



# PROCEEDINGS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

09 January 2023



Organised by

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



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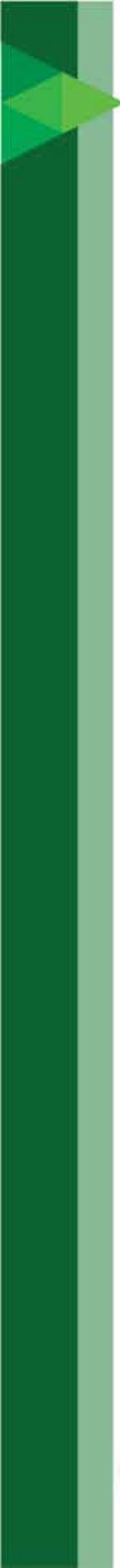
# Proceedings

## ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a roundtable with Senior Director Eileen Laubacher, Senior Director for South Asia, the United States (US) National Security Council (NSC), and her delegation on 09 January 2023, at the BIISS auditorium. Members of the delegation included: Helen LaFave, Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy, Dhaka; Brian Luti, Director for South Asia Regional Center, National Security Council, United States Government; Scott Urbom, Office Director, South, and Central Asia Bureau, U.S. State Department; Arturo Hines, Acting Political/Economic Counselor, US Embassy, Dhaka; Justin Halpern, Indo-Pacific Affairs Officer, US Embassy, Dhaka.



Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc, Director General of BIISS, delivered the Welcome Address. In the roundtable, four presentations were made by BIISS faculties. Mr Rubel Molla, Research Fellow of BIISS, presented on The Evolving Geopolitical and Strategic Environment in the Indo-Pacific Region; Mr M Ashique Rahman, Senior Research Fellow of BIISS, presented on Bangladesh-US Cooperation for Enhanced Security in the Indo-Pacific Region; Dr Mahfuz Kabir, Research Director,



BIISS, presented on Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: Opportunities and Expectations, and, Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf, Research Director, BIISS, presented on Strengthening Bangladesh-US Cooperation for Dignified Repatriation of the FMDNs. Senior Director Ms Eileen Laubacher, Senior Director for South Asia, the US National Security Council (NSC), delivered her speech on US-Bangladesh Cooperation and Collaboration in the Indo-Pacific Region. The presentations were followed by an open discussion. Later, Ms Helen LaFave, Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy in Dhaka, delivered her remarks. Colonel M A Saadi, afdc, psc, Research Director of BIISS, moderated the session. Finally, the roundtable ended with valuable concluding remarks from the DG, BIISS.

# Welcome Address



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

At the commencement of his speech, Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, Director General, BIISS, welcomed and expressed his gratitude to Senior Director Eileen Laubacher for her gracious presence. He said that throughout the last 50 years, the relationship between Bangladesh and the US has been defined by the common goal of global security, development, and a sustainable future. Being a reliable development partner, the US has already proven its dedication to Bangladesh by standing behind the country as it embarked on its spectacular development journey. Cooperation between the two countries has arguably grown in prominence across a number of dimensions. General Uddin argued that the US, Bangladesh's largest trading partner, is also one of the major destinations for the country's readymade garments exports. Aside from economic ties, the two countries are also collaborating on various issues, including border security, maritime security, the fight against terrorism, peacekeeping, and defence cooperation. He said that the relations between the two countries have already been elevated from cooperation to partnership and the sectors of engagement have increased manifolds. The bilateral



cooperation, in the last five decades, has significantly come a long way. Consequently, General Uddin argued that now it is time to see how the two countries can cooperate more in the face of evolving geopolitical realities since the US's enunciation of the Indo-Pacific strategy added a new significance to the Indo-Pacific region.

The Director General noted that, with the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region, an epicentre of great power competition has been looming due to the region's vitality, especially its rapid economic growth and more crucially, its growing strategic relevance. Therefore, recognising such strategic significance, major powers are trying to readjust their engagement in the Indo-Pacific. With such attention from the major powers because of being a vital trading hub and having resource-rich sub-regions, the Indian Ocean region is also becoming essential in terms to of strategic engagement.

General Uddin recalled the speech that the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gave at the Paris Peace Forum in 2021. In which she said that the "Indo-Pacific region must be an area of peace and prosperity for all." Therefore, the Director General believes that all countries in the Indo-Pacific region must work together to address the growing security challenges in the region. In this regard, it is essential to discuss Bangladesh's Security and Defence cooperation with the US. He believes, being a key partner of Bangladesh, the US's counterterrorism cooperation with Bangladesh has helped law enforcement authorities execute investigation-led operations, dismantle terrorist networks, and increase the judiciary's capacity to prosecute terrorism cases. Besides, the US is also a crucial partner in Bangladesh's efforts to safeguard its borders and maritime security. The critical aspects of Bangladesh-US security cooperation include counterterrorism, military training and joint exercises, civilian security cooperation, peacekeeping operations, and disaster management. By training personnel through joint exercises and providing relevant military hardware like patrol boats, the US has assisted Bangladesh in improving its security across its vast marine space. General Uddin informed the audience that a good number of Bangladeshi military officers had received training in different US institutions.

Similarly, Bangladesh also offered training to foreign officers at its Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC), Dhaka. In 2022, DSCSC trained 46 officers from different countries, including a good number of officers from the US. Trust between the Defense forces can only be built through such cooperative efforts.



At the concluding part of his speech, General Uddin expressed his gratitude and satisfaction with the US's cooperation for the dignified repatriation of the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs). He said that the issue has received a new height as the US renewed its commitment to assist Bangladesh in supporting the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingyas to Myanmar. As a part of the US's unwavering partnership with the government of Bangladesh and their "comprehensive response" to Rohingyas, the US recently established the resettlement program for the vulnerable Rohingya community in collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). By establishing such an initiative, the US showed their willingness to relocate a number of Rohingyas to the US. He believes this latest initiative of Resettlement of Rohingyas from Bangladesh reflects the US's long-standing leadership on refugee resettlement in the face of an unprecedented displacement crisis. In the end, the Director General expressed his hope that the roundtable will facilitate the exchange of knowledge and ideas about how both countries can effectively collaborate in the evolving geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region and contribute constructively to the promotion of security, prosperity and managing Rohingya settlement.

# **Presentations**

## ***Presentation One***

### **THE EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION**



**Mr Rubel Molla**

Research Fellow, BIISS

**Mr Rubel Molla**, Research Fellow, BIISS, started his presentation by mentioning the significance of the Indo-Pacific region, which has emerged as a strategic pivot in the evolving balance of power recently. The region encompasses about 60 per cent of the world's population, three of the ten largest economies, five of the ten most populated countries, and three of the ten largest countries. He pointed out that the region has an enormously populous and diverse mix of ethnicities, cultures, political systems, religions, and economic models. It is the global trade and energy linkages that bind the oceans such that events across the region are strongly interrelated and mutually dependent.

He mentioned that Indo-Pacific is on its way to becoming a fertile ground for collaboration and competition, both the regional powers and the extra-regional powers

have made this region for convergence of their interests and for divergent approaches, and hence Indo-Pacific acquires geostrategic, geo-economic and geopolitical salience. Mr Molla pointed out that one of the crucial discussions among the regional countries is the converging interests of the regional and global powers that drive them to engage in the Indo-Pacific region. The critical common interests are connectivity, maritime security, infrastructure development, and energy cooperation.

Mr Molla said that the Indian Ocean region has long been the primary artery for pumping oil from the Persian Gulf into the global economy. Its geopolitical significance has grown due to major powers' extensive reliance on sea routes for transporting energy resources and commercial goods. He highlighted that the world produces 96.7 million barrels of oil on average per day. The Strait of Hormuz connects major oil producers, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, and Qatar to the rest of the world. The Hormuz, Malacca, and Babel Mandeb straits transport 18.5, 16.0 and 4.8 million barrels of oil respectively a day. The Malacca Strait is equally crucial; around 25 per cent of the world's crude oil passes through the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Singapore. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that 80 per cent of global trade by volume and 70 per cent by value are transported by sea; of that volume, 60 per cent passes through Asia, with the South China Sea carrying an estimated one-third of global shipping. He said that if these straits shut down abruptly or even are under potential risks of conflict, any resultant commotion will severely impact the global economy. So, cooperation in connectivity, infrastructural development, energy, and maritime cooperation is crucial in the Indo-Pacific region for building a secure and prosperous region. He said that besides China, Most of Japan's and South Korea's imports are from Middle Eastern suppliers and are transported through the Strait of Malacca and then the South China Sea. Hence, cooperation among the Indo-Pacific nations will be imperative to meet these emerging maritime challenges. He then talked about the divergence of approaches to the Indo-Pacific by different regional actors.



He highlighted various Indo-Pacific policies by different countries. Mr Molla said that the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy talks about rules-based order and freedom of navigation. While India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) is an extension of its "Look East Policy." He mentioned Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy that aims at improving the connectivity between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and between the African and Asian continents not dominated by China and Chinese standards. Then he said ASEAN's approach to Indo-Pacific regionalism as the ASEAN countries have preferred to have the presence of a major power that gives them a sense of security. Australia's policy is to engage with major Indo-Pacific democracies including by working in small groups, to promote a balance in the region favourable to their interests. On the other hand, China's China has its own Indo-Pacific in the Maritime Silk Road, part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Mr Molla said that Indo-Pacific has its players designed to cooperate and sometimes to compete as well as has its groupings/alliances such as AUKUS or QUAD are intended to engage distrustful neighbours or distant partners in terms of economic, normative, or geographic connections, knowing full well that Indo-Pacific strategic and economic ecosystem is as much varied as to accommodate diverse features.

Mr Molla then mentioned about the intensified US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region has been the primary catalyst to ignite this frightful arms race. He mentioned several major regional flashpoints such as North Korean nuclearisation at the Korean Peninsula, increasing tension among the littoral states over maritime disputes at the South China Sea, renewed hostility over Kashmir between the nuclear neighbours India-Pakistan as well as tension in the Taiwan Strait, not only played a key role to exacerbate this arms race, these flashpoints has the potential to trigger a full-fledged military confrontation, undermine the regional security and destabilise the whole region. Like many of its South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh is at the crossroad of its path toward development.

Afterwards, Mr Molla pointed out the priorities of Bangladesh in this context. Bangladesh, a Strategic hub for the Bay of Bengal, has its own policy for navigating through the latest developments in the Indo-Pacific. He said Bangladesh prioritises its economic development and aims to become a developed nation by 2041. It is imperative for Bangladesh to have a secure and stable Indo-pacific for the objective. He mentioned that Bangladesh has two broad policies for its foreign affairs. One, the preservation of sovereignty, and two, the quest for securing resources for its continued economic development and welfare. The first one comes from the need to secure enough strategic autonomy to choose its own policy. In contrast, the second one marks the quest for resources through trade, aid, investment, FDI, remittances, and export diversification. Bangladesh prioritises multilateralism, aiming to engage with countries based on mutual trust and benefits. Then he said Bangladesh's priority is, as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, "any initiative in the Indo-Pacific 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, focus on wealth creation for all where development must be inclusive, and lastly, create fair competition, not rivalries." He highlighted that Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, Dr AK Abdul Momen, reiterated that Bangladesh wants to see an open, free, peaceful, and inclusive Indian Ocean instead of any single country or group's domination in the region. Bangladesh also supports the peaceful resolution of disputes, de-escalation of conflicts, and strengthening confidence-building measures in the region. He mentioned another important priority for Bangladesh is investment and infrastructure development. The region needs more investment in infrastructural development. Strengthening cooperation in infrastructural initiatives will benefit all by increasing the efficiency and sustainability of projects and enhancing regional economic growth. He said infrastructure-

driven economic development has been the thorn for many of Bangladesh's South Asian neighbours like Sri Lanka, Pakistan and most recently, Nepal. The goal to be a developed nation by 2041, needs trade and infrastructural investment to achieve. He also highlighted Bangladesh's Priority of addressing climate change. Many littoral and small island countries are threatened by climate change. Cooperation in climate change is one of the key priorities of the region. Many of the littorals of the region and small island countries are at threat of sea level rise and climate disasters. The region demands that regional and global powers cooperate in addressing the climate issue and support the voice of the climate-vulnerable countries of the region. He mentioned the Indo-Pacific region needs enhanced maritime cooperation. As Maritime safety and security remain an area of concern in the Indo-Pacific region, a vast integrated maritime space bound by trade and shipping connectivity. Bangladesh also prioritises cooperation in the maritime domain to tackle both traditional and non-traditional security issues. He also emphasised the importance of food security, Peaceful repatriation of the Rohingya crisis and ensuring the supply of energy resources to meet the energy demand. Another major priority area for Bangladesh is Defence Cooperation: Exercise and training; bilateral and multilateral trust building and interoperability among the armies of the region. Mr Molla concluded his presentation by reiterating that Bangladesh promotes multilateralism to find a peaceful and sustainable solution to the region's problems and wants to see an open, free, peaceful and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

## ***Presentation Two***

# **BANGLADESH-US COOPERATION FOR ENHANCED SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION**



**Mr M Ashique Rahman**  
Senior Research Fellow, BIISS

**Mr M Ashique Rahman**, Senior Research Fellow, BIISS, deliberated on Bangladesh-US cooperation for enhanced security in the Indo-Pacific region. In his presentation, Mr Rahman highlighted some of the common areas of concern for Bangladesh and the US as well as the existing security cooperation and future directions of such cooperation between the two countries. He identified traditional security concerns, such as border conflicts and maritime boundaries, as major regional concerns. Geopolitical and strategic competitions among the regional powers for resources and for influence as well as securing sea lanes of communication and significant choke points, are a few other major concerns for the countries of the Indo-Pacific. He also identified a trend of increased militarism where countries in the region are modernising their armies. Mr Rahman opined that although such military build-up should not be compared with the arms race from the Cold War period, it might lead to military conflict. Subsequently,

## **Roundtable Discussion**

he discussed the non-traditional security issues in the region, where he noted human and drug trafficking, criminal networks and terrorism as the most significant sources of concern for the region. Security vulnerabilities due to climate change are another important source of insecurity for climate-vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh. Due to worldwide inflation and the looming global recession in the year 2023, human security will be under significant duress. Developing countries might find it challenging to provide food and health security for their citizens.



Under such a backdrop, Mr Rahman focused his discussion on security cooperation between Bangladesh and the US, including defence cooperation to capacity and institution building. Since 2015 there has been an increase in bilateral defence trade, DoD exchange and so forth between the two countries. Subsequently, he pointed out that policymakers of both countries need to consider that albeit the very asymmetric nature of the Bangladesh-US relationship, the relationship framework must be based on equal status and mutual cooperation. Mr Rahman argued that the latest National Security Strategy of the US, published in 2022, focused on the South Asian region as a whole, which might be a convenient lens for the US to examine the region. However, he argued for the need for a country-specific focus since the region is diverse and each country has its own unique character and requirements. Henceforth, a relationship that promises mutual

benefits for Bangladesh and the US should be the priority of any diplomatic engagement. For example, Mr Rahman mentioned Bangladesh's requirements in capacity building in disaster management and defence modernisation. In this regard, if Bangladesh can receive concessional terms in defence purchases, that will be beneficial for a developing country like Bangladesh. Furthermore, he identified the need for Bangladesh-US bilateral cooperation to ensure enhanced regional security and stability. To that end, resolving conflicts among major regional powers will be imperative, he opined. Being a peace-loving nation, Bangladesh is a big supporter of a peaceful and stable region which is essential to attain the development priorities of Bangladesh and the region as well. In that regard, Bangladesh can facilitate dialogue among the major powers since Dhaka has warm relations with everyone. While concluding part of his presentation, Mr Rahman talked about the need for stronger public diplomacy to create a favourable public opinion and take the bilateral relationship to the next level. Since both Bangladesh and the US are democratic countries, more public events will engage the citizens and shape public opinion for stronger bilateral relations.

## ***Presentation Three***

### **INDO-PACIFIC ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK: OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPECTATIONS**



#### **Mr M Ashique Rahman**

Senior Research Fellow, BIISS

**Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BIISS, presented on the topic “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework: Opportunities and Expectation.” First, he showed a map of the region highlighting the members of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The region constitutes around forty per cent of the global economy, which is huge and has a lot of potentials to be realised in the days to come. If the turbulent time that the world has been undergoing for the last three years is considered, the Indo-Pacific region has a lot of impetus.

Dr Kabir briefly explained the four pillars of IPEF. The first pillar is trade which will be negotiated by the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR). The second pillar is the global supply chain which is under massive disruption because of the pandemic and

the recent conflict in Ukraine. The third pillar is a clean economy. This important pillar is consistent with sustainable development goals and other international commitments. The fourth one is a new topic in discussion i.e., fair economy. For these three pillars, the US Department of Commerce is responsible. Next, Dr Kabir gave a brief overview of the Ministerial meetings. There were four ministerial meetings. The first two were virtual and there was no significant progress. But in the third Ministerial meeting, four papers were produced, shared and discussed with the member countries. The fourth meeting was again virtual, where there was collective commitment and fast-track progress was noticed. Then there was only negotiation in Brisbane, Australia, where a lot of officials from IPEF members participated and intensive discussions took place with USTR and the Department of Commerce. There was an exchange of ideas and the papers were discussed. India will host a special IPEF negotiation in February and the three pillars on which India has agreed will be discussed.

Dr Kabir further discussed the pillars. There are a number of issues in each of the pillars, but certain issues like labour, digital economy, agriculture, good economic practices and competition policies are the most important things that are in the global trade discussions and members of the IPEF are considering. He also mentioned some of the reservations of India and Malaysia on selected issues. The data issue is very critical. A recent study quoted that, if we do not internationalise the data, it will impact the trade flow. The trade of services would also be an important thing. It is an emerging area of consideration. If we consider the supply chain, it is very important entirely. The new realities of massive disruptions in the international supply chain and energy flow and the flow of raw materials and finished goods make it an important pillar. The Ukraine war has shown a formidable challenge regarding the flow of energy. Information sharing and crisis response are also important issues. The third pillar is the clean economy. This is consistent with international commitments of SDGs, especially SDG 7, which talks about energy security and affordable energy transition, especially the transition from fossil fuel to green energy. Innovative technologies, especially the adaptability of technology in member countries is an important thing. Overall, a clean economy is an overarching objective. The fourth pillar is the fair economy. This will address money laundering and capital flight. The other issue is inclusive cooperation. All countries will have their opinion, they will raise their problems regarding corporate governance, anti-corruption and other issues. These are also important areas of cooperation.



At this stage of the presentation, Dr Kabir talked about the opportunities. The IPEF is a flexible arrangement. It is not like a traditional Free Trade Agreement (FTA) or a trading arrangement. Countries are allowed to join in any of the pillars. This is an important thing. There are no binding pillars. If the issues are discussed and agreed upon, then the countries will work on those and include them. A high standard in different areas like the digital economy and intellectual rights needs to be addressed. High labour standards are also an issue. All international agreements have the issues of labour.

In the concluding part, Dr Kabir shared the expectations from IPEF. The digital economy will be a considerable area in the coming years and there has to be a standard recognised by other global countries. It needs to support small economies and developing countries. There is an asymmetry in terms of the level of development in the Indo-Pacific countries. On one hand, there is the US, Australia, Japan, South Korea and other developed countries and on the other hand, there are developing countries. Because of the state of development, there is a lot of dissimilarity in standards. It will create a platform that will push development and achieve high standards. This is an area of cooperation that will help the IPEF members and other countries like Bangladesh. Since Bangladesh's economy is highly integrated with South Asian economies like India and has trade and investment collaborations with other countries like Australia, South Korea, etc., any kind

of collaboration in IPEF economies would positively impact Bangladesh's economy. Dr Kabir shared that there is an expectation that there is not going to be any traditional security implications of this framework. Since other security arrangements exist in the Indo-Pacific, this will be clearly based on economic cooperation. This is an essential expectation from non-member countries.

## ***Presentation Four***

### **STRENGTHENING BANGLADESH-US COOPERATION FOR DIGNIFIED REPATRIATION OF THE FDMN'S**



#### **Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**

Research Director, BIISS

In his presentation, **Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**, Research Director, BIISS, emphasised the inevitability of Rohingya repatriation and discussed the issue from humanitarian and security perspectives. He mentioned that the repatriation of Rohingyas is connected both with humanitarian issues and the security and stability of the region. He noted that Bangladesh is focusing on the dignified repatriation of the Rohingyas and emphasising a sustainable solution to the crisis. Referring to history, he said that the Rohingyas were repatriated in 1978 and 1992, but later the problem resurfaced. For that reason, Bangladesh is now focusing more on sustainable repatriation and a durable solution to the problem. He highlighted the US President and his government's commitment to the safe and dignified repatriation of Rohingyas and argued that there is a convergence of interest between Bangladesh and the US in terms of humanitarian response along with

the security and stability of the region.

Mr Yousuf focused on three issues in his presentation. Firstly, the inevitability of Rohingya repatriation, why repatriation is inevitable for resolving the crisis, and why other alternatives are not working. Secondly, the present realities in terms of Rohingya repatriation; and finally, strengthening Bangladesh-US cooperation.

While talking about the inevitability of the repatriation, Mr Yousuf highlighted two crucial aspects: humanitarian and security. There are international laws and obligations, and being a responsible entity of the international community, Bangladesh respects those rules and regulations and has to respond to the Rohingya crisis on humanitarian grounds. The second issue is the protection of Rohingyas. The international community and the US have an obligation to protect the displaced people of Myanmar. At the same time, it is very notable that the US is also focusing on the life and livelihood of the host community, and there is a comprehensive mechanism to respond to the crisis. And lastly, from a humanitarian perspective, a sustainable solution to the problem is important. Since the Rohingya issue is a long-standing crisis on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, failing to reach a sustainable solution could create problems in the future, Mr Yousuf added.

Regarding the security perspectives of the Rohingya repatriation, Mr Yousuf argued that the high population density in the southeastern border of Bangladesh and the Rohingya camp is becoming a burden of insecurity. Internationally, in any camp, the burden of insecurity increases as the number of people living there increases. There is also a great deal of concern about non-traditional security threats, like transnational crime, arms and drug trafficking, human trafficking, etc. The Rohingya issue is creating concern in the maritime region as well. The regional security concerns are also connected with the Rohingya issue, which is not only limited to the Bay of Bengal region but also to the border between Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar, as well as China. So, there is a fear that this can be a flashpoint regarding security issues. Besides, in the Bay of Bengal region, all the stakeholders are very active, so the Rohingya issue may not create more concern for the region's security. The spillover effects of the Rohingya crisis may impact the security and stability of the border area of Bangladesh as well as the Bay of Bengal region.



At this point of his presentation, Mr Yousuf highlighted the present realities regarding the Rohingya repatriation issues. The first point he mentioned was the decreasing trend of aid for the Rohingyas. Bangladesh supports the standpoint that Rohingyas need to go back to their homeland and settle there. The protection of Rohingyas is also important. The funding from the US mostly comes for the protection of Rohingyas. But the concern is that the funding for the Rohingyas has significantly decreased in 2022. The unmet fund for Rohingyas in 2017 was 26.95 per cent of the required fund, which increased to 50.80 per cent in 2022, becoming a big concern for the host community. The reason Mr Yousuf mentioned behind the decreasing trend was the weakening of global attention due to other problems. So, it is challenging to ensure international attention to this issue. The domestic developments in Myanmar, followed by the military coup, are also creating inconvenience in the negotiation process. And then there is the situation in Rakhine State, where the security situation is not stable. Therefore, what will happen when Rohingyas return to their homeland in such a condition is another major concern. The final point Mr Yousuf highlighted in this regard was the stalemate in the negotiation process. Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement for the repatriation. After that, there were five meetings of joint working groups. However, there has been very little progress. Particularly, at the field level, when Myanmar talks about verifications, the terms and conditions are very complicated. In 1992, the UNHCR was a partner in the repatriation process. But this time, after the agreement in 2017, there is no progress on the issue of repatriation.

Mr Yousuf finally focused on how Bangladesh and the US can cooperate on the repatriation issue. He stated that the United States is the largest contributor to the Rohingya crisis. In 2022, the US contributed 51 per cent of the total funds received for the Rohingya crisis, as per UN OCHA data. The US is contributing not only regarding funding but also by taking the Rohingya issue into international forums. The US is also focusing on the justice aspect of the Rohingya issue, which is related to crimes against humanity. On 21 March 2022, the US declared the crime against Rohingya as genocide, which has increased international awareness of the issue and reflected the US commitment to respond to the Rohingya crisis. Mr Yousuf argued that ensuring aid for the Rohingyas would be an immediate challenge, particularly, in 2023, and the necessity for funding would increase in the coming days as well. In this respect, the US can play a crucial role to ensure international focus and create more pressure on Myanmar. Besides, in 2019, the US imposed sanctions on certain individuals in Myanmar. If the US can continue such initiatives and put pressure on Myanmar, then the regional players might be more aware of the issue, he added. Mr Yousuf noted that the role of ASEAN is crucial in regard to the Rohingya crisis, and the US has some strong allies in ASEAN. Therefore, the US can engage its allies in the ASEAN region to influence Myanmar. The US's role in the multilateral forum regarding the Rohingya issue is vital since the country is a strong partner in the region, as well as in global forums. Mr Yousuf believes that the US response will enhance the country's image in the region as well as in the international arena.

Mr Yousuf concluded his presentation by stating that there is a strong convergence of interest between Bangladesh and the US regarding the Rohingya issue. Both are committed to the humanitarian response to this crisis, as well as to the peace and stability of the region. He identified three areas, i.e., protecting the Rohingyas, safeguarding the host community and their interests, and ensuring safe and dignified repatriation of the Rohingyas, to strengthen cooperation between Bangladesh and the US regarding the Rohingya issue; which he believes will have a spillover effect on the greater bilateral relations between these two countries.

## **Remarks by the Chief Guest**



### **Senior Director Eileen Laubacher**

Senior Director for South Asia, US National Security Council

At the outset, **Senior Director Eileen Laubacher** thanked the respected Director General of BIISS for his invitation to participate in the roundtable. She appreciated the presentations made by the BIISS faculty and their well-stated ideas. She expressed that she would take these back home and think about it. She stated that the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) rightly recognises that the Indo-Pacific nations are helping to define the very nature of international order. The IPS lays out a vision about how the US's partners and allies can create and maintain an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, inter-connected, prosperous, secure and resilient. She referred to the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who clearly stated Bangladesh's desire to be a friend towards all and harbour malice towards none. Senior Director Laubacher stated that US's and Bangladesh's visions and their respective foreign policies are not only compatible but genuinely reinforcing. To achieve the goals for an international order that is rules-based, that upholds and protects the sovereignty of each member, one with regional and global mechanisms, it is needed to promote cooperation and to mediate conflicts peacefully. The current international order

established and strengthened over the last eight decades has many of these, imperfect as it may be. However, this international order is being challenged by a myriad of traditional and non-traditional threats. Those threats include climate change, cyber-attacks, global pandemics, non-state actors such as terrorists and criminals, and recidivist powers that flaunt and seek to overturn those rules. The US and Bangladesh are already partnering on a number of these issues. She highlighted that Bangladesh is very much aware of the threat of climate change, as two-thirds of the countries are already less than five metres above sea level. She emphasised that Bangladesh has the opportunity to be a powerful voice of the vulnerable and advocate as the current chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). She shared that the US is delighted to see Bangladesh joining the pledge and efforts in COP 27 to reach an agreement to establish a loss and damage fund. Together the two countries can partner through international institutions to urge the transition away from fossil fuels. She reflected that the US is helping Bangladesh transition its energy sector away from fossil fuels, particularly coal, through the development and deployment of utility and skill of renewables, energy storage and increased cross-border power sharing.

At this stage of her deliberation, Senior Director Laubacher focused on security cooperation. For a long time, the US has had a strong security cooperation relationship to tackle security challenges in Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal and globally. The two countries partner in counterterrorism. The US has helped Bangladesh by providing over 60 million dollars in counterterrorism assistance since 2016. This assistance includes equipment and training to strengthen the government's capacity to deter, detect and respond to these threats within the rule of law framework. The two countries have also partnered in maritime security through exercises like Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) and the provision of two high endurance coast guard cutters to the Bangladesh Navy through the 'Excess Defense Articles program'. She stated that the US greatly appreciates Bangladesh's leading role in UN peacekeeping operations and helped develop its capacity through exercises like Tiger Lightning and the recent provision for a UAV advisor. Through Bangladesh's contribution to UN



peacekeeping operations consistently as one of the top contributors, Bangladesh has helped bring peace far beyond the Indo-Pacific.

Next, Senior Director Laubacher brought up the Rohingya issue. She mentioned that the US and Bangladesh are strong partners in responding to the Rohingya crisis. She reflected on her experience from the previous day's visit to Cox's Bazar, which was truly moving. She highlighted that Bangladesh is hosting almost a million Rohingyas. The US providing 1.9 billion dollars in assistance has saved countless lives in the face of the Burmese military's genocide. While the US, Bangladesh and other partners continue to press the Burmese army to create conditions that allow for the voluntary, peaceful, safe, dignified and sustainable return of the Rohingyas, they need to keep working together to provide the Rohingyas with hope through improved access to education and livelihood.



Towards the end, Senior Director Laubacher emphasised that the US seeks to partner with Bangladesh in countering those countries seeking to remake an international order that would disadvantage the smaller countries in favour of larger ones. The US does not do this by telling Bangladesh whom it can and cannot partner with, but by being open and honest when it sees the activities that Bangladesh's other partners may take that lead to coercion. The US will speak out when it sees these malign activities so that Bangladesh can make decisions with complete information. In this way, it is the US's goal, and also Bangladesh's goal, for the US and Bangladesh to partner for the future of the Indo-Pacific that is free and open, inclusive, prosperous, secure and resilient.

# **Open Discussion**



Ms Ayesha Binte Towhid, Research Officer, BIISS, noted that the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2022, puts emphasis on building coalitions with allies and partners to defend the vision of a rules-based order. She asked Senior Director to kindly share some insights regarding what would be the nature of such coalitions and if there would be any obligations from the participating countries.



In reply to this question, Senior **Director Laubacher** said that over time, the US experienced that countries always feel stronger when they work together. The US found ways to work with multiple partners, and there is a tremendous benefit and strength in unity. Powerful countries working alone are one thing, but it is highly desirable that countries come together to cooperate on different issues. So the US tries to bring together the things that everyone has in common and can be a part of. It has a shared vision for the world, which is free and open, rules-based order. Then she mentioned traditional and non-traditional security issues on which cooperation can be forged., i.e., maritime security piracy, counterterrorism, and counternarcotics etc. She mentioned a few other global and regional challenges like climate change, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response, and added that these are the areas where partnerships and relationships will play a significant role.



**Mr ASM Tarek Hasan Semul**, Research Fellow, BIISS, asked that due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, there have been disruptions in the global food and energy supply chains. On the other hand, there have been sanctions from Western countries on Russia. This has put many countries in the Indo-Pacific region in a tight spot. He also asked if the US has any plan to address such instabilities through IPEF under its pillar II which deals with global supply chain resilience.



In her answer, **Senior Director Laubacher** mentioned that Russia's action in Ukraine is something that all countries are concerned about. This has disrupted the global supply chain and the world's energy security. She reiterated that it is important for countries to work together to find ways to deter such actions in the future.



**Mr Brian Luti**, Director for South Asia Regional Center, National Security Council, US Government, supplemented with **Senior Director Laubacher** and said that the sanctions placed on Russia do not affect food production and trade that comes out of Russia or Ukraine. He mentioned that an agreement had been reached and continues to allow some grain shipments to transit the Black Sea. To help alleviate that, the US continues to look at ways to help with ensuring global food security. US President Biden raised the issue at several different fora. So in the short term, it is an area where the US will look forward to cooperating with other countries. He said that the world has learnt from the pandemic that there is a need for resilient supply chains that work where multiple countries can work together to build a web and a network instead of becoming reliant.



**Mr Arturo Hines**, Acting Political/Economic Counselor, US Embassy, Dhaka, said that in July 2022, the US hosted a supply chain ministerial forum, and the purpose was to get allies and like-minded countries to look at a whole host of supply chain partners. He said that the US is looking forward to working with Bangladesh on the issues to address this shared challenge.



**Ms Moutusi Islam**, Research Fellow, BIISS, said there is an immense opportunity for the US to cooperate with Bangladesh over different issues related to maritime security. The countries have joint military exercise such as Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT), which has improved collaboration between the two navies. She thinks that the US can assist Bangladesh by providing technological know-how in its efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness. She wanted to know if there is any plan for the US to further cooperate in this area.



In reply, Senior Director Eileen Laubacher said that the US is positive in this regard and desires to cooperate more with Bangladesh on maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and in the Indian Ocean region. She mentioned where Mr Molla pointed out the issues of the choke points in the region and the amount of trade that goes through the area. She noted many of the challenges that both countries face is genuine. Particularly in the traditional aspects of maritime security, but also with counternarcotics, counterterrorism, human trafficking, and so forth are the areas for both countries to cooperate. She hopes that more like-minded countries in the region will find new and creative ways to work together in this arena.



**Mr Justin Halpern**, Indo-Pacific Affairs Officer, US Embassy, Dhaka, added that over the last years, several announcements came out from different QUAD meetings, one of which is on the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative. The initiative aims to bring in new technologies for partners across the region. Though this is an initial announcement, the conversations will continue with regional partners under the QUAD framework.



Mr Sajid Karim, Research Fellow, BIISS, asked a question related to the climate loss and damage fund. He mentioned that it was one of the major outcomes of COP 27, but expressed his concern that the establishment of the fund comes with lots of uncertainties, especially about its modalities and possible contributors. Throughout the history of climate finance, developed countries have repeatedly failed to provide the adequate funding that they have pledged. In this regard, he emphasised developed countries' pledge of US\$100 billion to the climate fund, which was made in 2009 and was expected to be mobilised by 2020. He wanted to know what sort of assistance climate-vulnerable countries can expect from the US in regard to the mobilisation and operationalisation of the loss and damage fund.



**Mr Brian Luti** said that climate change is one of the very important issues for President Biden. For example, he referred to this issue at a meeting in Geneva, and referred to the historic flooding that occurred in Pakistan back in August and September 2022. He added that about US\$ 15.6 billion dollars have been under assessment for damage recovery. In this regard, the US will make an announcement of a considerable contribution for the recovery. Therefore, he believes that similar engagement will go on for securing funding and finding ways for cooperation with partners globally, especially those who are most susceptible to climate change. As the Senior Director mentioned, like Bangladesh, Maldives and India face considerable climate change challenges. He also referred to the Africa Leaders' Summit earlier in 2022 where the US made commitments to address the climate effects.



Mr Arturo Hines, mentioned that John Kerry, the former US Secretary of State, is now the Special Envoy for climate and has been very active in that role. He noted that one of his early overseas trips was to Bangladesh. Bangladesh's Honourable Foreign Minister Momen had a lot of discussions on the issue. The US values Bangladesh's input in the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). He thinks that such initiatives will be more visible and actions will be seen in this regard.



Lastly, **Senior Director Laubacher** highlighted President Biden's commitment to climate change. She thinks there is going to be a tremendous amount of effort will be needed to help countries that are most affected by climate change. She mentioned that having a partner like Bangladesh, which is creative and deeply concerned with the climate change issue, will be a great contribution to future cooperation.

## Remarks by the Deputy Chief of Mission



### **Ms Helen LaFave**

Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy in Dhaka

At the outset of her speech, **Ms Helen LaFave**, Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy in Dhaka, acknowledged the discourse that had been used by the BIISS researchers during their presentations, which she believes speaks to the shared values between Bangladesh and the US. These include “cooperation,” “trust,” “respect,” “equality,” “open,” and “honest.” She believes this reflects the types of relationships that the US and Bangladesh have. She appreciated BIISS’s analysis and commentary that have been presented and believes the conversation will remain open between Bangladesh and the US. She noted that conversation is very important for the growth and development of the relationship between these two. She discussed the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and how it relates to Bangladesh, as well as how the US seeks to work with Bangladesh and other partners to build an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, interconnected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. This vision is not unique to the US, and the same vision has been shared by many other countries. They call it something different, like strategy, vision, or outlook. But, there is an incredible overlap among those strategies, which will be part

of the countries' collective strength. The US sees a significant crossover with the vision presented in the IORA outlook and the Indo-Pacific at the Council of Ministers Meeting that Bangladesh hosted in November 2022.

Ms LaFave opined that Bangladesh already contributes in significant ways to the five pillars of the strategy. Bangladesh and the United States work together to achieve these goals in a variety of ways. She discussed each pillar of the strategy with reference to how both countries are working on those issues. Firstly, the US will advance a free and open Indo-Pacific where ideas and people will flow freely across land and cyberspace, and open-sea governance will be transparent and responsive to the people. Bangladesh has made an important contribution to this cause by committing to the peaceful resolution of its land and maritime disputes. Bangladesh has made the Bay of Bengal an example for the world to follow.

Secondly, the US will continue to forge stronger connections within and beyond the region. She opined that countries must work together to tackle the shared challenges. Bangladesh has long been a leader in regional integration. She referred to Bangladesh's role at the beginning of SAARC, hosting of the BIMSTEC secretariat, and most recently as a chair of IORA in this regard.

Thirdly, the US will promote broad-based prosperity so that no one is left behind in the 21st century. The country is the largest historical and current foreign direct investment (FDI) provider to Bangladesh. It works together with the government of Bangladesh to support Bangladesh's developmental goals. The USAID mission in Dhaka has the largest development budget of any USAID mission in Asia, and its significant amount is focused under the economic growth office, where it designs and implements programmes in conjunction to support renewable energy, development, trade facilitation, and more.

Fourthly, the US will bolster Indo-Pacific security. The US is a proud partner of Bangladesh in tackling violent extremism, illegal fishing, and human trafficking. The US believes that a major security challenge to the region's stability is the instability in Burma and the Burmese military's actions toward its own citizens. It imposed new sanctions last year and called on other countries to halt the provision of different sorts of assistance to Burma to put pressure on it. The US will continue working with its allies and partners to hold Burma accountable and impose new sanctions and international pressure on Burma.



The fifth element of the US Indo-Pacific strategy is to build regional resilience to transnational threats, including climate and biological threats. Bangladesh has shown leadership in the climate space, particularly as the voice of the most vulnerable countries. The US greatly appreciates Bangladesh's example of signing the global methane pledge. Both countries have cooperated closely over the past three years over the Covid-19 pandemic, and the US has provided over 140 million vaccines as a gift from the American people to the Bangladeshi people. As an example of the shared efforts of the US and Bangladesh, both countries co-chaired the Covid-19 Pandemic Prioritised Global Action Plan for Enhanced Engagement (GAP) meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September.

To sum up, Ms LaFave mentioned that there is already a great deal of work being undertaken together by Bangladesh and the US to promote a free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific. The US will continue working with Bangladesh in these important areas. The country values the informed views of scholars and researchers, which Ms LaFave believes will provide new perspectives.

## **Concluding Remarks**



### **Ms Helen LaFave**

Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy in Dhaka

Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin said that Bangladesh is eager to work with the US to achieve mutual prosperity and believes that there are many untapped opportunities for cooperation and partnership. Consequently, he argued that in future, a deeper level of US-Bangladesh cooperation based on pragmatism and sovereign equality can be achieved. He mentioned that the US is a time-tested partner in Bangladesh's pursuit of progress, peace, and prosperity.

The Director General mentioned the discussion that took place at the round table as fascinating since several enlightening deliberations were made on how the geopolitical and strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region is gradually evolving. The presenters also addressed the issue of how both countries can enhance security cooperation between them, what recently launched IPEF is offering for nations of the Indo-Pacific, and how Bangladesh and the US can cooperate for the dignified repatriation of the FDMNs.

General Uddin thanked Senior Director Laubacher for enlightening the audience with very illuminating and thought-provoking deliberation. He said that the open discussion session was also vibrant and rewarding and expressed his hope that the exchange of ideas in the roundtable will contribute to a greater level of understanding of important aspects of Bangladesh-US bilateral relations. At the end of his speech, the Director General expressed his gratitude and sincere thanks to Senior Director Eileen Laubacher for visiting BIISS. He also extended his thanks to the other members of the US delegation and BIISS officials.

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