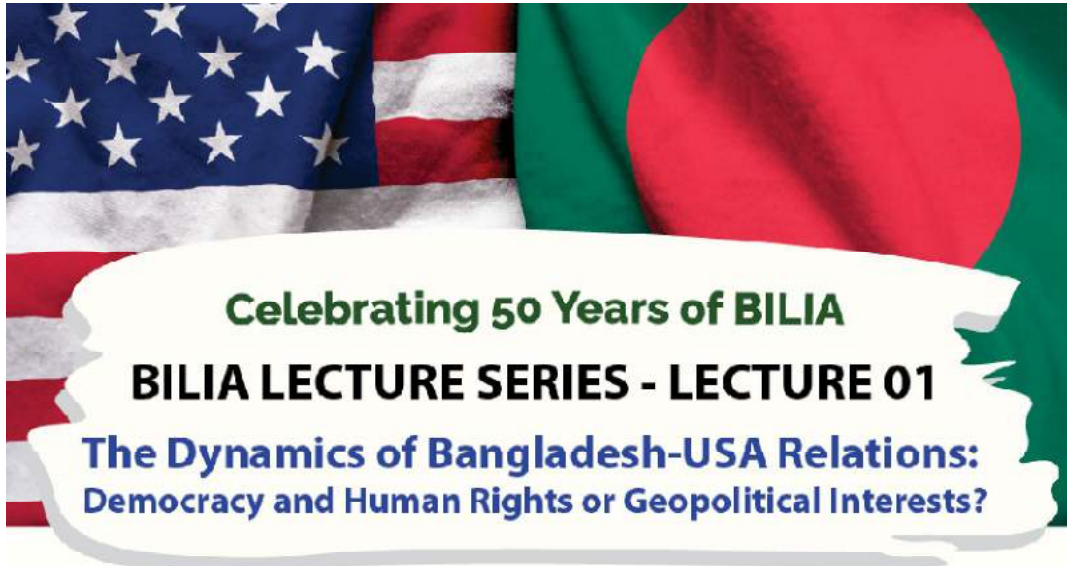


The Event Report



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

Date & Time

26 February 2022, Saturday, 05:00 PM

Program Schedule

05:00 - 05:10	Welcome Address	Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman Director, BILIA.
05:10 - 05:50	Keynote Paper Presentation	Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta Associate Professor and Chairman, Department of International Relations, University of Chittagong.
05:50 - 06:20	Panel Discussion	Mr. Toufiq Islam Shatil, ndc Director General (Americas), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. Dr. ASM Ali Ashraf Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.
06:20 - 06:45	Open Discussion	Participants
06:45 - 07:00	Concluding Remarks by the Chair	Mr. Masud Bin Momen Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh.

In celebrating the 50th Anniversary of its Establishment, Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA) initiated a series of Lectures on the contemporary issues related to law and international affairs. The First Lecture of the Series held on 26 February 2022, titled, “The Dynamics of Bangladesh-USA Relations: Democracy and Human Rights or Geopolitical Interests?” at BILIA. The keynote paper was presented by Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta, Chairman and Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Chittagong. Mr. Toufiq Islam Shatil, ndc, Director General (Americas), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, and Dr. ASM Ali Ashraf, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka were the designated discussants of the program. Mr. Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, graced the program as the Chair. Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman, the Director of BILIA, moderated the program. The lecture was held at BILIA Auditorium, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Introductory Remarks by Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman:



The program commenced with a welcome address by Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Director, BILLIA. In his speech, Professor Rahman briefly highlighted the importance of the recent happenings in the European Theatre by arguing that, “the events that have been taking place in Europe since the morning of the 24th is going to have serious, far reaching, long-time consequences for all the international community; Bangladesh not excluding. The way that the power balance and international politics is changing very rapidly and fast, our foreign office probably has to take some of the initiatives at the right moment to rip the benefits of the changing, shifting nature of international politics today.”

While considering the changing circumstances, Professor Dr. Rahman argued that, “we need to identify what should be done for our national interest.” He also mentioned that, “when we decided to have this lecture on ‘The Dynamics of Bangladesh-USA Relations: Democracy and Human Rights or Geopolitical Interests?’, Russia-Ukraine Crisis in Europe did not take place. That time we wanted to have a general/overall discussion with the members of the civil society on these important points, to combine our overall thought process and to come up with a set of recommendations by which we will be able to free our nation and our people from the burdens that are often intentionally placed upon us; which in the long run is going to probably reflect the interest of a country like Bangladesh. Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman then turned the floor over to Dr. Sujit Datta for presenting his paper.

Keynote Paper Presentation by Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta

Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta, Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of International Relations, University of Chittagong, presented the keynote paper at the event. In his paper, Dr. Datta highlighted that Bangladesh’s geo-strategic location and notable economic progress over the decades have been some key determinants in the current dynamics of the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and the USA. At the same time, Bangladesh’s deeper political, economic, and security ties with China have led the United States to reconsider its position. While the COVID-19 issue has had a significant level of impact on the global economy, the USA has seen the highest number of fatalities. On the other hand, China’s continuous economic

growth in the face of COVID has by far indicated to significant changes in the global, political and economic landscapes in the coming days. By emphasizing the issue of democracy and human rights, the United States is attempting to exert pressure on some countries with the primary goal of removing them from China's sphere of influence.



While refereeing to the historical facts, Dr. Datta also remarked that, during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, although the Government of the United States supported West Pakistan, American citizens, led by Archer K. Blood, the then Consular General of the USA in East Pakistan, sent a series of telegrams against the atrocities of West Pakistanis on Bangladeshi people, students, and intellectuals. As a result, many of the US citizens took a firm stand against the Nixon Administration for remaining silent on the genocide in Bangladesh and cooperating with the Pakistani Military Junta. After the Liberation War, during his visit to the U.S. in October

1974, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, stressed the importance of bilateral relations between the two countries. Since then, the US policy towards Bangladesh is centered on the “three D’s”: democracy, development, and denial of space for terrorism or militancy.

While pointing out the recent US sanctions on some key Bangladeshi law-enforcement officers, Dr. Datta identified the issue as a “pressure-building” tactic by the US on Bangladesh. On the same point, as he argued, Bangladesh’s growing partnership with China has also led to the changing US’s attitude towards Bangladesh. While maintaining its relationship with the USA, Bangladesh is giving priority to development and economic coordination. China has warned about the QUAD, a security alliance comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. China’s defense minister said that if Bangladesh joins the U.S. security alliance, relations with China will be damaged. However, Bangladesh clarified that, by far, it has not received any proposal to join the alliance, he added.

Dr. Datta also opined that, for various reasons, there are some notable shifts in Washington’s attitude towards Dhaka over the last few years. One of the main reasons for that is China’s warm relationship with Bangladesh. He noted that although the United States has proposed several Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and agreements, it has taken time to finalize them. Unnecessary surveillance is being carried out on Bangladesh due to the recruitment of lobbyists by anti-liberation forces and the continuous spread of false and unauthentic information against Bangladesh. As Dr. Datta argues, a lobbyist firm should be appointed in the United States to present the facts against such propaganda. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Bangladesh should be vigilant about all kinds of diplomacy with the United States.

Dr. Datta argued that a new relationship or engagement between the United States and the South Asian region will be formed. The United States has recently realized the strategic importance of small states in this region. The US sees that the relationship between India and

the smaller states in the region is going through a bit of a tug of war. In this regard, there are indications that the US will keep its strategic relations with India unchanged and build bilateral relations with India's neighbors. As he said, "in addition to Government-to-Government involvement, we should also increase people-to-people engagement. One of the main objectives of Bangladesh's foreign policy is to increase development and trade while maintaining good relations with all."

In his closing remark, Dr. Datta said that the challenge before Bangladesh is how to balance relations with China and the USA without compromising its own interests. Bangladesh is believed to have maintained good relations with all major global powers. In today's geopolitical reality, we need to maintain good relations with the United States at a tolerable level without moving away from liberal democracy and a free market economy. In the current context of international politics, the main objective of our foreign policy should be to formulate a balanced foreign policy without directly supporting any particular party, he added.

Discussion on the Keynote Paper by Mr. Toufiq Islam Shatil

Mr. Toufiq Islam Shatil, ndc, Director General (Americas), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh started his speech by thanking Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta for his thought provoking and analytical keynote presentation. He also thanked BILIA for organizing an important and timely discussion. Mr. Toufiq elaborated the dynamics of Bangladesh-US diplomatic relations through his speech by highlighting the issues of human rights and geopolitical interests.

Mr. Toufiq began with the point that, traditionally, the issue of human rights is considered as one of the key foreign policy goals of the Democratic Presidencies in the United States of America. To him, often the Western countries use human rights as a tool of pressure over the countries of South Asia by interfering in the internal matters of the state. This might be the reason that the Clinton, Obama and Biden Administrations emphasized on human rights to be a major foreign policy goal during their tenures. The sanctions imposed upon the law

enforcement agency officials of Bangladesh was a continuation of such policies. Mr. Toufiq raised a question for discussion – whether unilateral coercive measures, like sanctions, actually violate human rights in the first place?



Mr. Toufiq also opined that some global and geo-political situations might have contributed to America's approach towards Bangladesh. As Bangladesh continues to maintain strategic balance in terms of relation with the major regional and the global powers, some of the recent developments might have contributed to certain misperceptions regarding Bangladesh in Washington D.C. Despite the dynamics of relations between our three close Allies – India, China and the US – Bangladesh has always tried to maintain a balanced and cordial relationship with all of them and will continue to do so.

He proudly narrated the development of diplomatic relations between these two countries over the past few years. The two countries have been holding bilateral dialogues since 2012 to understand each other's priorities and to further enhance this multifaceted relationship. As the two countries are celebrating the 50th Anniversary of their diplomatic relations, four rounds of dialogues (partnership dialogue, security dialogue, defense talks and economic partnership) are ought to take place in the coming months. He also mentioned about the trade growth between the two countries and the generosity of the United States of America to send COVID vaccines during the pandemic.

Regarding the recent sanctions by the United States upon the RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) and some top law-enforcement officials of Bangladesh, Mr. Toufiq observed that, the USA needs to reassess their decisions and lift the sanctions as soon as possible. To him, the unilateral decisions undermine the stellar performance of a highly professional law enforcement agency, which is combating organize crimes, terrorism, violent extremism and human trafficking, those are also the priorities of the US Administration. The Government of Bangladesh is ready to engage in a conversation and provide necessary information in a transparent manner to clarify the misunderstanding, as he pointed out.

In the final part of his speech, Mr. Toufiq expressed great optimism regarding Bangladesh's desire to work towards becoming a prosperous, peaceful, and developed nation in the next two decades, as per *Vision 2041*. And for that, Bangladesh needs the political, economic, and strategic support from our major partners, including the USA. In his concluding observation, Mr. Toufiq suggested continuing the bilateral dialogue and, thereby, maintaining cooperation between Bangladesh and the United States of America.

Discussion on the Keynote Paper by Professor Dr. ASM Ali Ashraf

As the second designated discussant of the program, Dr. ASM Ali Ashraf, Professor of International Relations at Dhaka University, started his speech by thanking BILIA for arranging a lecture on such an important topic. While referring to the keynote paper, he mentioned that,

given the contemporary scenario, the relationship between Bangladesh and the United States has some hiccups. The tension between the two countries started with the US sanctions imposed on some senior law-enforcement officials of Bangladesh. He added that the United States has taken the issue of human rights violations, such as extrajudicial killings and disappearances, very seriously. In this regard, Professor Dr. Ashraf complimented the keynote paper for being thematically rich.



Dr. Ashraf requested the Foreign Secretary to ensure that the academicians have access to the dialogues between the United States and Bangladesh. He thanked Mr. Shatil for talking about the partnership dialogue, the security dialogue, the defense dialogue, and the economic dialogue between Bangladesh and the USA. He emphasized the fact that, if academicians are included in the bilateral dialogues, they can do a content analysis and include more evidence-

based arguments in their papers, which ultimately will help the practitioners pursuing foreign policy issues. From the keynote paper, it is understood that the United States is concerned about China's growth and one of their policies is to ensure that China has as few allies as possible in the region, he noted. Infrastructural development is an important indicator of economic development, and there is no denying that China has been a key development partner for Bangladesh over the past several years. Therefore, these sanctions could be a strategy of the USA to pull Bangladesh out of the Chinese Axis and to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) as suggested by the keynote paper, he added. However, Professor Dr. Ashraf expressed his disagreement with the speaker and mentioned that QUAD is a multilateral security dialogue aiming to reduce Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region, and the US has yet to approach Bangladesh to join this dialogue.

As Professor Dr. Ashraf explained, Foreign policy decisions are usually taken on two possible variables. One is domestic level variables and the other is external level variables. He observed that, at the domestic level, political parties, pressure groups and even lobbyist groups matter. However, trade unions play a diligent role in the USA's foreign policy decisions. Over the years, they have been very vocal about the violation of labor rights in Bangladesh, while some other rights groups have also shown their concern over the human rights violations in Bangladesh. The American people were very supportive of Bangladesh's independence back in 1971. An American sanction on a few Bangladeshi law-enforcement officials in recent times has only been a tiny part of the picture. When the US made the decision to impose the sanction, it may not have only been motivated by the foreign policy aspects, he noted. He further added that domestic pressure from the pressure groups, NGOs, and trade unions may have influenced this decision. Therefore, we cannot assume that the US sanction imposed on Bangladeshi officials is only a warning to Bangladesh not to close its ties with China, he observed.

Professor Ashraf concluded his speech by saying that, given its economic and geopolitical interests, Bangladesh must maintain a balanced relationship with the US while carefully addressing their criticisms as well.

Questions and Comments from the Audience:

Right after the discussion by Professor Dr. ASM Ali Ashraf, the moderator of the session, Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman, opened the floor to the audience in order to make questions and comments on the topic of discussion. Accordingly, **Mr. Kamran Siddique**, Staff Correspondent, *Business Standard* (A national Daily in Bangladesh), took the first floor and put forward his question to the panelists that, whether there are any opportunities for Bangladesh in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict?

Mr. Tasnim Mohsin, Diplomatic Correspondent, *Ajker Patrika* (A national Daily in Bangladesh), thanked the host for giving him the floor and raised two questions on the topic: first, by addressing Dr. Sujit Kumar Datta, he asked, whether it is appropriate to accuse the media instead of the political party for asking questions to the foreign dignitaries regarding the internal matter of Bangladesh? and Second, why Bangladesh needs recommendations or suggestions from other countries to improve its human rights situation instead of addressing those human rights violations nationally through a systematic approach of humane treatment?

Mr. Zakir Hossain from *Nagarikh Uddyog* (A national NGO) shared his view by mentioning that the discussion on such a topic is very relevant and thought-provoking, which provides the audience with valuable insights regarding the relationship between Bangladesh and the USA. He also pointed out in his comments that, rather than outright rejection of the incidents of human rights violation in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Government should accept such incidents occasionally, so that, other countries do not get the chance to raise questions on such matters.



Mr. Ataur Rahman Talukder, Lecturer, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), addressed two questions. Firstly, he quoted from the speech of Dr. Datta that, "The United States wants Bangladesh to become actively involved with either side quickly", and asked that, why the US would want Bangladesh to join China as it would go against the national interest of the former? and secondly, Mr. Talukder asked that, whether the world is entering into a new dimension of the international system, where the United States would lose its hegemonic role as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seems quite paralyzed?

Samaul Alam, a graduate student at Bangabandhu Law College (BLC), took part in the session by addressing a question to Mr. Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, that, how Bangladesh is going to maintain a balanced relationship and face the consequences if it joins QUAD amid of Bangladesh-China growing partnership?

Responses by the Panelists

In response to one of the questions, Dr. Datta answered that he didn't accuse the media or the reporters; rather, he emphasized about national unity. He said, national unity doesn't include the government only; rather, it includes all the political parties and other stakeholders of the country, such as the media. Although the media people do have the right to ask questions regarding the internal matter of Bangladesh to foreign diplomats, but if they avoid asking such questions, then the foreign diplomats would not get the scope of answering questions related to the internal matters of Bangladesh he replied. Further answering such a question, he replied. We should all be united and uphold national unity to address any national crisis, he emphasized.



Dr. Datta also replied to another question by saying that, upholding the human rights and human rights violations are two of the important perspectives of the US Foreign Policy Strategy. The US always uses these terminologies to create pressure on other countries. In the keynote paper, therefore, Dr. Datta used these two terminologies to indicate the diplomatic pressure on Bangladesh posed by the USA.



While responding to the questions from the audience, Dr. Ashraf, also replied that, "a particular incident never creates a new international system; rather it can either manifest the emergence of a new system or the consolidation of an existing system. But, we have to understand how to interpret this context." He argued that, after the end of the cold war, the USA was the main superpower for quite some time and the world appeared to be unipolar. He further added that, for the last two decades, we have seen that there are many wars started by the USA but with

no major opposition and we are also witnessing the emergence of China and Russia in the great game, as they are trying to challenge the American supremacy in different aspects. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is significant in this regard, which confirms that the world is no longer unipolar, rather it is multipolar, he replied.

In response to the questions asked by one of the participants, Mr. Momen replied that, since we have not received any request or invitation to join the QUAD, it is too early to make any comment on that matter.

Concluding Remarks by the Chair, Mr. Masud Bin Momen



Mr. Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh delivered the concluding remarks of the event as the Chair of the session. He started his speech by thanking the Director of BILIA, the keynote speaker, the

designated discussants, and other distinguished guests present there. Then he congratulated BILIA on the occasion of its 50 years of establishment and thanked BILIA for organizing the Lecture and for inviting him as the Chair. He then mentioned that the Foreign Policy of Bangladesh is based on the prudent dictum of the Father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which is "Friendship to all and malice to none". He also said that Bangladesh is constitutionally obligated to conduct its external relations in conformity with the UN Charter with a view to promoting international peace and security.

Mentioning the historical basis of the diplomatic relation between Bangladesh and the USA, he then pointed out some of the significant areas of cooperation on which the relationship between the two countries is developing day by day such as counter terrorism, combating transnational crimes, like human and drug trafficking, resolving the Rohingya Crisis and so on. On recently imposed US sanctions on RAB and other officials, Mr. Momen said that, Bangladesh has expressed its deep discontentment without any delay. He also opined that these sanctions are based on politically fabricated and motivated inputs and are therefore unjustifiable.

Mr. Momen proposed three pronged approaches to address the aftermath of the sanctions. The first of these is to remain closely engaged with the USA and to clarify the efforts Bangladesh is making for the promotion and protection of Human Rights. Secondly, Bangladesh needs to continue its foreign relation based on the policy of maintaining strategic balance. And finally, as he stated, "in the area of Human Rights there is always scope for improvement, including taking remedial measures and making a course correction". He also said that seeking international cooperation in this regard would not only resonate positively but would also benefit Bangladesh.

He pointed out that Bangladesh-USA relation has numerous determinants. Bangladesh is eager to enhance and deepen its relationship with the US. He also pointed out that, "we need to make efforts both internally and internationally to propagate our success stories of promoting and protecting human rights as a viable alternative to the one-sided narratives often being

projected by certain quarters. The objective of our activities should be to bolster the relation with the US and the other development partners by maintaining our national values and interests." He welcomed the civil society actors and the media to play their respective roles in this endeavor.

Mr. Momen concluded his speech by welcoming the initiative of arranging the lecture and requesting to arrange such sessions by engaging more civil society actors, NGOs and media, to have more engaging dialogues.

Vote of Thanks by Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman:

Professor Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Director, BILIA, thanked all the guests and participants for their valuable contributions in making the event successful and thought provoking.