

Event Report





Celebrating 50 Years of Independence
BILIA Lecture Series | Lecture 08

**"China's Strategic Interests in Post-US Afghanistan:
Implications for South Asian Region"**

আফগানিস্তানে মার্কিন শাসনোত্তরকালে চীনের
কৌশলগত স্বার্থ এবং দক্ষিণ এশীয় অঞ্চলে এর প্রভাব

 **Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA)**
The First Think Tank Organization of Bangladesh

Date: 30 October 2021 (Saturday)
Time: 11:00 A.M.

Program Schedule

11:00 – 11:10	Welcome Address:	Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman Director Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA)
11:10 – 11:40	Keynote Paper Presentation:	Dr. Sultana Yesmin Former Visiting Research Fellow Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS)
11:40 – 12:20	Panel Discussion:	Dr. Delwar Hossain Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka Md. Shahidul Haque Professorial Fellow and Adjunct Faculty, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University, and Former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh
12:20 – 12:45	Open Discussion	
12:45 – 01:00	Concluding Remarks by the Chair :	Ms. Mashfee Binte Shams Secretary, East, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh

The China-Afghanistan relationship can play a positive role in ensuring security and stability in the South Asian region, said scholars, academicians, and professionals in an online lecture organized by the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA). They opined that China's influence in Afghanistan's economic development would not be limited to bilateral relations but would play a significant role in defining future regional politics and security.

In celebrating the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 50 years of Independence of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA) held its 8th lecture titled "*China's Strategic Interests in Post-US Afghanistan: Implications for South Asian Region*". The keynote paper was presented by Dr. Sultana Yesmin, former Visiting Research Fellow at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS), Kunming, China. Professor Dr. Delwar Hossain, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka and Md. Shahidul Haque, Professorial Fellow and Adjunct Faculty, SIPG, North South University and former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh were the discussants of the program. While Ms. Mashfee Binte Shams, Secretary, East, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, chaired the lecture, Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman, the Director of BILIA, moderated the program. The lecture was based on the presentation given by Dr. Yesmin on the above title. The lecture was held on the online zoom platform.

Welcome Address: Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman

The program commenced with a welcome address by Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Director, BILIA. In his speech, Professor Rahman briefly highlighted the importance of the recent happenings in Afghanistan and their implications for the South Asian region. He further added that China has been one of the first countries to support the new regime in Afghanistan, at least enhancing economic cooperation, which certainly has political implications as well. Professor Rahman then turned the floor over to Dr. Sultana Yesmin for presenting her paper.



Keynote Paper Presentation: Dr. Sultana Yesmin

In her presentation, Dr. Yesmin stated that China has played a significant role as a mediator and supporter in the peace process in Afghanistan since 2014, clearing the path for the country's war to be ended. In order to accelerate the peace process in Afghanistan, China had to ensure good relations with both the Afghan government (anti-Taliban) and the Taliban, and it continued to do so even after the war by providing several million US dollars in aid to Afghanistan, she added. Dr. Yesmin observed that because both China and Pakistan supported the Taliban's return to Afghanistan, there was a chance for further commercial and security collaboration between the three countries. China is likely to provide more assistance to the Taliban in order to establish peace in Afghanistan, given its economic and geopolitical interests, she said, adding that it is critical for the stability of the entire South Asian area. Regarding the security aspect, Dr. Yesmin pointed out that China is concerned about the possible collaboration between the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), referring to the Uyghur extremist group and the Taliban. China sees the possible ties between the Taliban and ETIM as a threat to its national security, which may have influenced the country to build a strong relationship with the Taliban, she added. She opined that China also wants to make sure that the Taliban does not interfere in its Belt and Road Initiative, and for this reason, it is important for the Chinese authorities to maintain good collaboration with the Taliban.



Panel Discussion on the Keynote Paper: Professor Dr. Delwar Hossain

While highlighting the recent developments in Afghanistan, Professor Dr. Delwar Hossain said that after the withdrawal of the US army, China's policy towards the country will be centered on strategic interests rather than economic interests. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world with a GDP of 19 billion dollars, equivalent to Bangladesh-China trade, which gives an indication that China is probably going to emphasize more on geostrategic interests given the location of Afghanistan, he added. China has been trying to mark its presence in Afghanistan for a long time, but because of the US presence, they have struggled to achieve this goal, and the withdrawal of the American soldiers would make it easier for them, he noted. Regarding the security issues, he thinks that China does not want to see the Taliban supporting the Uyghur separatist movement, and for that reason, the country has to maintain a good relationship with the Taliban. Although the Chinese authorities supported the Taliban coming to power, they are yet to recognize the Taliban-led government and they are a bit cautious in this regard, he added. China is trying to follow a collective approach regarding the recognition of the Taliban and would like to engage regional powers like Russia, Iran and Pakistan in the process, he noted. While referring to the presence of the Haqqani Network, a militant organization within the Taliban government, he expressed concern that the Taliban might not abandon its connection with the terrorist groups anytime soon, and that the strong presence of Islamic States (IS) terrorists in Afghanistan may pose a security threat to the entire region. He concluded by saying that only an inclusive government in Afghanistan can ensure peace in the region; otherwise, even Bangladesh may have to face the challenge of violent extremism.



Panel Discussion on the Keynote Paper: Md. Shahidul Haque:

While discussing the various aspects of China's engagement in Afghanistan, Mr. Shahidul Haque pointed out that China's engagement with the Taliban is not ideological; it is rather pragmatic. Having a relationship with a "political movement" like the Taliban is different from keeping a relationship with an established government well recognized by other states, he noted. The Chinese province through which China shares a border with Afghanistan is not that stable given the separatist movement growing there, he added. There is no denying that China will definitely celebrate the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, but it also means that now China will have to face the growing influence of America in the Indo-Pacific region and it may mark the beginning of a new cold war, he observed.

Mr. Haque also added that China is building a relationship with Afghanistan in two ways. On the one hand, the country is maintaining a close connection with the Taliban, and on the other hand, they have not abandoned the anti-Taliban fraction currently operating from Tajikistan, he noted. Also, China is trying to engage Afghanistan in regional cooperation platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation and Collective Security Treaty organization led by Russia, in which Afghanistan is playing the role of an observer state. Mr. Haque concluded by saying that "the East is rising and the West is declining," which means that China will play a leadership role in the region along with other superpowers like India, and for that reason, it has to play a significant role in maintaining peace in both Afghanistan and Myanmar, which ultimately will have an impact upon Bangladesh.



Open Discussion: Dr. Kavita Chahal:

Dr. Kavita Chahal, a scholar from Kerala, India, participated in the open discussion and said that although strategic interests are of utmost importance in the Sino-Afghan tie, commercial interests are also important. According to her, commercial relationships set the tone for political interaction between states. Rather than focusing only on political relations, it is also important to look at the issue from the perspective of strategic commercial relationships, she added. Why is China extending its cooperation to Afghanistan? Or is it associated with their one belt, one road initiative that they are keeping an eye on? An analysis of such aspects may add value to this discussion, as she observed.

Concluding Speech by the Chair: Ms. Mashfee Binte Shams:

Ms. Mashfee Binte Shams, Secretary (East), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, chaired the session and delivered the concluding remarks at the end of the program. Regarding Bangladesh's policy towards the new regime in Afghanistan, she said, Bangladesh would be happy to be engaged with the regime in Afghanistan if it is an inclusive one. She pointed out that over the past 20 years, Bangladeshi NGOs such as BRAC has been engaged in several developmental projects in Afghanistan, and Bangladesh would like to contribute to the development of the country in the near future.



Historically, Bangladesh has had a thousand year-long relationship with Afghanistan, and peace and stability in Afghanistan are equally crucial for both Bangladesh and the South Asian region, she noted. Since South Asian countries share a common goal of prosperity, it is important that the region be a place of peace and stability, she added. Therefore, it is expected from China that whatever investment they are making in Afghanistan, be it in CEPEC or BRI, will be a constructive one and it will not lead to tension in the region, she observed.

The Event Report is prepared by Mr. Sourav Ghosh, Research Assistant (International Affairs), BILIA.