what Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina says and that is very important in determining the country’s foreign policy towards neighbours. She always calls for “inclusive development, shared prosperity in the regions” and Bangladesh has portrayed the image of a true friend among South Asian countries. Mr Haque stated that more ideas or visions can also be found from Dr A K Abdul Momen, Honourable Foreign Minister of Bangladesh who once remarked, “we must not forget that we are living in a fast-changing, complex and hyper-connected world; we cannot make progress in area by working alone.” From his body language, it can be found he is inviting other neighbouring countries to come forward, collaborate and cooperate with Bangladesh. As per Dr Momen, “The Bangladesh government is working strongly to establish the country as a regional



hub for connectivity and ensure inclusive development in entire South Asia.” These were some insights Mr Haque provided into the making of Bangladesh’s foreign policy regarding its neighbours. That is, the country wants to have friendly relations with shared prosperity and peace. He then defined five components used by Bangladesh as foreign policy tools with neighbours. First, promoting friendly relations based on mutual trust and respect. When mutual trust and respect are said, that means Bangladesh does not pursue its foreign policy according to size, population, geography or other indicators. There are smaller neighbours, e.g., Bhutan and Nepal, but when Bangladesh pursues its foreign policy, it always tries to ensure similar kind of respect for them the way it does with other neighbours. Then comes conducting balance on strategic issues. It is very important Bangladesh does not do anything or when it actually engages with them, it does not try to put any underlying meaning, like, it should fulfill purposes of other big countries or neighbours in the region. Next is strengthening effective sectoral cooperation; areas identified in this regard are water, trade promotion, power sector, energy and connectivity. People-to-people contacts are another component and pursued accordingly. Last but not the least, Bangladesh always tries to demonstrate soft power with impressive, tangible impacts, e.g., providing humanitarian assistance.

He pointed out some aspects regarding the country’s foreign policy objectives with a big neighbour like India, and stated about things why Bangladesh has become important for that country. India views Bangladesh as an important destination for its goods and services exports. It receives the highest number of tourists and medical patients from Bangladesh, which is also an important destination for Indians seeking white-collar jobs and one of the largest sources of inward remittances for India. That is how Bangladesh is contributing to India’s economy. The country is also important for providing security, stability in India’s restive Northeast and remains the most trusted friend in South Asia. The country helps facilitating communication between this region and Indian mainland which makes it vital in Indian foreign policy. Similarly, India is crucial for Bangladesh which as a single country, provides Bangladesh with the highest amount of LOC (they call it development line of credit). Due to having 54 common rivers, water sharing always remains a vital aspect; another such is power sector cooperation. Also, for ensuring peace and security, Bangladesh needs Indian support and cooperation. With Bangladesh’s economic growth, the middle and upper-middle classes find India as an attractive destination for tourism and medical purposes. The country is a major source of raw materials for Bangladesh and the latter has a trade deficit of about US\$ 14 billion with it. Out of that, nearly US\$ 10 billion is for raw materials. This is important, because, India is the closest market or destination for any product or essential commodity for Bangladesh. It also is the closest country who responds immediately when there is any natural calamity. It has many other labels: a big country, regional power, old civilisation, its policies receive high importance from Western countries and thus,

India matters. Bangladesh has close connections with Nepal and Bhutan but there is some border or land that need actually to be crossed. It is planning to import power from these two countries as they have surplus of this commodity. However, Bangladesh needs to use Indian territory for transmission. Sectoral cooperation with India encompasses all sectors and the two countries have over 70 working group mechanisms. Every month, there are five to six joint working groups meetings are held, covering myriads of issues.



There are some commonalities other than those with India. In South Asia, a broader aspect can be found; countries other than India, lack strong economy, sometimes there is political instability, largely influenced by India and China, and are members of SAARC and BIMSTEC. Mr Haque spoke about common objectives of Bangladesh's foreign policy tools concerning these neighbours, especially those in South Asia. Exchange of high-level visits is very important. In September 2022, Bangladesh's Prime Minister visited India, while in 2021, Indian Prime Minister and President visited Bangladesh, an unprecedented event in a single year. Water sector cooperation is very significant with all neighbours. Last year, there had been a landmark agreement signed between Bangladesh and India, on withdrawal of water from common river Kushiara and that would help ensure irrigation of 5,000 hectares of land in Sylhet. On power sector cooperation, he said Bangladesh is importing about 1,160 megawatts of power from India and planning to import an additional 1,600 megawatts from the Adani Godda thermal power plant, which would

be commissioned in March 2023. Completion of the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline is expected by June 2023. From Numaligarh, Bihar, Bangladesh is expected to import diesel into a designated pipeline. Bangladesh is the largest trade partner in South Asia for India and always promotes trade. Recently, Bangladesh allowed Bhutanese traders to open letters of credit as a special arrangement so that they can export oranges to Bangladesh. A statutory regulatory order (SRO) has been issued for opening the Banglabandha landport for Nepal for exporting yams to Bangladesh.

Mr Haque also provided assessment of other countries of South Asia and how they view Bangladesh. In line with the commitment of Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, i.e., inclusive development and shared prosperity, providing assistance to neighbours, Bangladesh has been able to establish its image as a true friend in South Asia. Main manifestation is, when the country was celebrating the Mujib Chironton in 2021, all heads of governments and heads of states in the region participated and joined their hands for that occasion. Also, that same year, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh-India diplomatic relations, Indian Prime Minister and President visited Bangladesh, as mentioned earlier. India sees relations with Bangladesh as trouble-free. It (India) is big a country and wants to take Bangladesh as a partner to face and address common global challenges. In recent times, it attained the G20 presidency and in the latest summit, Bangladesh has been invited as one of the guest countries. Neighbouring countries are very much associated with Bangladesh's progress and also have a lot of goodwill. As an evidence, Mr Haque said that when Bangladesh inaugurated the Padma bridge on 25 June 2022, all South Asian countries, including Pakistan, conveyed their messages of congratulations to Bangladesh's Prime Minister. However, only India issued a press release. He concluded by saying the foreign policy of Bangladesh is pursuing towards its neighbours, is strengthening relations through progressive partnership for shared peace, prosperity and inclusive development.



**Dr Mahfuz Kabir**

Research Director

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

At the outset of his speech titled **“Exploring New Avenues of Cooperation with the Neighbours”**, **Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BIISS highlighted that, like many other parts of the world, Bangladesh has been undergoing an uncomfortable period as a result of two major events — COVID-19 and the Ukraine conflict. The situation has dampened the impressive economic growth of Bangladesh, which was identified as one of the best performers in terms of recovering from the fallout of COVID-19. Bangladesh experienced slow growth, but it caught up rapidly. In FY 2000-2022, the growth rate was 7.25 per cent. It is one of the rarest countries in the world to achieve this kind of intensive growth. But there is a massive disruption nowadays because of the Ukraine conflict, which affected the global input-output supply chain. Energy and other sectors are undergoing serious pressure, and it has created and deepened the global slowdown. South Asian countries are also facing a reduction of foreign reserves. As a response mechanism, Bangladesh immediately took selective austerity, not secular austerity for all the economies. Important sectors like megaprojects were on the priority list. Bangladesh also prioritised the import of essential items and discouraged the import of non-essential items. Under the leadership of Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh adopted prudent policies and reforms to address the supply shock. Despite all the problems in the global economy, Bangladesh showed remarkable growth in terms of export, which was around US\$ 52 billion in goods export and US\$ 9 billion in services export. It amounts to US\$ 61 billion altogether. However, there is significant pressure on the external sector, especially because of the dollar crisis and deflation. Nevertheless, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has promised to provide loans. The formalities have been going on, and Bangladesh is expecting a US\$ 4.5 billion loan within a short period.

Dr Kabir pointed out the milestones for Bangladesh in the coming years. Bangladesh will graduate from the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in 2026 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are expected to be implemented by 2030. Bangladesh also aims at becoming a middle-income country by 2031 and then a



high-income, developed nation by 2041 following the “Vision 2041” and Smart Bangladesh. He opined that one of the important instruments to achieve these milestones and overcome the challenges is international trade. Bangladesh’s main import sources are within the region, i.e., South Asia and Southeast Asia and, to some extent, East Asia. It exports to the developed parts of the world and also to some countries like Japan and South Korea, and the Middle East. Regarding market diversity, he talked about export diversification of products and services. In India, Bangladesh is doing very well in terms of export, specifically in 2021 and 2022. Bangladesh’s export volume to the United States (US) is around US\$ 1.1 billion, and if the current rate continues, Bangladesh can reach up to US\$ 2.2 billion. On the other hand, even though China is providing 99 per cent duty-free access since September 2022, Bangladesh has not been able to do much well. However, according to the analysis of the International Trade Center, Bangladesh has a huge potential in exporting goods and services.

Considering Bangladesh’s trade with its neighbours, trade with the Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) countries stands at 12.09 per cent; with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, it is 12.81 per cent; with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries, it is 13.21 per cent, and with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, it is 10.6 per cent. Altogether, with SAARC, BIMSTEC and ASEAN, it is 23.4 per cent, and if China is included, it goes up to 38.69 per cent. If Bangladesh’s trade with South Korea and Japan is included, then it becomes 43 per cent. He added that Bangladesh can explore its relations within the region, especially with India and other countries in Asia, East Asia or South Asia. Bangladesh wants to be a regional hub and, therefore, is focusing on megaprojects to improve the standard of life and become a developed country. The Honourable Prime Minister has rightly directed the way Bangladesh should continue its major projects. Hence, Bangladesh needs to decide about the relatively unimportant projects, which is a part of selective austerity. Regarding the investment of the neighbouring countries in Bangladesh, there is a considerable volume of investment and trade with India. Bangladesh sources raw materials and intermediate goods from India. The top item among them, cotton, was imported around US\$ 4.2 billion in FY 2021-22, cereals around US\$ 2.21 billion and vehicles around US\$ 0.77 billion. The export, on the other hand, is around US\$ 1.99 billion if the service sector is not included. Most products in super shops like H&M and Marks & Spencer originate from Bangladesh.

He highlighted the importance of some infrastructural projects like the rail link, Kalni bridge and the Maitree power plant. However, India stood tenth among the investors in the last FY with around US\$ 100 million direct investment. Considering the size of the FDI, it was not satisfactory. China is also implementing a number of projects like the Dhaka-Ashulia Elevated Expressway, Karnaphuli

Tunnel, Special Economic Zone and the Padma Rail Link project. Bangladesh mainly imports boilers, machinery, cereals, electrical and electronics. Total import from China was more than US\$ 19 billion in FY 2021-22. Considering merchandise, export to China in FY 2021-22 was meagre — only around US\$ 683 million. Woven Readymade Garment (RMG) products, jute and knit RMG products were the three top items among them. In terms of FDI, China was the second most important country after the US.



Dr Kabir then discussed the opportunities for Bangladesh. The issue of monetary policy coordination is already being discussed in the policy arena to find out whether Bangladesh can establish a currency swap system with India and China because these are the two countries with whom Bangladesh has significant relations in terms of trade and investment. This system can facilitate and manage the pressure on Bangladesh's economy. He pointed out the importance of supply chain management as well. It is also one of the four pillars of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). If there is an alternative global supply chain, especially for energy and raw materials, then there can be a passage towards managing the pressure as well as increasing and diversifying export. Bangladesh now permanently depends on the RMG export. RMG covers 87 per cent of the total export, and with the inclusion of home textiles, there is an additional 3 per cent. Therefore, 90 per cent of the total export is textile and clothing. Hence, diversification is needed, especially in the renewable energy sector. Dr Kabir opined that Bangladesh has to look inwards.

Considering the size of the South Asian economy, India is the largest, with an economy worth US\$ 3.4 trillion, and Bangladesh is the second largest, with US\$ 460.75 billion. A report from the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) titled “Trillion-Dollar Prize” identified some of the sectors, i.e., the gig economy and the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). The recently published IMF report mentioned that the US economy and the European economy are likely to squeeze, but it is not going to be the case for China and India. That shows the significance of thinking regionally and thinking of Asia. He reiterated that, despite 99 per cent access, Bangladesh has not been able to utilise the potential of trade with China. Therefore, Bangladesh’s market strategy with China has to be revisited to understand what they want, and Bangladesh can promote its products in the Chinese market. Bangladesh has to attract Chinese buyers and attract investments from them so that it can implement development and trade-related projects.

Bangladesh also needs to think about the export of services. He mentioned some important destinations, including mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, Japan and South Korea. Bangladesh is also showing good performances in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Nepal. He stressed that Bangladesh should negotiate on critical issues like anti-dumping duties. Recently, India has extended the period of anti-dumping duty on jute again for another five years. There is also the prospect of cross-border tourism. Bangladesh can explore modern outlets like H&M, which are international outlets where Bangladesh is doing good. However, in terms of traditional products like jute, it is not satisfactory. It is facing a considerable amount of duties in the Indian market. He concluded his presentation by sharing that Bangladesh can pursue innovative marketing in the Chinese market. Bangladesh is doing well in terms of localising products in the Indian market. Entrepreneurs can also follow this kind of marketing model to achieve good results in the Chinese market.



**Mr M Ashique Rahman**

Senior Research Fellow

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

**Mr M Ashique Rahman**, Senior Research Fellow, BIISS made a presentation on “**Sustaining Bangladesh's Relations in the Extended Neighbourhood**”. At the outset of his presentation, he identified the scope of his presentation to be the immediate extended neighbourhood i.e., China and Southeast Asia.

He first gave a brief overview of Bangladesh-China Relations. China is the largest trading partner of Bangladesh. Bilateral trade between Bangladesh and China amounts around US\$ 20 billion. Besides, China is also a development partner of Bangladesh. The main focus is on the investment in infrastructure and FDI. Chinese investments in Bangladesh kicked off after Chinese president Xi Jinping's visit in 2016. After that, the two countries came up with a number of infrastructural projects. However, in some cases, China has not fulfilled the pledge it has made. In terms of defence cooperation, China is Bangladesh's largest supplier of military equipment. Bangladesh is also the second largest defence export market of China which is 20 per cent of the total share. Total Arms Trade during 2013-2019 is about US\$ 2.37 billion. There are a wide variety of equipment supplied namely tanks, maritime patrol vessels, corvettes, fighter jets, submarines, frigates, anti-ship missiles to the majority of small arms. Defence training and exchanges and multilateral defence exercises also exist. All these led to calling China one of the time-tested friends and reliable strategic cooperation partners.

While talking about Bangladesh-Southeast Asia Relations, he noted that some of the Southeast Asian countries namely Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam are major sources of Overseas Employment and sources of remittances. Besides, the countries are major sources of FDI. In recent times, there has been discussion on energy trade with some of the Southeast Asian countries. Specifically, Brunei when the Sultan of Brunei Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah visited Bangladesh in October 2022. Bangladesh is supposed to get 1-1.5 mn tonnes of LNG annually from Brunei starting in early 2023. Besides, MOU has been signed to import an average of 210,000 tonnes of diesel on deferred payment. There will be coal imported from



Indonesia as well. Therefore, energy is the new area of cooperation with Southeast Asian countries.

He provided certain recommendations for advancing Bangladesh's relationship further in the immediate neighbourhood. First, Bangladesh needs to ensure peace and stability prevail in the region. Second, Bangladesh needs to continue to follow the policy of equidistance – avoiding inclinations to join any alliance/alliances. Third, Bangladesh needs to continue participating in Multilateral Economic Initiatives albeit cautiously. Fourth, it is necessary to continue to pursue Economic Diplomacy but more pro-actively along with nation-branding. Fifth, Bangladesh needs to continue with Economic Development as the utmost priority including infrastructure development overcoming challenges like energy shortages, ease of businesses, increasing investment both domestic and foreign, export diversification and a sound banking system. Sixth, there is a need to strengthen Bangladesh's role in regional organisations such as ASEAN and BIMSTEC and finally, Bangladesh needs to continue with “hedging” as a foreign policy behaviour.



At the last part of his presentation, he clarified what hedging means for Bangladesh. Two aspects are important in this regard. First, it is necessary to continue economic cooperation with rising powers. He argued that receiving support and assistance from major and rising powers is important. Bangladesh needs to ensure voluntary and conscious participation in bilateral and multilateral economic

frameworks. Besides, Bangladesh needs to follow equidistance at the sub-systemic level and maintain 'strategic ambiguity' both at the sub-systemic and systemic levels. Second, Bangladesh should emphasise military modernisation. There is a need for qualitative improvement in this area. He argued that acquisition should be based completely on need to strengthen national security both traditional and non-traditional security issues in no way for "balancing" regional/rising power/s.





## OPEN DISCUSSION



**Air Cdre (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Chowdhury**, Treasurer, University of Asia Pacific talked about courses provided by the National Defence College (NDC) Bangladesh where all the officers from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh take the courses under the same roof. Here throughout the course, the officers get the opportunity to get to know each other and become closest friends which is a unique example. Regarding the defense diplomacy of Bangladesh, he commented that Bangladesh is diversifying its defense suppliers not only depending on any particular country which is a praiseworthy move.

**Mr Salahud Din Ahmed**, Former Member of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission referred to professor Dr Lailufar Yasmin and said that he too would like to see Bangladesh taking assertive agenda setting role. He praised Dr Kabir's recommendation of selective austerity. He mentioned that Bangladesh needs to be cautious not only in selecting new mega projects but also the present projects under implementation needs scrutiny as well. He then posed a question to Mr M Ashique Rahman about multilateral defence exercises with China. He wanted to know if there are other countries that take part in such exercises.





**Ambassador Md Abdul Hannan** raised three questions. His first question was to professor Dr Lailufar Yasmin about new kind of neutralism as mentioned in her presentation. He asked if it excludes more engagement motivated by economic interest but not political, in the newly emerging mechanisms available in the Indo-Pacific region's political and security affairs. Second question was to Mr Rokebul Haque regarding the assertion of India for its quest of strategic sovereignty and simultaneously hosting over 100 countries in the name of the Global South meeting, is there any prospect for the country's leadership for revival of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in today's

conflictual scenario? And what is Bangladesh's stake in this area if it is there? Third question was for the Session Chair, Ambassador Humayun Kabir regarding whether Bangladesh and neighbours need each other for common benefits. However, is it the time Bangladesh should think seriously of redefining regional cooperation based on realism and move for strategic regional cooperation like the EU or ASEAN.

**Professor Dr Syed Anwar Hussain**, Bangabandhu Chair Professor of Bangladesh University of Professionals said from reading history, he believed Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah, the independent ruler of Bengal between 1393 and 1410, was the father of small state diplomacy in the history of Bengal. Because, he was the first to cultivate relations with extended neighbours, e.g., China. He sent a giraffe to China and giraffe is not found in Bangladesh. It was certainly imported and was very expensive indeed but still he imported and sent it as a gift for Yongle emperor Zhu Di, of the Ming Dynasty. He also invited Chinese ambassadors to live in Bangladesh



and sent his own ambassadors to live in China; this was his political diplomacy. Second was his cultural diplomacy. He invited the great poet, Hafiz of Persia, who could not come due to sudden illness but immortalised Azam Shah as he mentioned the sultan's name in one of his ghazals. For religious diplomacy, Sultan Azam Shah cultivated special relations with the cities of Makkah and Madinah. A madrassah was established in Makkah named after him as Ghiyasiah Madrassah for the poor. He also sent 39,000 Miskals (gold coins) to repair the Al Arafah Stream. Dr Husain



in this regard remembered Ambassador Kabir stood first in the first batch at the Bangladesh Foreign Service Academy and secured highest marks in his courses. He then said India had a Gujral Doctrine that was adumbrated at the Chatham House in 1996. It was concerned entirely with India's neighbours, neighbours first. He wanted to know from the State Minister if the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs has anything like this doctrine espousing nitty-gritty details of neighbourhood policy. Then he asked Dr Lailufar Yasmin if Bangladesh has any cultural diplomacy like India has. His next question was if Bangladesh has defence diplomacy; only two institutes in Bangladesh were pursuing this: the Staff College and the National Defence College where he met many senior military officials from different countries including from neighbouring nations. Thus, his question was, does the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have any defence diplomacy? To Mr Rokebul Haque, he asked what the Bangladesh government, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has so far done in track-II and track-III diplomacy, including India's importance in Bangladesh's education system. Thousands of Bangladeshi students are pursuing higher studies in that country. Many books by Indian scholars are used in Bangladesh while researching on various topics bearing on South Asia; hence, India figures quite prominently in Bangladeshi academic circles, which needs to be mentioned. Referring to Dr Mahfuz Kabir, he said albeit Bangladesh is expected by 2041 to become a developed country, but in reality, will the country develop educationally, culturally and other areas by that period? What steps have so far been taken to address that situation? Its education system and culture are in a mess. Economic indicators of development given by capitalist nations may not always be appropriate for all. Dr Husain said indicators like per capita income and GDP are capitalist methods of measuring development and growth. How do people eke out a living? Has their living standard been developed in real sense of the term? It is not that someone is not found without proper clothes and that is not the real indicator of development. He asked if Dr Kabir had any suggestion to redress these situations.



**Mr Raihan Khan**, student, Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, asked Ambassador Kabir, when it comes to water sharing with India, it is well known what is happening with the Teesta River Treaty and Bangladesh is providing India with transit at cheaper cost. Relations are developing in energy trade, but that will also make Bangladesh more reliant on India after 2-3 years as 20 per cent of its supplies come from there. Why does not Bangladesh develop its own energy security and increase capacities by constructing refineries? He then asked if the country, as a geopolitical hub, would need any security strategy; this is not 1971's Bangladesh but

a new, rising one of 2023. Hence, he wanted to know from Ambassador Kabir about the country's national security strategy.

**Ms Zubaida Faruqi**, student, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Dhaka wanted to know about maritime diplomacy between Bangladesh and its neighbours—India and Myanmar. She referred to the 2012 and 2014 arbitrations and asked what kind of developments are taking place that will further secure these achievements of Bangladesh in the maritime domain.





**Dr Noor Mohammed Sarkar**, Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA) pointed out that Bangladesh obtained significant maritime area in 2012 and 2014. It is very important for Bangladesh now to safeguard this area and utilise its potential out of it. The Indian Ocean is getting very competitive over the years since both regional and extra-regional powers are involved. It involves Bangladesh's immediate neighbours like India and Myanmar as well as extended neighbours like Sri Lanka and even China. He asked how Bangladesh can ensure maritime security in this regard. He also highlighted Bangladesh's recent success in vaccine

diplomacy. Bangladesh, on the one hand, mobilised internal resources, and on the other hand, employed both bilateral and multilateral initiatives. He wanted to know if that can be an emulative example for Bangladesh to extend further in areas like cultural diplomacy.

## Responses by the Presenters



Responding to Dr Husain's question of cultural and defence diplomacy, **Dr Lailufar Yasmin** said Bangladesh had these both. Defence diplomacy is clearly visible in its participation in UN peacekeeping operations; it remains the top troops contributor country, and that is how it is fulfilling commitments under the UN in support of global peace and security. The country also has vibrant cultural diplomacy. The Department of International Relations of Dhaka University has begun cultural week which will help students of this department in promoting such diplomacy with neighbours and other nations in future.

**Mr A T M Rokebul Haque** in response to Ambassador Hannan's query on India's role in Non-Aligned Movement, said, he did not see much active role of the movement. He served in New York at the permanent mission of Bangladesh in the UN, and thus found their (the movement's) activities confined mainly to the UN building. However, as a big country, India's presence is very important and many countries actually follow the position taken by India. Replying to Dr Husain's comment on education system of Bangladesh, he said that thousands of training courses have so far been provided by India for lots of Bangladeshi officers from different public service agencies and many Bangladeshi students are also going there for higher studies. He, therefore, suggested Bangladesh should put more attention to increasing and enhancing development of its own service sectors. The good thing is, countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives are showing higher interest nowadays to avail service sector benefits from or developing cooperation in these regards with Bangladesh. There are huge demands and those are growing as well, e.g., in medical education of the country; but, there remain needs of working on these and expand capacities. There is a sort of mindset in Bangladesh questioning why the country shall allow students from other countries while its own students cannot avail medical education, which is very unfortunate indeed. Here, Mr Haque mentioned examples of the Prime





Minister of Bhutan, Dr Lotay Tshering, who studied at the Mymensingh Medical College and their Foreign Minister, Tandi Dorji, also had some connections with Bangladesh regarding his education. Therefore, he thought Bangladesh could expand its capacities in these two sectors.



**Dr Mahfuz Kabir** said some economists believed in per capita income, GDP, and other indicators as financial mode of development, but there were other indicators too, like human capability and happiness, which should also be considered. Even amid the Russo-Ukrainian war, Bangladesh is definitely doing well on both fronts. It aspires to become a developed country by 2041 with a smart economy to impact the milestone. He thought there was a clear message that it was not something like formal GDP, and there is need of transforming the country's human resources. He in this regard, mentioned about the East Asian Miracle, where all countries did very well through developing their

human resources. Bangladesh government also has aptly devised a curriculum for practical purposes and that will continue; that is how it will become a smart Bangladesh.

**Mr M Ashique Rahman** said, besides participation in UN peacekeeping missions, there are other areas of defence diplomacy where Bangladesh has active participation. There are various bilateral military exercises, defence training programmes, mutual visits, attendance by high officials including defence attachés, all of which are part of the bigger structure of such diplomacy. Thus, one can see, Bangladesh is already participating in lots of those activities, but there are more areas which require further attention at various levels. On nonalignment, he said it was a thing of the past, adopted by countries during the Cold War era. Nowadays, scholars of International Relations and Political Science are talking about the hedging strategy; India and other nations of South Asia are following that. The strategy needs more discussion. When scholars talk about it, there is no disagreement; the strategy is like a mix of balancing and band-wagoning. Bangladesh needs to begin discussion about this strategy and what it means for itself.



## Speech by the Chief Guest



**H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP**

Honourable State Minister

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

**H E Mr Md Shahriar Alam, MP**, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, said that, for the present generation of people who have not experienced the historic events in the 1970s, particularly the War of Liberation, this is the most significant time of the era. Depending on perspectives or geographical locations, one can say it is an “interesting time” or “challenging time” or “opportune time.” But COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war have proven to be common challenges for every single country on the planet. The topic is more relevant when it comes to foreign relations with neighbours in the evolving global order. He added that it is difficult to define the term “neighbours.” He shared the example of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and pointed out that just the inclusion of the Afghanistan element into the entire equation made it a “non-starter” to many even though he believes that there is still a future. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was established 25 years ago; but the progress that it made except for the last two years during COVID-19 gives renewed enthusiasm and hope.

He pointed out that, among the SAARC and BIMSTEC member states, there are issues with more than one country and sometimes it is difficult to engage with some of them. Nevertheless, the secretariat is making its best efforts. Other multilateral fora, even the European Union, had to submit this list of negative items, but it was the other way around for BIMSTEC. The majority of the countries of the organisation submitted their list of products that they were willing to include in the duty-free list. He reiterated that there is some progress, but a summit is needed to seal those.

He informed the audience that Bangladesh has a neighbourhood foreign policy. If the definition of “neighbourhood” is limited within South Asia, it includes promotion of friendship among the countries, strengthening the sectoral partnership that Bangladesh has with these countries, and the use of soft power to facilitate impressive, tangible impacts and promotion of people-to-people contact. These are largely the policies that apply not only to the South Asian countries or the neighbourhood, but also can be extended to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), or beyond ASEAN, to China. If Bangladesh wants to carry the policies to the Middle East or to the West, it must note that the policies were actually tabled by the founding Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, known as “Friendship to all and malice towards none.”

He emphasised that Bangladesh wants to be a good neighbour. There is no denial in any part of the world regarding this image of Bangladesh. However, there was a lack of continuity. What was declared and aspired by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was completely destroyed after 15th August 1975. But at least for the last 14 years and prior to that, from 1996 to 2001, there was an attempt to revive that continuation of the policy. Following the policies undertaken by the government of Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the worthy daughter of the Father of the Nation, Bangladesh has managed to establish herself as a good neighbour. He requested the audience to be aware of different geopolitical challenges. In the majority of the regions of this world, there are countries that are not acting the way their other neighbouring countries ideally want them to do. Despite this type of issue in South Asia, it is still one of the most peaceful regions in the world which was not easy. It needed leaders like Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Regarding connectivity, he added that there are both demands and expectations. There are even further demands beyond the 6,000 visas that the High Commission of India in Bangladesh is issuing. 15 years ago, this particular issue of connectivity was narrowed down to transit, and it was used in the domestic politics of Bangladesh. Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had to risk her political career to successfully table the idea. It is now the demand and expectation of the masses and it is very difficult for the political parties to use that as a political tool.

If there are terrorist outfits or groups with wrong motives and intentions, they can destabilise an entire region, not just the bordering areas of a country or two. The peace and tranquillity were brought by the dedication of the law enforcing agencies and intelligence, but it obviously needed a political will, a political directive, and that has brought changes in the affairs of this region. If Bangabandhu was alive, Bangladesh could have achieved that long before or it would have never been an issue. A substantial share of resources went behind neutralising those forces and they spent a significant part of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP), despite being one

of the poorest regions of the world. That was a game-changer. The policy and tools adopted by Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to remain a good neighbour have brought the region this far and can take it to the next level. Bangladesh might have a trade deficit with India and with China. But India, for example, is a neighbour that produces lentils, paddy, rice and wheat, sugar, vegetable oil, onions, essential items that are used by 35 million households in Bangladesh. If Bangladesh had to import those from Canada or Australia, the market price would fluctuate. There can be negotiations and fresh consignments to bring normalcy into the market affairs; but without good neighbours, there would not be any immediate access to these. The other side of this picture can be seen in Africa. Egypt is the largest importer of wheat in the world and the largest exporter is Ukraine. Had there been no mediation of the United Nations (UN), Turkey and Finland — the grain initiative that was launched followed by a ship getting loaded at Odessa, the entire situation would collapse. The Government of Egypt provides five pieces of bread to every household daily. Without that, the people would starve to death. As a country, they do not produce much. Egypt has got the Nile. They have fresh water, but there are many other African sub-Saharan and Saharan countries that do not produce anything. They all depend on imports.

He underscored that despite the trade imbalance with India and China, the remainder includes 50 per cent of industrial raw material that Bangladesh converted to a US\$ 55 billion export of clothing. Most of the raw materials of clothing come from these two countries. Regarding energy independence, the strategy is deliberate. Bangladesh does not have ample energy resources, i.e., hydro resources. There is little coal reserve; but for Bangladesh, environment and agriculture come first. Bangladesh does not want to sacrifice the very fertile delta and replace it with coal. It is not exploring its own coal resources which probably was not still enough to produce all the electricity that Bangladesh needed. Therefore, Bangladesh has to tap into the resources of other countries now. Further imports are helping Bangladesh to be energy secure. It has also signed an agreement with Nepal. But if it wants to produce, it has to be noted that putting together a hydropower plant from scratch requires a multi-billion-dollar investment for eight to ten years.

Mr Alam then highlighted the significance of the policy to promote partnership and cooperation. When the world was under lockdown for COVID-19, all the heads of the states or the governments came to Bangladesh upon the invitation of Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to celebrate the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman within five working days. It never happened in the history of the world. He echoed the points of the Director General of BIISS and stressed that it was also historic that the President and Prime Minister of India visited the same country in the same year. The number of visits between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Maldives, Bangladesh and Nepal and



Bhutan are very frequent. It further extends to visits with China and Indonesia. He also pointed out the importance of virtual communications in foreign relations and diplomacy. Nevertheless, even in the pre-COVID-19 days, it was mostly unheard of that prime ministers and presidents in this region were talking over the telephone frequently. Thus, the region is recalibrating in terms of the ways the modalities and technologies are used.



Regarding trade and commerce, there are several non-tariff barriers that need to be eliminated. During the last SAARC summit in Kathmandu, Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina brought up the importance of an integrated grid for power, electricity and transportation. Another issue was road connectivity. When the summit failed, all the leaders went back home with the promise of signing an agreement, but things fell apart. But Bangladesh did not stop there. It narrowed the plan down to four countries and that is where the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) initiative came from. After two years, it was evident that Bhutan was not comfortable with allowing an unlimited number of vehicles because they have ambitious environmental standards. The BBIN countries respect that and they are planning to bring it down to Bangladesh, Nepal and India. The countries in the region are trying to be innovative, irrespective of the debate on whether SAARC failed or not. The countries are now exploring alternative avenues. Bangladeshi vehicles are carrying Nepalese and Bhutanese products back.

There is also ease in transportation shipment. Some new routes have been introduced and there are some talks about re-energising old riverine roots. An Indian cruise ship has also sailed but got stuck because the navigation channel in parts of India was at its lowest. But there have been successful plying of ships through Bangladeshi river channels up to Guwahati very recently. In terms of trade and commerce, Bangladesh is working on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India and good progress has been made. Benapole-Petropol is in operation every day of the year. There will be a few more ports. There are frequent demands of border haats. This is how Bangladesh has managed to deal with informal illegal trade in the border. Bangladesh is also trying to rationalise pricing discussions. These elements are brought into the costing structure and pricing structure. Trade relations with Nepal and Bhutan have increased. Due to the historic contribution and being the first country to recognise Bangladesh, Bhutan is enjoying duty-free status of their product and it was granted a long time ago before any discussion of such nature took place with any other country. Nepal is also doing well, and Bangladesh is happy to see it. Within three months, a trial shipment of train full of fertiliser was unloaded in Mongla. It travelled through the Ishwardi-Rohanpur track and went to Nepal and it is now frequent.

Focusing on water sector cooperation, he noted that there had been some unfinished jobs or issues here; but there is also notable progress. The meeting of the Joint River Commission (JRC) is taking place after almost a decade. The seriousness of India can also be noticed. However, Bangladesh does not want to confine to India alone when the neighbourhood is concerned. He believes that a greater discussion should take place since some of the rivers are originated in China, Bhutan and other parts of the world. Hence, there is a need for a wider and larger discussion that requires some innovations from all.

He also addressed the issue of capacity building and people-to-people contact. He referred to some fantastic institutions like the National Defence College (NDC), where Bangladesh invites students and professionals from across the globe, and this has become a great venue for them to meet. Bangladesh also has its own Foreign Service Academy and is now enrolling students from the neighbourhood, i.e., Nepal and Bhutan, and very soon, it will cover entire South Asia. Therefore, exchanges of education and technology between the neighbours is also helping Bangladesh to propel through the demonstration of soft power and humanitarian assistance. After the Taliban took back the control of Afghanistan, Bangladesh sent help. It was not easy to send a C-130 aircraft and negotiate a safe landing and safe departure through the Embassy in Iran. Yet, the brave soldiers have done that for the much-needed Afghan people who were suffering due to a lack of medicine, food and clothes. There were natural calamities and disasters like in Nepal. Bangladesh has also sent assistance during the pandemic to the Maldives. When it came to serious issues like

shortage of foreign currency, Bangladesh also extended support to other neighbours as well. This signifies a completely new dimension in Bangladesh's foreign policy dictum, especially in the neighbourhood.

In conclusion, he added that the global order is shifting fast. There are phases when it is difficult to have a continuity of a policy. Undoubtedly, Bangladesh's principal position, friendship to all and malice towards none will remain intact. But there are lots of changes in the global platform and, as a result, the states need to remain alert and vigilant, Bangladesh will never compromise in the areas of its founding principles. Keeping those intact, Bangladesh will continue to mobilise its resources. The country also has a large diaspora. It has soft power which is going to gain more momentum in the coming days. Through proper and planned use, Bangladesh will continue to expand both in regard to the depth and breadth of the relationship that it established as a good neighbour in the neighbourhood. Bangladesh hopes that the neighbours will reciprocate that to the best of their ability. When the world is undergoing a complex transition, the government of Bangladesh is persistently working to consolidate its foreign relations for regional stability, prosperity and development.



## Concluding Remarks by the Chair



**Ambassador M Humayun Kabir**  
President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)

As the Chair of the Seminar, **Ambassador M Humayun Kabir** began his speech by lauding the seminar as a timely one. There were two reasons for this, firstly, a highly volatile, unprecedented situation emerged throughout the globe. For countries like Bangladesh with moderate exposure to international environment, it is a big challenge. Second reason was the impending graduation Bangladesh would attain in 2026 which also involved lots of preparations from the country in order to pursue better negotiations with the outside world. He, in this regard, expected the seminar would provide some useful outline of challenges faced by Bangladesh emanating from transformations throughout the world and simultaneously, suggest how the country could create its own space in the neighbourhood that in his views, would be the best option for the country in the context of global transformations that had been taking place. He also spoke on how Bangladesh made its own transition in last 50-51 years. Two things made the journey reasonably smooth. One was the consensus that existed in Bangladesh and outside world on economic agenda. Bangladesh saw some challenges internally but on economic agenda, there was consensus across the world and that helped it move forward without much difficulty. The second factor that facilitated Bangladesh's growth, in particular, for last 30 years, was the open global environment. Trade and remittance, two major pillars of the country's economy, moved ahead reaping advantage of the global open environment, which was essentially a product of globalisation process. But that process now has come under tremendous pressure as global environment is being characterised by massive challenges too. How should Bangladesh navigate in such situations? In the last meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF), it was mentioned the world had become fragmented. Countries like Bangladesh thus are facing troubles. The open world all are familiar with, is undergoing rapid and major shifts. In addition, other things are coming up. Growing economic nationalism, for example, has become strong not only at global level but is being witnessed in



Bangladesh's neighbourhood as well. These are some important questions whose answers are needed now to be found out or the phenomena understood for devising ways out. Ambassador Kabir said every country has been struggling now with their neighbourhood policies on how to manage those. Needless to say, Bangladesh's neighbourhood is in the vortex of global challenges or transformations. The Cold War of the 20th century has returned now to Asia and is affecting the country. US-China competition is in a way percolating and coming to this part of the world in the form of Sino-Indian contestation which is also affecting Bangladesh.

In summing up the Session, Ambassador Kabir started with reference to South and Southeast Asia. He said both regions are somehow connected or interconnected through geography, history and other means. Therefore, they can definitely share various benefits too. Having the spirit of making sacrifices is also necessary which he thought was the basis of relationship when Bangladesh tries to develop its neighbourhood policy and that principle could be followed. As regards foreign policy of any country, two issues remain dominant: 1) Security and 2) Prosperity. Everything else can be put under these two. In terms of security, South Asia or extended neighbourhood is becoming volatile. Bangladesh has very distinct perspectives on national security issues and there is no common definition, theme or platform to describe, redefine or refine the security concept from a larger standpoint. This should be kept in mind while Bangladesh develops its neighbourhood policy. SAARC has not worked because of security problems. BIMSTEC is not working, perhaps, because of some issues regarding security and partially economy as well. Therefore, when discussions are going on neighbourhood or extended neighbourhood, the security element remains a very crucial one. He in this regard remembered, when he was talking to some of his Indian friends, they said relations with Bangladesh could be developed if Bangladesh addressed India's security problems; this was their perception about Bangladesh. Once they felt Bangladesh provided some security, other things could move ahead. Ambassador Kabir said about the need of focusing on multidimensional relationship but Bangladesh should also think about its own security. As India thought about its own security, they should not underestimate Bangladesh's demands or aspirations for ensuring its security. About prosperity, he discussed some more things as was done by the Panellists earlier. One was trade that is a major driver of Bangladesh's economic growth. Interestingly, Bangladesh is in middle of the chain; it imports from China, India, exports to Europe and Americas. However, it needs to be thought how Bangladesh can strengthen, enrich or empower that chain for its own benefit. Bangladesh imports about US\$ 19 billion from India but exports do not reach even US\$ 2 billion; the scenario is somewhat similar with China. The country needs to diversify and improve its export competitiveness. Then comes investment. Bangladesh in next 10-20 years will need lots of investments both from internal and external sources. Huge reforms are needed at the domestic level. Bangladesh currently is in the lowest position in terms of tax-GDP ratio; where will

the government get the money from? That needs to be improved and is a significant challenge for any government. FDI is also very important but unfortunately, even in this sector, Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the region. The country has to finance various projects that are coming up. Hence, investment-wise, it needs to look at the world and the region as to who can invest in Bangladesh and also how Bangladesh can make itself an attractive destination for foreign investment. He also spoke on infrastructure. Bangladesh has done a lot in this regard visible in the progress made in last 10-15 years. But the country needs to go beyond its national borders now and get connected with other countries. With India, there is some connectivity but that is only physical and there remains need of deepening connectivity in other areas too. On energy sector he said, it needs to be considered whether Bangladesh should remain dependent on others for energy supplies, improve own competitiveness or diversify energy sources. Migration is another important issue. There are about 13 million Bangladeshis working abroad in different countries; but how many are working in South Asia? Migration is still a pejorative word in this region? How can regional integration be talked about unless migration is accepted as a positive element contributing to economies? This area needs to be looked at; because, Indians are working in Bangladesh and Bangladeshis should thus be allowed also to work in India. Saying is better than done; the issue here is, India will only have Bangladeshis, if Bangladeshis are competitive in terms of labour market attraction and Bangladesh needs to work on that. Ambassador Kabir spoke on technology transfer which is another important area; referring to Dr Husain's comment on smart Bangladesh, he said a smart Bangladesh would be knowledge-dependent and physical improvements would not be enough. The country would also have to build a knowledge-based economy but that would not be easy. He stressed on coordination. Referring to Dr Yasmin's discussion on various types of diplomacy, e.g., economic, cultural, diaspora, he asked if there was any coordination. Does Bangladesh have one national voice or multiple voices? In his observation, only during the COVID-19 time, the MOFA sat down with five other ministries for coordination and that produced the best COVID diplomacy as said by one participant during the open discussion session. If Bangladesh can coordinate better, it can engage better with the outside world as well, be it in the region or beyond. Therefore, coordination is extremely vital and the country must think about that. Besides, the country needs a national consensus on defining its national interests. Because, when foreign policy issues come into the picture, that should be driven by such interests. He concluded by expressing hope that the presentations and ensuing discussions, suggestions, comments would help BIIS in preparing a policy paper, that would in turn, help the MOFA in developing Bangladesh's neighbourhood policy.

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