

COMMENT 215 - *Bangladesh resists Chinese BRI heavy-handedness!*

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1. BRI in Bangladesh

Bangladesh formalised its presence in the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, BRI, (bgnews24.com, 15 October, 2016) during a visit by President Xi to the country. Both countries also agreed to promote their relations to the level of ‘strategic partnership’. The volume of investments agreed made Bangladesh the second most important recipient of Chinese funds after Pakistan ([Ramanchadran, S., 22 July, 2019](#)). According to [China Daily, 06 April, 2021](#), and notwithstanding the pandemic-related general slowdown, Chinese investment has been steadily rising in domains such as infrastructure (a new railway crossing on the Padma River is a flagship project) and special economic zones.

The initiative faced some major hurdles. There were important clashes between local workers and Chinese expatriates at the site of the Payra power plant ([Ramanchadran, S., 22 July, 2019](#)). Popular protests were raised against coal-based projects which, among others, were withdrawn, ostensibly for environmental concerns ([Green BRI, 27 April, 2021](#)). Contracts were also cancelled for bribery by the state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), which was blacklisted by Bangladesh authorities in 2018 ([Nikkei Asia, 30 June, 2021](#)). Nonetheless, the bulk of the projects agreed is going forward.

Up to now, Bangladesh authorities have been relatively carefree as concerns the potential geopolitical dependency brought by their participation on the BRI. Unlike Pakistan and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh did not allow Chinese investment in deep-sea ports suitable for a future Chinese Navy presence, as it cancelled the Sonadia deep-

sea project ([Ramachandran, S., 21 June, 2016](#)) and only agreed to a port project in Payra, ‘approachable only through a 75-kilometer-long canal (...) a very unlikely place for a naval base’ ([Ramachandran, S., 22 July, 2019](#)). Otherwise, contrarily to other BRI recipients such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka, Bangladesh authorities have conducted a prudent macro-economic management in order not to fall in any ‘debt-trap’. In fact, Bangladesh has lately even helped Sri Lanka deal with its high-indebtedness ([Nikkei Asia, 7 June, 2021](#)).

The BRI’s general appeal relies on the widely held idea that it comes with ‘no strings attached’, a principle recently reaffirmed by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi while criticising the G-7 announced investment initiative ([Wang, A., 24 June, 2021](#)). So the recent crescendo of Chinese warnings for Bangladesh not to engage with India and Western powers might have come as a surprise to some. Minister of National Defence Wei Fenghe declared in a meeting with Bangladesh’s President Abdul Hamid that in order ‘to jointly maintain regional peace and stability, the two sides should make joint efforts against powers outside the region setting up military alliance in South Asia and practicing hegemonism’ ([Xinhua, 27 April, 2021](#)). The point was repeated some days later in a clearer fashion by the Chinese Ambassador in Dhaka: ‘Relations with China will be damaged if Bangladesh joins US-led ‘Quad’’ ([The Daily Star, 10 May, 2021](#)), a warning more in line with the new Chinese ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ than with the originally announced ‘absence of strings attached’.

The Bangladeshi authorities’ reply came swiftly; ‘Foreign Minister A. K. Abdul Momen made his displeasure clear, telling reporters: “We are an independent and sovereign state. We decide our foreign policy.”’ ([Nikkei Asia, 11 May, 2021](#)), an answer sufficiently clear to cool down the Chinese authoritarian mood for the time being. Still, the issue remains unresolved.

2. The western awakening

The West both applauded and encouraged China’s turn towards capitalism as well as its inclusion in the mechanisms of international order from the late 1970s – assuming that this capitalism would put an end to communism and its imperial agenda, a belief held virtually to this day. China would thus be a new Asian tiger, considerably larger than its precursors and neighbours, and therefore even more important for business, but without imperial ambitions ([Casaca, 28 June, 2021](#)).

Yet things are not always as they seem. The new ambitions are quite clear: the military occupation of the South China Sea ([Shigeki, S. 4 July, 2021](#)), the civilian-military model in which civilian ports become naval bases ([Kardon, 2021](#)), fishing fleets which (after devastating the seas) become paramilitary vessels ([Barker, A. 25 May, 2021](#)), military aggression against neighbours ([SADF, webinar, 25 June, 2020](#)), the diplomacy of the 'warrior wolf' ([Dai I. et al., 2021](#)) and the successive conquest of a dominant position in the UN institutional universe, from food to health and human rights ([Casaca, 28 June, 2021](#)). All of this eventually woke up the sleepy Western political elites.

The European Union, timidly, finally revealed that China would be a 'systemic rival' in some areas. It concluded agreements on 'connectivity' with both India and Japan, began to react to China's meddling in Europe and threatened to abandon the Pharisaic position of spectator between the US and China ([European Parliament Briefing -EPB, April, 2021](#)).

The U.S. has also begun to act. After the Trump Administration announced in late 2019 the Blue Dot Network aimed at evaluating infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific area - an initiative that was apparently aborted by the pandemic - the Biden Administration moved forward with the B3W (Build Back Better World) approved at the recent G-7 summit ([Casaca, 23 June, 2021](#)).

In this context, the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' (in short Quad), an initiative that first gathered Australia, India, Japan and the US in 2007 but which remained dormant through most subsequent years ([EPB, March, 2021](#)) resumed its activity again – to the point where Chinese authorities felt the need to threaten Bangladesh if the country dared to join it.

Inspired by the common work of these four countries in organising relief after the 2004 tsunami, the Quad has fundamentally centred on security issues (and this is why China has nicknamed it as the Asian NATO). However, it has also dedicated itself to different topics and managed to attract the presence of several Asian countries, as well as EU members such as France, Germany and the Netherlands ([EPB, March, 2021](#)). In particular, France has announced the participation in a Quad naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal ([Archus, D. 5 April, 2021](#)).

Notwithstanding its defence inspirational engine, the Quad has recently announced important initiatives within a much larger framework in a common declaration titled 'The Spirit of the Quad' ([The White House, 12 March, 2021](#)). This is far from being

extraordinary; for instance, the initial European Community, specifically dedicated to coal and steel, tried to develop into both a community of defence and a political union (both projects died at the ratification stage) before switching to a second community, the economic community, which eventually became the most important ([Berlingozzi, 3 August, 2016](#)).

3. Prospective developments

Bangladesh has presented the best example of development of Southern Asia – managing to overcome the predicted ‘basket case scenario’ to become a regional example in human development and economic performance ([Lampe, 29 June, 2018](#)) while keeping the Jihadi threat under control and handling the largest burden out of the Myanmar crisis ([Casaca, M. 8 October, 2018](#)). Otherwise, Bangladesh’s engagement in BRI, while keeping its independence and judgement untouched, has been irreproachable.

The situation is however evolving fast as the country is confronted with new challenges as well as opportunities. The retreat of the US and NATO from Afghanistan is both a threat to regional security and a fuel to further China’s dominant ambitions and imperial posture.

Chinese support for the military putsch in Myanmar ([Bloomberg, 10 June, 2021](#)) should worry Bangladeshi authorities, as a worrying precedent in a country that suffered dramatically in the past from illegitimate military activities.

Bangladesh deserves to fully enjoy available support and engagement from democratic countries and neighbours within the multilateral domain, including naturally the Quad, deciding on each issue according to its own judgements and interests.

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