

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

The Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS) that communicates about the varied issues through its Bi-Monthly "News Reel" with its vast reaching audiences. Similarly in the June-July edition the Bi-Monthly would talk about the recent happenings between India and its neighbourhood. It defines the objectives and the implications of the Bangladesh's newly constructed Indo-Pacific Outlook, which echoes to meet the goals of maritime security, combating piracy, terrorism, and transnational organized crime and thereby develop the "blue economy" through the sustainable management of oceans and seas.

The bi-monthly also covers the story of the Sittwe Port as part of India's Kaladan Multimodal Project. The port received an initial cargo shipment of vessel MV-ITT LION (V-273) that was flagged off from the Syama Prasad Mookherjee Port in Kolkata on May 04 carrying 20,000 bags containing 1,000 metric tonnes of cement. The editions also looks at the intricacies of the expanding and deepening of Indo-Japan relations in recent years. Whereas the segment on the "News of Neighbours" gets a grip of the cultural and developmental exchanges taking place precisely between India-Bangladesh-Myanmar. On the concluding segment as usual it gives a glance to the multiple events and activities initiated by the Institute over the last two months.

-Arindam Mukherjee, Director, ISCS, India

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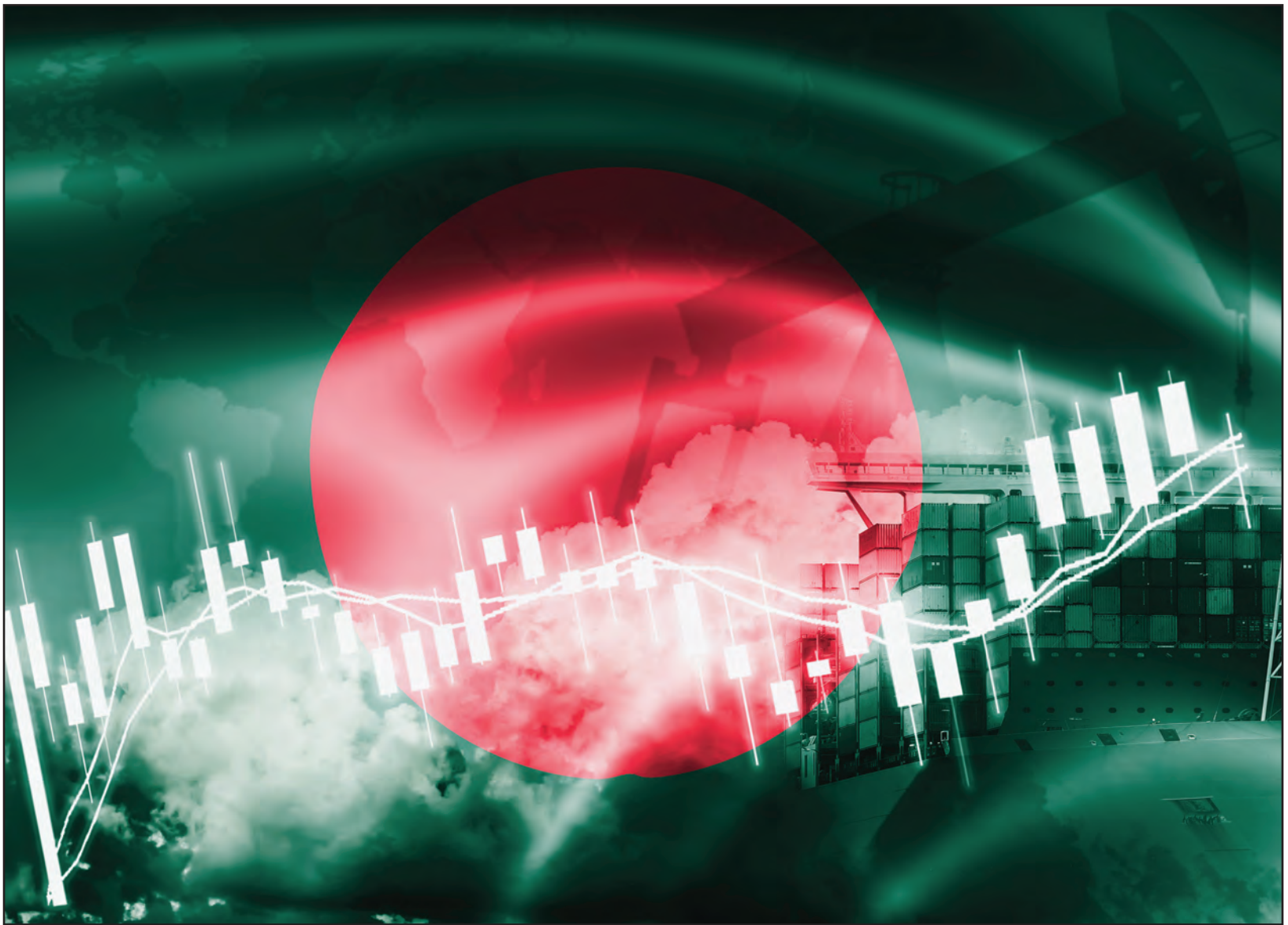
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BANGLADESH REVEALS ITS INDO-PACIFIC CARD

— Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty★

Historically, the term Indo-Pacific was first used in academic circles in oceanography and geopolitics around a century ago and after the first World War, in Japan. In Germany, oceanographers visualised the Indo-Pacific, as comprising an anti-colonial India and a republican China against an Euro-American alliance. In the post-World War II, era the US, the rising new global power, decided to treat the Indian and Pacific Oceans for its global geopolitical strategy.

Broadly, the Indo-Pacific includes all countries in the Indian and Pacific Oceans littoral, the maritime zone comprising the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Indo-Pacific has acquired a growing geopolitical profile, because of strategic contestation in this arena. India had outlined its

Indo-Pacific strategy in 2018, in the speech delivered by PM Modi at the ShangriLa Dialogue in Singapore. Many other countries are developing new strategies or policies towards the Indo-Pacific.

President Trump's Administration had introduced the term Indo-Pacific instead of the older nomenclature "Asia-Pacific". He also renamed the American Pacific Military, based in Hawaii, as the Indo-Pacific Command. The older Asia-Pacific geopolitical construct was felt to be less inclusive and inadequate as a geopolitical construct. It was also a recognition of the fact that around 60% of global trade, currently uses the Sea Lines of Communication [SLOC] that go via the Indian Ocean.

The primary reason for redefining the Asia-Pacific geopolitical space as the Indo-Pacific is, undoubtedly, the phenomenal rise in China's economic and military power and its avowed policy of using economic and military coercion for territorial expansionism and hegemony. China's new predatory policies has led to strategic shifts in the Indo-Pacific. The Biden Administration's national security strategy in 2022 designated China as the principal challenger to the international system and a predatory power in the Indo-Pacific. China's reaction to the Indo-Pacific was initially negative but has now become muted as China views opportunities for itself in the Indo-Pacific.

In this evolving situation in the Indo-Pacific, Bangladesh has released its Indo-Pacific Outlook late last month. India has welcomed the release of Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook. Bangladesh waited long enough, perhaps wary of China's reaction. Bangladesh's deepening ties with China has made it the 2nd largest trading and number one defence partner. Bangladesh joined China's BRI initiative and has entered into more than 60 agreements, mainly in the infrastructure sector, with the promise of funding by China to the extent of USD 25 billion.

The USA, UK and Japan have been urging Bangladesh for some time to buy into the Indo-Pacific initiative. Geographically, Bangladesh is an integral part of the Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh's strategic location is an important gateway to both South and Southeast Asia. Japan has invested in the Matarbari deep sea port which will have an industrial zone. The incentive to integrate economically Bangladesh with India's north-eastern states is growing, to access a bigger market. Japan's PM Fumio Kishida has said that the industrial value chain from Matarbari in the Bay of Bengal and the hinterland of landlocked northeast states of India which neighbours China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, will be immensely beneficial from "the growth of the entire region."

Bangladesh's vital export markets, mainly for RMGs, are in the US, EU, India, Japan and RoK. China is an export market of around USD 1.8 billion, much less than the USD 7 billion export market in the USA. These countries are also major investors and development aid partners. Bangladesh has developed extensive economic and military ties with China, US, UK, Russia, and India. China is the largest defence partner of Bangladesh.

Two years ago, Gowher Rizvi, foreign policy advisor to PM Hasina, had said "we are very willing to be a part of the Indo-Pacific relationship" and India "is our most important partner." The timing of the release of Indo-Pacific Outlook,

on the eve of PM Sheikh Hasina's visits to Japan, the USA and UK was designed to avoid any further speculation on this issue and not cast a shadow on PM Hasina's visits. The core of the Outlook reflects Sheikh Mujibur Rehman's foreign policy vision for Bangladesh. He believed firmly in non-alignment and neutrality. He was determined to stay away from great power rivalry, emphasizing the principles of peaceful coexistence and of "friendship towards all, malice towards none." The document is called an "Outlook", the same word used for the ASEAN document. Bangladesh policy document is much shorter and precise. Calling it an "Outlook" rather than a "policy" or "strategy" gives it a softer tinge and avoids any linkage to security objectives.

Objectives in Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook are boilerplate ones, unexceptionable and non-controversial. There are several similarities with the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook with a similar emphasis on expanding and engaging in constructive regional and international cooperation process which is expected to contribute to regional as well as Bangladesh's sustainable development and prosperity. Bangladesh is a key player in the sub-region, having accomplished peaceful settlement of maritime disputes with India and Myanmar. Bangladesh benefits from a free and open Indo-Pacific. Currently, Bangladesh holds the Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and has announced its blue economy plan.

Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook is an attempt to navigate various compulsions on Bangladesh and reflects its domestic and external policies that it has followed after independence. Bangladesh's policy is to cooperate with all countries. The foremost priority of Bangladesh is socio-economic development. It has joined the Chinese-sponsored BRI, is building a nuclear power plant with Russian economic and technological assistance. It is implementing a number of projects with Indian lines of credit and Japanese funding. It has acceded to the US-sponsored Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and receives substantial American developmental aid. At the same time, Bangladesh has so far refrained from joining any great power-led military alliances. Hence, there is no mention of QUAD in Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook.

China seems concerned. On January 10 this year, in an unprecedented move, the newly appointed Chinese Foreign Minister stopped over in Dhaka on his first-ever foreign trip, which broke a record lasting 32 years. Clearly, China was pressing Bangladesh not to join the QUAD. A few weeks ago, the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh squarely blamed Washington for pushing Dhaka into the US-backed Quad

against China. American officials view China's loans as "bad deals" for the country. There has been a spate of statements from the USA, UK and the EU about free and fair elections in 2024, as if to give notice that if unfair means are adopted, these countries will review their ties with Bangladesh. The USA has imposed sanctions on RAB officials and has recently revised its policy to deny visa to anyone obstruction the conduct of free and fair elections in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook is essentially a hedging policy, attempting to balance its interest with major powers. It attempts to allay concerns about any Bangladeshi tilt or perception of a tilt towards China. Huge funding from China for infrastructure has led to growing worry about

debt-traps and Bangladesh being sucked gradually into China's orbit. Bangladesh has become a theatre for great power competition. It is strategically located, bordering India, serving as a gateway to both South and Southeast Asia. China is making strenuous efforts to obtain military facilities at ports in Bangladesh. China tried to seduce Bangladesh into a Hambantota model of deep sea port construction at Chittagong but Bangladesh backed out, despite China supplying Bangladesh with two second hand refurbished submarines Ming-class Type 035B diesel electric submarines of 1970s vintage and building a submarine maintenance facility at Chittagong. Bangladesh is heading for elections and has to tread carefully.



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ENHANCING INDIA-MYANMAR TRADE AND CONNECTIVITY

— Mohit Musaddi★

On May 09, the Indian Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways SarbanandaSonowal along with the Deputy Prime Minister of Myanmar Admiral Tin Aung San jointly inaugurated the Sittwe Port as part of India’s Kaladan Multimodal Project. The port received an initial cargo shipment of vessel MV-ITT LION (V-273) that was flagged off from the Syama Prasad Mookherjee Port in Kolkata on May 04 carrying 20,000 bags containing 1,000 metric tonnes of cement.

Sittwe Port, located in the capital city of the Rakhine State in Myanmar, has emerged as a critical maritime infrastructure project with far-reaching implications for the country’s economic development. This deep-water port, strategically positioned at the mouth of the Kaladan River, plays a pivotal

role in facilitating trade and transportation in the western region of Myanmar. The Sittwe Port further connects to Paletwa in Myanmar through an inland waterway and from Paletwa to Zorinpui in Mizoram through a road component. The Port is designed to primarily handle various types of cargo, including general goods, agricultural products, and construction materials. It has facilities for both import and export activities, enabling the transportation of goods to and from different parts of Myanmar and neighbouring countries. The port’s development will have a positive impact on the region, creating employment opportunities and contributing to economic growth. It will also strengthen the bilateral ties between India and Myanmar by promoting trade and connectivity.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which is a joint initiative between India and Myanmar was signed in April 2008 with an aim to establish a robust multimodal transport corridor connecting the two countries. The project's objective is to provide an alternate trade route for India's north-eastern states, bypassing the existing circuitous route through the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck".By connecting Kolkata to Sittwe, goods from India's north-eastern states can be transported via waterways and road networks through Myanmar, significantly reducing travel distances and time. Minister Soborwal stated that "after operationalisation of the Sittwe Port, there will be a 50 per cent reduction in cost and time of transportation of goods between Kolkata and Agartala and Aizawl". Overall, the Kaladan Multimodal Project consists of various components, including the development of Sittwe Port, the dredging and improvement of the Kaladan River for navigation, the construction of a highway network connecting Sittwe to the Myanmar-India border, and associated infrastructure such as bridges and customs stations. These integrated efforts aim to establish a seamless multimodal transport corridor, combining riverine, maritime, and road transportation modes.

While the Kaladan project has faced consistent delays due to logistical, administrative, and security issues, the operationalisation of the Sittwe Port notwithstanding the ongoing military coup in Myanmar and the associated humanitarian crisis, is a testament to India's persistent developmental focus in the region. Even though the construction of the Port by the Inland Waterways Authority of India was completed in 2018, its operationalisation was impeded due to the conflicts in Chin and Rakhine State, causing delays in obtaining necessary approvals and licenses.

The development of the Sittwe Port must also be looked at in the context of China's growing influence in Myanmar. While Beijing was cautious at the beginning of the coup as it had invested heavily with the democratically elected Suu Kyi government, it resumed business as usual in Myanmar only a few months after the coup.According to the junta's Investment and Companies Directorate, between the coup and February 2023, China invested more than USD 113 million in Myanmar.China is also by far Myanmar's largest trading partner, with its total trade more than double of second-largest Thailand. To appease the junta government, China has blocked several attempts by the United Nations



The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

(UN) to address the crisis and has also reportedly provided fighter jets and armoured vehicles to the junta for use against the resistance groups and civilians. Just a year prior to the coup, President Xi Jinping had undertaken a historical visit to Myanmar in 2020 and signed 33 MOUs, including several on connectivity. During the trip, President Xi chose to focus on three pillars of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), namely the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone, the China-Myanmar Border Economic Zone and the Yangon City Urban Development Project. Earlier this month, on May 02, the Chinese Foreign Minister (FM) Qin Gang travelled to Naypyidaw and met Myanmar coup leader General Min Aung Hlaing. FM Gang stated that “China will continue to provide assistance within its capability for Myanmar’s development, accelerate key cooperation projects of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and carry out projects on agriculture, education and health care, among others”. In response, Gen. Hlaing welcomed a “greater role played by China” and reassured that the military will prioritise the “safety of Chinese citizens and institutions in Myanmar”.

Nevertheless, there is significant unease over China’s economic activities in Myanmar. Chinese investments have generated concerns among the Burmese populace, as quite often, these investments tend to have lopsided benefits for military families. The only other major beneficiary remains Beijing itself, with little positive effects on the local populations. According to a Radio Free Asia (RFA) report, “Burmese people see Beijing’s engagement as solely

focused on its own bottom line”. Local residents often lose their businesses due to the impact of Chinese projects, which also lack transparency. The RFA report states that China has worked with the junta through local authorities in the Yunnan Province, which scrupulously avoiding any display of contact between top leaders. Earlier in the coup, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had expressed public support for the Myanmar military, declaring that it will back the regime “no matter how the situation changes”. As a result, Beijing’s Myanmar policy has further worsened the public’s view of China. An ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey of 2022 found that 88.8 per cent of the Myanmar respondents had “little” or “no confidence” in China doing “the right thing to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance”. This figure was 59.6 per cent in 2021, before the military coup.

Therefore, against this backdrop, the operationalisation of the Sittwe Port by India and Myanmar is a step in the right direction. At the same time, it is important to note that countering China’s influence through infrastructure development is a complex and multi-faceted process. It requires a comprehensive approach that includes economic, political, and diplomatic strategies. While the development of Sittwe Port can contribute to this effort, it is just one component of a broader strategy aimed at balancing regional influence and ensuring the sovereignty and economic prosperity of Myanmar and its neighbouring countries.



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Dreamstime

TAIWAN IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND INDIA-TAIWAN TIES

— Prashant Kumar Singh★

Taiwan is an important player in the Indo-Pacific. It is a democratically governed, economically prosperous, culturally rich, and educationally and scientifically advanced island in the western Pacific. It is a key link in global supply chains. It is among the top twenty trading economies in the world. Its companies have leading positions in electronics, information technology, and communications, particularly in semiconductor technology, where its TSMC is a global giant. Taiwan had around USD 10 billion in outward investment in 2022, which does not include the figure for investment in China.

Taiwan's Complicated Status

Yet treating Taiwan as a normal country in the Indo-Pacific is difficult. China considers it a breakaway Chinese province that has remained separated from the mainland due to the

legacy of the Chinese Civil War. The Communist Party of China considers the reunification of Taiwan its national commitment. However, every major political formation in Taiwan opposes the Chinese claim. While the current ruling party, the Democratic People's Party, opposes 'reunification' unless the Taiwanese people themselves want it, the leading opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), which fought the Chinese Civil War and has its own pan-China conviction, supports reunification but under its own vision, not the CPC's vision. Taiwan has survived as a de facto independent country despite constant Chinese threats because, first, of the formal security guarantee under the Sino-American Mutual Defence Treaty from 1954 to 1979, and then because of the informal security guarantee under the US's Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) since 1979. Incidentally, only 13 very small countries recognise Taiwan as a sovereign country.

No major country recognises it as a sovereign country. It is not a member of any international organisation in which sovereignty is the membership criteria. The international community, by statement or implication, supports the PRC's One-China policy, which seeks the countries not to have any diplomatic or political relations with Taiwan if they want to have these relations with China.

Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific Strategic Flux

In recent years, the Taiwan issue has yet again attracted global attention. After eight years of cross-Strait stability from 2008-2016, during which period the KMT government's reconciliatory approach and policies ensured cross-Strait rapprochement by papering over the cracks, the issue of the nature of cross-Strait relations again came to the fore after the DPP's victory in 2016. In keeping its long-standing positions on the nature of cross-Strait ties, the DPP refused to uphold the One China principle, which was the prerequisite for China to continue cross-Strait dialogue with the DPP (the KMT believes in the principle, albeit under its own version, One China, with Respective Interpretations).

Further, the sharp deterioration in US-China relations in the last few years, basically from the Trump presidency onwards, has contributed to the cross-Strait complications. Taiwan has emerged as a major issue in the ongoing Sino-US strategic standoff. During this period, the US's political, diplomatic, economic, and military support for Taiwan has increased. On the other hand, China has been demonstrating its resolve by asserting its claim over Taiwan through tough military and diplomatic posturing. The security and strategic situation in the Taiwan Strait has become very fragile. The international community is concerned about any unwarranted military conflict erupting in the Taiwan Strait.

Support for Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific

Any military conflict in the Taiwan Strait will have a drastic impact on the political and economic security of the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, Taiwan has been mentioned in the Indo-Pacific strategies and policy guidelines of many countries, such as the US, Canada, and the Republic of Korea.

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy document of 2022 declared that the US will "work with partners inside and outside of the region to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, including by supporting Taiwan's self-defense capabilities..."

Canada, in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, released in 2022, declared that it will "continue to work with partners to push back against any unilateral actions that threaten the status quo in the Taiwan Strait... While remaining consistent with [its]

One China Policy, Canada will continue [its] multifaceted engagement with Taiwan, which includes collaborating on trade, technology, health, democratic governance and countering disinformation."

The Republic of Korea (ROK) reaffirms "the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait for the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula and for the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific."

Japan, in its National Defense Strategy, 2022, stated, "China thus has intensified its coercive military activities around Taiwan, and concerns about the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait are rapidly growing not only in the Indo-Pacific region including Japan but also in the entire international community."

The countries in their Indo-Pacific strategies or outside them have recognised the threat to Taiwan from China. Some of them, such as the US and Canada, have explicitly stated that they would oppose the unilateral change in the status quo. Some others, such as the ROK and Japan, recognise the gravity of the security situation in the Taiwan Strait and warn the world about it. And, they express commitment to deepening economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. The US, of course, has a historical commitment to Taiwan's defence, which it reaffirms, reiterates, and implements through arms sales among other security measures.

Taiwan's Promotion of its Interests in the Indo-Pacific

Taiwan needs a stable, peaceful, and secure Indo-Pacific for its growth and prosperity. Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen maintains that "as an integral democratic partner in the Indo-Pacific, and as a key to maintaining regional and global security, Taiwan will continue to stand with our like-minded partners in protecting our shared values, so that future generations can enjoy the hard-earned democratic freedoms passed down to us."

Taiwan promotes its interests in the Indo-Pacific mainly in three ways: it seeks to strengthen its ties with the US; it seeks to deepen its cooperation with the major members of the international community in a pragmatic manner and sensitise them about Taiwan's position on the cross-Strait issue; and it promotes its economic, cultural, educational, and scientific research and development ties with Southeast Asian and South Asian countries through its New Southbound Policy (NSP).

A View of India-Taiwan Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

India maintains 'unofficial' ties with Taiwan. They had an appreciable amount of USD 10.90 billion in bilateral trade

in the year 2022-23. As of April 2022, Taiwan had USD 1.5 billion worth of investments in India. Taiwanese companies were reported to be employing around 65,000 people in India. 2783 Indian students were reported to be studying in Taiwan in 2019-20 and 2239 students in 2020-21. They were among the top 10 “groups of international students.” Overall, bilateral relations have made considerable progress since they were first established in 1995. Incidentally, India is a key target country in Taiwan’s NSP. Any disruption in the security and stability of the Taiwan Strait will understandably impact India as well. Therefore, the MEA remarked, “Like many other countries, India too is concerned at recent developments... We urge the exercise of restraint, avoidance of unilateral actions to change status quo, de-escalation of tensions and efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region.” This statement was given after the Speaker of the

House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, visited Taiwan in August 2022, which created a big scene between China on one side and the US and Taiwan on the other.

Finally, Taiwan is a major geo-strategic and geo-economic player in the Indo-Pacific. India has stakes in the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait, like every other major country. However, India has to take its complicated relations with its giant neighbour, China, into account. Managing relations with China is always a priority for India. The best course for India-Taiwan relations is to increase consultative space at multiple levels, deepen their bilateral relations within the frameworks of Taiwan’s NSP and India’s Act East Policy, and contribute to creating alternative and resilient supply chains. This would be their contribution to stabilising the Indo-Pacific region.



Dreamstime

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INDO-JAPAN RELATIONS AND THE CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

— Shovontika Chakraborty ★

Tuesday, 23rd May, 2023 : The Maulana Abul Kalam Institute of Asian Studies(MAKAIS), in association with the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies(ISCS), India, organized an illustrious seminar on a grappling issue of relevance in contemporary international politics, namely, the dynamics of Indo- Japan relations in the context of a changing world order. The speakers included eminent personalities such as His Excellency Mr. Nakagawa Koichi (the Consulate- General of Japan in Kolkata), Dr. Rajaram Panda, Dr. Swasti Rao, Dr. Sarup Prasad Ghosh.

AN AGE - OLD RAPPORT

India and Japan have been age-old spiritual neighbours, with ties dating back to the eighth century, when Buddha emerged as the bridge between the two countries. Indian culture filtered in through Buddhism and has had a great impact on Japanese culture and thought. Earliest recorded exchanges through Buddhism are exemplified by the monk Bodhisena (704-760), who was also the first documented instance of an Indian arriving in Japan. Bodhisena, was in turn credited of performing the eye-opening of a statue of Buddha at Sakyamuni. Despite opposition from certain traditionalist clans, who were skeptical of doing away with the indigenous Shinto faith, Buddhism was adopted as the State religion.

Direct exchange, however, began only in the Meiji era, when Japan embarked on the process of modernization. From then on, bilateral relations developed around Japanese purchases of cotton. During the Second world War, the Indian nationalist Subhash Chandra Bose, a staunch advocate of armed struggle against colonial imperialism, joined forces with Japan to further Indian independence and oust the British from the country. Taking over leadership of the Indian National Army in 1943, he and the INA (Indian National Army) participated in the Imphal Campaign in 1944.

Barring Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, several other eminent Indian personalities ranging from Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda have been associated with

the 'Land of the Rising Sun.' The Japanese, in turn, have fairly reciprocated India's efforts warmly, and it is not a coincidence that the Japan-India Association was set up in 1903.

BILATERAL COOPERATION IN THE POST WAR ERA

The establishment of bilateral relations between the two Asian giants in April 1952, following the end of the Second World War, opened a new chapter on peace and cooperation in the post-War order. While ideologically differing in terms of Japan's preference for the Western bloc and India's support for non-Alignment, the two countries regularly engaged in high level functional meets, including cooperation on aspects such as political, defense and security, economic, science and technology, education, cultural and people to people exchange. Despite Japan initially restricting overseas travel, it made an exception for India considering its warm relationship with the country. Cultural interaction between the nations was centered on intellectuals and officials from both countries. Among nongovernmental organizations, the International House of Japan (IHJ) played a leading role in cultural and intellectual exchange, inviting a number of prominent Indians as lecturers to the IHJ, including Vice-President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in 1956 and Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1958. The IHJ also supported the activities of the Japan-based Indian Studies Group, which was engaged in research on modern India.

Fast forward to the decade of the 2000s, Prime Minister Abe paid an official visit to India in January 2014 during which he was the Chief Guest at the Republic Day celebrations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to Japan in 2014 for the Annual Summit meeting upgraded bilateral relations to 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership'. The India-Japan Annual Summits are being held regularly.

THE PRIMACY OF INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

Japan-India cooperation is of particular relevance especially in the light of India's 'Act East' policy. Initially starting out in its rudimentary form as the 'Look East'

policy in 1991, the Act East policy of 2014 revamped by Prime Minister Modi gained importance in a transformed economic environment. Realizing the need to cultivate new ties in an era in which the Soviet Union had collapsed and South Asia was still fairly shrouded by economic backwardness and political strifes, looking eastwards and reestablishing warmer relations with Southeast and East Asia was considered to be a necessary step. The Act East Policy thus came to be premised upon the development of elaborate institutional mechanisms, economic interests including infrastructure development and connectivity; and common strategic interests. Japan is an important player in this region. A vast array of institutional mechanisms binds their partnership in forums such as annual summits, strategic dialogue, defence dialogue, and numerous forums on energy cooperation, counter-terrorism, U.N. reforms, cyber security, and maritime cooperation. Japanese investment has made an important contribution in several important sectors including automobile, telecommunications, chemicals and pharmaceuticals.

India's Act East Policy is also closely connected with its long-term vision of developing its Northeastern region (NER) which is considered as a gateway to Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Modi has shown a strong commitment to developing the infrastructure of the region in transport, highways, communication, power and waterways. Japan's interests in the NER may be attributed to historical affiliations. Thus, there is a broad bilateral consensus to cooperate for the regional development of the Northeast. Several recent developments in India-Japan relations have focused upon the increasing convergence of interests between the two, who will both stand to benefit by collaborating in the region.

The synergy between India's Act-East Policy, Indo-Pacific vision based on the principle of SAGAR, and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) on one hand, and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision on the other provides evidence of the growing synergy between the nations. Japan has agreed to lead cooperation on the Trade, Connectivity, and Maritime Transport pillar of IPOI (Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative).

NUCLEAR PARTNERSHIP AND CHANGING RELATIONS

Japan's harrowing experience of atomic bombing makes it a steadfast advocate of nuclear partnership, disarmament and non-proliferation. Indeed, the late-1990s proved particularly transformative in Japan's relationship with India. The Pokhran-II nuclear tests by India in May 1998 added strain to their otherwise blossoming relationship and Japan condemned India by participating in the international sanctions regime against it along with the United States

and several other countries. Even though Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's visit in 2000 did act as a healing balm to this relationship, Japan has always felt uncomfortable with India's status as a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). In the early 2000s, prior to the official declaration of the Strategic Partnership in 2006, Japanese diplomats formally requested that India participate in negotiations for these treaties. Towards the end of Junichiro Koizumi's tenure as Prime Minister, and during Shinzo Abe's first term, Japan realized the futility of reproaching the nuclear issue with India. It was only after years of negotiation that the nuclear deal could make some headway, and Japan and India signed a historic deal that would allow Japan to export nuclear technology, equipment and material to India. The significance of this agreement lies in India being a non-member of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. Since Japan's nuclear expertise is still very much in demand, this agreement is particularly useful for a developing country like India which majorly uses fossil fuels.

DEFENCE BASED COOPERATION

The turn of the century witnessed an increased focus on defense-based cooperation. India-Japan defense exchanges have gained strength in recent years due to growing convergence on strategic matters and its significance is growing from the common outlook on issues of peace, security and stability of the Indo-Pacific Region. Thereafter several agreements have been signed including the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) signed in 2008, a Memorandum of Defense Cooperation and Exchanges signed in 2014, an agreement concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation and an Agreement concerning Security Measures for Protection of Classified Military information signed in 2015. The agreement concerning the Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Indian Armed Forces (RPSS) was signed on 9 September 2020.

NEW AGE TRANSFORMATION IN JAPANESE ATTITUDE

Interestingly, Japan's 2023 budget showcases a proposed hike in military spending to about 2 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2027. This reflects a dramatic shift in Japan's military policy. In the decades immediately following the end of the Second World War, Japan had capped military spending at 1 percent of GDP and had limited its military capabilities to what was needed to repel an armed attack on its territory. This transformation in attitude has

been witnessed despite the seemingly pacifist sentiments of the Japanese population, who were forever made to renounce war as a means of settling international disputes, as per Article 9 of the US imposed Japanese Constitution. Indeed, this could be attributed to the heightened tensions emerging from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the frequent nuclear missiles test undertaken by North Korea and last but not the least, the increasingly assertive and expansionist role being played China. An April 2022 poll showed that 55 percent of Japan's public were in favour of raising the defence budget to two per cent of GDP, or greater, while 33 percent were opposed. This is a significant shift from a similar poll in 2018 which showed only 19 percent of the public supported an increase in defence spending, while 58 percent wanted the budget to remain unchanged. Certain government ministers and members of the Liberal Democratic Party (also pro-China factions), who fear a public backlash amid rising costs for the public and businesses recovering from the pandemic-induced economic recession and the ensuing high inflation, are particularly skeptical of this latest development.

THE WAY FORWARD

China's growing assertiveness showcased by the increasing militarization of maritime sea lanes in the South China Sea is a strategy that is at odds with the regional practice of resolving maritime disputes peacefully. Added to these are China's global ambitions such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its desire to gain a leverage over the Asian heartland in particular. Despite China's paranoia over the reemergence of a "US led Asian NATO", QUAD definitely appears to be at the moment a loose geostrategic alignment of states. Countering Chinese hegemony is one of the narratives that makes Indo- Japan cooperation a necessity. Realistically speaking, it is uncertain on how a world wherein China is backed into a corner would appear like. The upcoming Tokyo Summit with chief attendees being President Biden of USA, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia, Prime Minister Modi of India, and Prime Minister Kishida of Japan will advance the Quad's ambitious and diverse agenda, through a major new initiative to improve maritime domain awareness across the Indo-Pacific.



Dreamstime

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NEWS OF NEIGHBOURS



Dreamstime

Bangladesh Cultural Affairs Ministry to observe the birth anniversaries of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam

The Bangladesh Ministry for Cultural Affairs has taken up programmes to observe the birth anniversaries of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam at the national level. The programmes include colourful rallies, discussions, cultural programmes and painting competitions. The ministry has allocated BDT 250,000 on the occasion of the observance of the birth anniversaries of the two poets. While the three-day long programme for Rabindranath Tagore was held from May 8 onwards, a similar programme for the birth anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam took place between May 24-26.



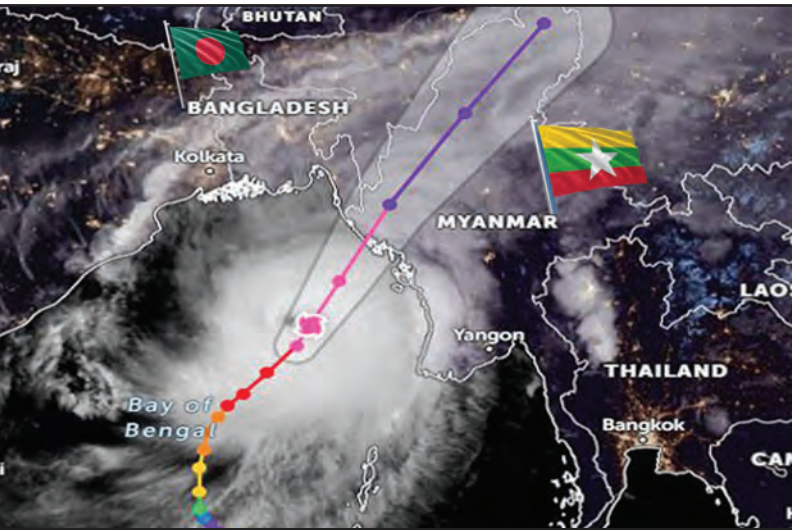


EAM Jaishankar reviews Indo-Bangladesh relations with PM Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka

India’s External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar met with Bangladesh Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka on May 11. They reviewed Indo-Bangladesh relations and discussed the South Asian regional economy amid the post-Covid pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. They discussed India’s G20 Presidency and the Summit to be held in September this year. EAM Jaishankar also thanked PM Hasina for Bangladesh hosting the 6th Indian Ocean Conference in Dhaka on May 12 and 13.

Agartala-Akhaura railway link to open in September 2023

Bangladesh Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan stated on May 17, that the Agartala-Akhaura railway project will be jointly inaugurated by the two countries’ Prime Ministers in September 2023. The minister further added that the opening of this railway line will begin a new era of business and trade between the two countries. Earlier the Tripura Transport Minister had informed that 85 per cent of work in the Indian side while 73 per cent of work in the Bangladesh side has already been completed. With the launching of the railway services, the travel time in the Agartala-Kolkata route via Dhaka will be reduced to 10 hours from 31 hours.



Cyclone Mocha serves as a reminder to strengthen Bangladesh-Myanmar cooperation

Cyclone Mocha struck between Myanmar’s Sittwe and Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh on May 14. It was one of the most powerful storms to ever hit the region, uprooting trees, bringing down pylons and cables, and creating a tidal surge that inundated streets in the low-lying region. Reports suggest that up to 150 people died in Myanmar, most of them from the Rakhine region. Natural disasters such as this reinforce the need for Dhaka and Naypyidaw to engage with each other through integrated disaster management systems, operations and projects in order to reduce the risk of future similar disasters.



Dreamstime

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EVENTS (APRIL- MAY 2023)

Annual Planning Meeting 23rd April, 2023, Astor, Kolkata

The Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS), India organized its Annual Planning Meeting on 23rd April, 2023 at Astor, Kolkata. The yearly planning meeting is held by the institute to decide its planner of activities, events and research objectives in details with the institute's members and stakeholders.

On 23rd April the Institute hosted its Planning Meeting for the financial year 2023-24. The members and the associates of the institute, through a power point presentation, reviewed the range of events and activities that the institute had organized in the previous year. The presentation pointed the versatility and the increased range of activities that the Institute has delivered over the span of last ten years.

The Director of the Institute, through a graphical presentation, described about the planned Chapter-wise activities which the institute has plotted for its ongoing year along with the blueprints of the annual national and

international events in the planning meeting.

The meeting later through interaction and discussion received some useful suggestions and advices from its stakeholders who suggested some contemporary issues which the Institute would be addressing through its publications and other activities.

The Annual Report of 2022-2023 was also released at the event and was shared with the stakeholders and the participants of the meeting. The chapter-wise planner was further drawn for the ongoing year comprising the suggestions and ideas of the members altogether.

The event concluded with a vote of Thanks by the ISCS Associate and was followed by Lunch. The event actually turned out to be an occasion to meet, celebrate institute's yearly milestone, share accolades with its relentless team members and most importantly exchange ideas and future endeavours.



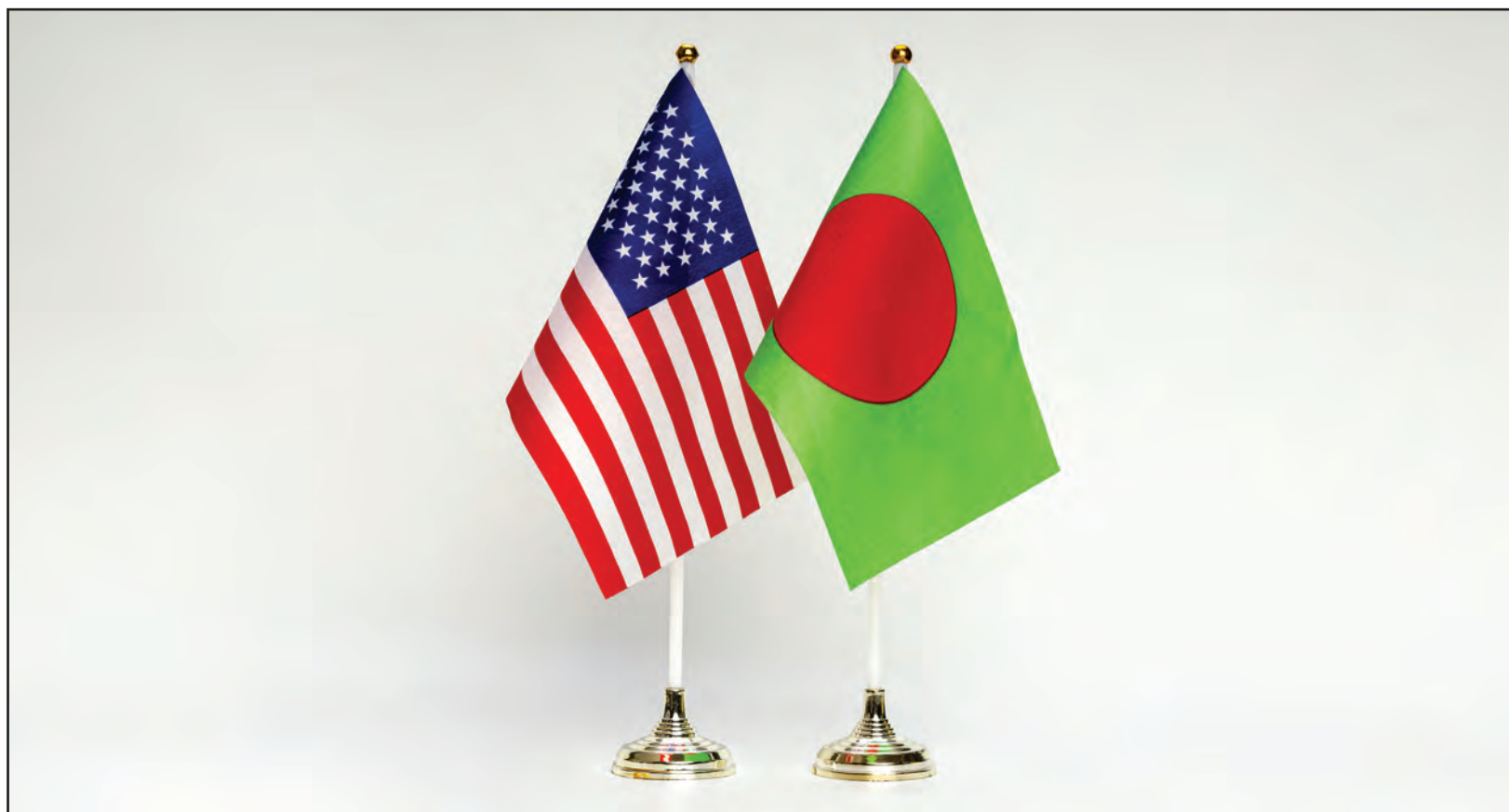
*ISCS's Round Table on
Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook and Its Implications
10th May, 2023, The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, ICCR Kolkata*

The Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS), India organized a Round Table to discuss the Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific outlook and its implications on 10th May, 2023 at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Kolkata. The event observed Chatham House guidelines.

The Introductory note was delivered by the Senior Research Associate – Sri Snehangshu Bhattacharjee. The Key Note address was delivered by Ambassador Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, IFS (Retd.). The Round Table facilitated a discussion on multiple dimensions of the Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook in terms of multilateral relations in areas including trade, commerce, economy, people-to-

people connect, digitization etc. along with the resilience against crime and terrorism, actions against climate change and steps towards peace, prosperity.

The event was attended by the Kolkata intellectuals, academicians, journalists and civil society actors. The Round Table turned out to be extremely enriching. The event summarized itself with the observations by the Director of The Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS), Shri Arindam Mukherjee and later followed by the discussions and interactions between the participants and also between the Distinguished Speakers.



Dreamstime