

BANGLADESH 2014: OLD PATTERNS, NEW TRENDS

Marzia Casolari

University of Turin
marzia.casolari@unito.it

1. *Preface*

2014 opened in Bangladesh with the elections, held on 5th January amidst unprecedented political violence which led to the killing of 29 people. The 2014 elections were recorded as the most violent in Bangladesh's history.¹

Throughout 2014, the government of the re-elected Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina faced several challenges. Firstly, the political crisis, fuelled by an alliance of 18 political parties led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), threatened to trigger a wave of protests similar to those of 2013. In turn, political instability brought to the fore the risk of adverse fallout on the economic situation. Secondly, the trials for the 1971 war crimes started in 2010, reaching their highest momentum in 2013 and continuing in 2014, with varied reactions from national and international public opinion. Thirdly, Sheikh Hasina's government was charged with corruption and human rights abuses.

In 2013, for the first time in Bangladesh's history, the incumbent prime minister gained a second mandate.² The large majority obtained by the Awami League allowed Sheikh Hasina to lead the country with a steadiness never experienced before, not even by Hasina's main rival, Khaleda Zia.

A multifaceted and ambitious foreign policy has been a new factor, with stronger ties to India and promising relations with several countries, especially China, Japan and Russia.

2. *Bangladesh politics after the 2014 elections*

The 2014 elections represented a watershed in Bangladesh's politics. One year is not enough to evaluate the long-term effects of the elec-

¹ 'Bangladesh has little to celebrate after the most violent election day in its history', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2014; Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme: dallo scontro politico alla guerriglia urbana', *Asia Maior 2013*, pp. 167-80.

² *Ibid.*

toral results (Awami League's 40% majority and 232 out of 300 seats in parliament).³ It is, however, a sufficient lapse of time to draw some conclusions on the short-term effects.

The entire electoral process, including the results, was very much criticized, not only by the opposition but also by some prominent international actors.⁴ The nature of the Bangladeshi democracy was questioned. Only 40% of the electorate voted. The restrictions imposed on the two main opponents, Khaleda Zia and Mohammad Hossain Ershad, were justified as measures to prevent violence, but on the polling day alone over 20 people were shot by the police. In spite of this gloomy start, which brought about fears of more violence in 2014, the year turned out to be much more peaceful and stable than the previous one.⁵ Before the first session of the 10th National Parliament, held on 29th January 2014, about 30 members of the outgoing government were dismissed for corruption or poor performance, as a sign of the government's intention to create a new political climate.⁶

The large majority obtained by the Awami League provided Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with an unprecedented strength and allowed her and her government to put forward several changes and reforms. However, the first half of 2014 continued to be influenced by the old patterns of Bangladeshi politics: polarization between the government's supporters, especially those belonging to the Shahbag movement, and the wide and well-organized opposition, political tensions and open clashes. Residual street protests and violence went on at the beginning of 2014, with a declining intensity throughout the first part of the year. In 2013, rallies and *hartals* (the general strikes aiming at paralyzing the entire public life of the country) nearly caused the country's economic collapse. The increasing normalization of the political situation in 2014 had a positive impact on several sectors and the country's general mood. The *Dhaka Tribune* newspaper carried out two opinion polls respectively, in June and December 2014.⁷ While in June, only 52% of the interviewees were unhappy with the BNP, in December, the discontent had increased to 62%. Even though the appreciation of the Awami League government slightly decreased between the first and second half of the year (from 75.3% to 72%), the overall evaluation was definitely positive. According to the respondents, «education has been the government's biggest success», while the second was the investment in infrastructures. Concern has been expressed for the law and order situation, which remains critical. In spite of these results, according to another *Dhaka*

³ Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme'

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 'Another beating', *The Economist*, 11 January 2014.

⁶ 'Bangladesh: Domestic Politics and External Actors', *IPCS Web Site*, 17 February 2014.

⁷ '72% consider government successful', *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 January 2015.

Tribune poll carried out in the same period, if there was an election at the time of the poll, 41% of the interviewees declared they would have voted for the Awami League and 34% for the BNP.⁸

Nevertheless, 48% of youths between the ages of 18 and 24, expressed their preference for the BNP and 34% for the Awami League. The more radical character of the BNP, especially of its affiliates, might appeal more to youths. Indeed, they seem to be increasingly attracted by international Islamic fundamentalism.

In February 2014, the *upazila* (sub-district) elections took place. The BNP, which boycotted the 2013 vote by abstaining from the general elections, obtained 123 posts out of 224 candidates, and the Awami League obtained 117 out of 295. The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) was one of BNP's main allies, even though it had been banned from any polls. The BNP's results were interpreted as being due to the JI's presence within the coalition. This result confirmed Jamaat's increased popularity in 2014.⁹ Yet, the BNP was facing a deep crisis. The results of the 2014 election, independent from the BNP boycott, the ban imposed on the Jamaat by the government, and the low percentage of voters, may be interpreted as the electorate's choice of continuity, while the opposition did not represent an alternative. Khaleda Zia was carrying out a party reform aimed at rejuvenating the party. This would imply an increasingly important role for her son, Tarique Rahman, who is supposed to inject a spirit of youth into the party. Unfortunately, Khaleda Zia's son – who is so compromised with corruption cases to be forced to live abroad – is very unpopular, both within and outside Bangladesh.¹⁰

Sheikh Hasina's electoral success was questioned not only by the Bangladeshi opposition, but also by some foreign powers, the UK and the US in particular. While the British criticism was milder,¹¹ the US went to the extent of asking «for a free and fair re-election in Bangladesh».¹²

Bangladesh's politics were a matter of debate for the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on 11th February 2014.¹³ Additional criticism came from Jean Lambert, leader of the EU team who visited Bangladesh in the spring of 2014; the West remained unsatisfied with the poor progress regarding safety measures in favour of the garment industry workers.¹⁴

⁸ 'Voters prefer Awami League over BNP', *ibid.*, 12 January 2015.

⁹ 'Islamic party defies Bangladesh ban', *Asia Times*, 27 March 2014; 'Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh: Where to From Here?', *IPCS Web Site*, 22 April 2014.

¹⁰ 'One and only one', *The Economist*, 20 September 2014.

¹¹ 'Bangladesh has little to celebrate after the most violent election day in its history', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2014.

¹² 'Bangladesh Post Elections 2014: India's Challenges and Options', *IPCS Web Site*, 20 January 2014.

¹³ 'Bangladesh: Domestic Politics'

¹⁴ 'Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary in New Delhi: Why Now?', *ibid.*, 1 April 2014.

As far as the internal situation is concerned, while the political clash weakened in 2014, the opposition's sharp criticism went on. The main charges against the government were corruption and human rights abuses.

3. *Corruption and anti-corruption measures*

Corruption has always been endemic in Bangladesh, which continues to be among the most corrupt countries in the world. Corruption involves all fields of Bangladeshi political life. The judiciary is the most affected. According to *Doing Business 2014*, the *Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014* and *The Transformation Index*, Bangladesh's courts, at all levels, «are both inefficient and subject to political influence from members of government, citizens and companies». The *World Bank & IFC* and *Doing Business 2014* reveal that subscribing to a commercial contract in Bangladesh requires, on average, the fulfilment of 41 administrative procedures, taking about 1,442 days. According to the *Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014*, the police are not able to enforce law and order. The police themselves are affected by political interference, and the punishment of officials and prominent persons is biased by political factors. Appointments are determined by «bribes, nepotism and party loyalties, rather than by professional qualifications». The main reason for bribery within the police is officers' low salaries. As far as the public services are concerned, the *Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014* states that the bureaucracy is inefficient. According to the *Investment Climate Statement 2013*, ministries often require «unnecessary licenses and permits». Factory owners often offer bribes to speed up procedures, bypass inspections or relax the rules. Just to give an idea of the disastrous consequences of such a situation, cases of bribed inspectors were behind the Rana Plaza tragedy of 2013 and similar accidents frequently occurring in Bangladesh's garment factories. The National Board of Revenue, the government authority for tax administration, is one of the most corrupt agencies in the country. Tax laws are enforced in a discriminatory way and tax evasion is extensive. One of the most corrupt sectors in the country is customs, where the problem extends from petty corruption (bribes and kickbacks to customs officers) to unofficial or irregular payments of import and export taxes. Officers exert their power to change tariffs and to expedite or delay customs processing at the frontiers or ports. These problems, and an overall lack of transparency in trade regulations and policies, represent the obstacles that make trading with Bangladesh uncertain. Chittagong port, handling approximately 80% of the total of Bangladesh's import-export, is considered one of the most corrupt and inefficient ports in Asia. Political patronage is enforced to award public contracts for infrastructures in construction,

transportation, utilities, and supplies. In April 2014, it was discovered that the public gas supplier, Titan Gas, provided illegal gas connections to approximately 500 companies. Corrupt officials received bribes for each connection. Illegal takeover of government land by politicians is frequent. Bangladesh passed several laws against corruption, such as the Prevention of Corruption Act 1947, and the Money Laundering Prevention Act of 2002, while the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Penal Code contain specific reference to corruption crimes. The Money Laundering Law has been amended to include norms to prevent stock market manipulation. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) was established in 2004, but in 2014 its power was significantly curtailed. Indeed, in 2013 the Anti-Corruption Commission Act was amended, passed by the parliament and signed by the president. The amended Act established that the ACC was obliged to obtain the government's permission before investigating state officials, including judges. The ACC itself is not corruption-free. Other bodies involved in anti-corruption initiatives are the National Coordination Committee (NCC), the Office of the Ombudsman, the Auditor General and the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC). All these bodies lack independence and are occasionally affected by inefficiency and bribery.¹⁵

This climate does not attract foreign investors. One of the main challenges the Prime Minister will have to face is enforcing an efficient anti-corruption policy.

In April 2004, the Chittagong police intercepted a shipment of arms and hand grenades worth \$5 million. The arms, made in China, were directed to insurgents in Assam, to trouble India. Pakistani spies seemed to be involved in the case. For years the case was ignored and Khaleda Zia, prime minister at that time, did not take any action. Her son Tarique Rahman was involved. A number of other corruption cases pile up against him in Bangladesh, while he lives in London. Since the Awami League came into power in 2009, they have taken the corruption issue seriously. On 30th January 2014, the court sentenced 14 men to be hanged, most of them belonging or affiliated to opposition parties. The charges were smuggling related to the arms haul. Among the sentenced was Jamaat-e-Islami's chief, Motiur Rahman Nizami. Already indicted for 1971 war crimes, he faces the risk of being sentenced to death twice.¹⁶

¹⁵ 'Business Corruption in Bangladesh', *Business Anti-Corruption Portal*, June 2014 (<http://www.business-anti-corruption.com/country-profiles/south-asia/bangladesh/snapshot.aspx>).

¹⁶ 'Bang Bang club', *The Economist*, 8 February 2014.

4. *The trial for the 1971 war crimes: a landmark in Bangladeshi history*

The charges against the government of human rights abuses, especially concerned the death sentences and the executions of 2013, related to the trials for the crimes of the 1971 civil war.

The opposition and those among the international observers who criticize the trial, do not take into account that the truth about the events of 1971 was strongly pursued by the people. The Shahbag movement, one of the main supporters of the trial, has relatives of the 1971 war victims among its members. The Shahbag activists, which have been described as undemocratic, protest peacefully with non-violent methods. The movement is formed mainly by youths and demands the country's democratization.¹⁷

The prosecution of war criminals had been one of the main elements of political polarization and the clash between the government (and its supporters) and the opposition.

The trial went on throughout 2014, although with much less vigour than in 2013.

Undoubtedly, the trial, desired and instigated by Sheikh Hasina's previous government in 2013, was partially exploited for electoral purposes. After the January 2014 elections, the usefulness of the trial diminished and it may have become politically counterproductive. The death of more than 100 people in violence related to the trial in 2013 may have affected the image of the Prime Minister, who adopted a softer approach and preferred «to advance her credentials as a wise, legitimate and moderate leader by leaving a flawed tribunal to grind forward only very slowly».¹⁸

However, seeing the trial exclusively under this light would lead to misunderstanding and underestimating the real impact of the events of 1971 and the deep scars they left on the Bangladeshi people. A meaningful and politically-conscious part of the population cannot bear the injustice of seeing the perpetrators of unspeakable atrocities living undisturbed and acting politically, within the organizations of radical Islam. Describing the trial simply as an electoral move would be like denying the necessity of war crimes trials, from Nuremberg to Cambodia.

5. *Debating on the 1971 civil war: does it make sense?*

In 2003, the famous 'Blood Telegram' was declassified. It was the telegram sent on 6th April 1971 to the State Department. Signed by the consul general, Archer Blood, and by the entire staff of the Consulate General of the United States in Dhaka, the telegram deplored the US backing of the West Pakistan Army in suppressing the uprisings following the non-rec-

¹⁷ Marzia Casolari, 'Bangladesh in fiamme'.

¹⁸ 'Dialing down', *The Economist*, 1 November 2014.

ognition of the December 1970 election results. Ten years later, between August and October 2013, a series of articles about the Blood Telegram came into the international press, probably inspired by the ongoing trial. Again in 2013, a book, *The Blood Telegram*, was published by Gary J. Bass, a journalist and professor of international politics at Princeton and a 2014 Pulitzer Prize finalist.¹⁹ Based almost exclusively on primary sources, the book is a remarkably accurate description of the events of 1971. It is built up around the figure and the role of Archer Blood. The consul general and the consulate staff were increasingly disgusted by the US government's inaction, turning to overt support to Pakistan's Army crushing Bengali dissent. Besides providing indisputable evidence of American political and military support to Pakistan, the most important US ally in Asia, the book reconstructs in detail the 'forgotten' genocide. It discloses the complexity of the events, which involved more than just two enemies opposing each other, but several interwoven rivalries: Muslims against Hindus; Bengalis against Biharis; and the Pakistani Army against the Awami League and the Mukti Bahini. Atrocities were committed by both sides, the army and its collaborators, and the Mukti Bahini. Bass' book does not enter into the details of the responsibilities of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Razakar Bahini and other radical Muslim organizations in the massacre, but it focuses on the international intrigues behind the war: US-Pakistan relations; relations between Pakistan, China and India; and Pakistan's role in facilitating the China-US rapprochement, in view of the Sino-American negotiations at the end of the Vietnam war. The main subject of the book is Kissinger and Nixon's staunch support to West Pakistan and to the Pakistani Army.

Strangely, the book did not have such remarkable resonance in Bangladesh as it had in the West, especially in Great Britain and in the United States, where it was reviewed by several famous newspapers and magazines.²⁰

In Bangladesh, the only noticeable article appeared in the *Dhaka Tribune* on 14th August 2013: *The Blood Telegram, Case for an American Apology*. The article does not mention Bass' book, but it extensively discusses the subject of the American President and Secretary of State's active involvement in the events of 1971. The article draws the conclusion that «the American government does owe Bangladesh a long due apology», like Pervez Musharraf did during his presidency. As noted by the article, Musharraf was «the only Pakistani head-of-state to personally apologise to Bangladesh for the atrocities committed during the 1971 liberation war».

A more recent paper by an Italian scholar focuses on India's response to the 1971 crisis «as one of the first cases of humanitarian intervention in world

¹⁹ Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram. Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide*, London: Hurst, 2014.

²⁰ *The Economist*, 21 September 2013; *The New York Times*, 27 September 2013; *The Washington Post*, 10 October 2013; *The New Republic*, 9 November 2013.

history» and calls into question this interpretation.²¹ Even if the most recent literature on the subject does not deal with the question behind the trial of the JI's war criminals, these scholarly and well-documented studies prove that the 1971 war crimes do not represent a subject that can simply be dismissed as electoral propaganda. More light has to be shed on the topic from a historical point of view and justice has to be done on behalf of the victims. Stating this does not mean to defend the death penalty. However, justice has to be done, and this brings about the need to impose appropriate penalties on those guilty of war crimes. Hopefully, especially after its post-electoral stabilization, the Bangladeshi government, in judging and punishing war criminals, will adopt an attitude in line with its declared aspiration to democracy.

6. *A 360-degree foreign policy*

6.1. *India first*

Due to its sustained economic growth over the past few years, Bangladesh can no longer be considered an underdeveloped country, the 'basket case' of the 1970s. Bangladesh indeed is becoming an increasingly important nation in the region, not only from the economic, but also from the strategic point of view. It lies across South and Southeast Asia, right at the centre of the highway under construction, which will connect these two important regions. Bangladesh is also facing the Bay of Bengal, which is attractive not only for its commercially interesting coastal area, but especially for its largely unexplored oil reserves. Bangladesh is therefore becoming the pole of multiple interests. India is the most directly and deeply involved power within Bangladesh, especially for its position. Whilst China does not border directly with Bangladesh, India shares a border with this country, a huge and troublesome frontier. India has several strategic, political and economic interests in Bangladesh. Firstly, Bangladesh has a key geographic position to contain Chinese expansion in South Asia. Secondly, India has a special link with Bangladesh, due to its involvement in the 1971 liberation war, which turned into the third Indo-Pakistani war. On the other hand, the new era of Bangladesh foreign policy, inaugurated by Sheikh Hasina's second term of government, aims primarily at developing good relations with India. The government of Delhi supported the Awami League's re-election, encouraging a democratic transition in Bangladesh. For the world's largest democracy, promoting democracy elsewhere is a priority, in a region where authoritarian governments are most common. A secular and democratic Bangladesh can also help to contain the expansion of radical Islam in South Asia, and especially in India. Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), whose main objective is to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh,

²¹ Sonia Cordera, 'India's response on the 1971 East Pakistan crisis: hidden and open reasons for intervention', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 17, No. 1, January 2015.

and other groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) and the Jagrata Muslim Janata, are spreading in the region. India is used by the JMB for hideouts and for recruitment through the madrasas, the mosques and the social networks. JMB is connected with radical Muslim groups in India, as well as in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A recent JMB slogan is «Jihad from Bangladesh to Baghdad». JMB is also active in Myanmar, where it relies on the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). Most of these groups act against India through their connections within the country, in particular among insurgents in border areas, especially in the Muslim-majority districts of Assam. India does not want to have another Pakistan on its eastern border and it is interested in cooperating to fight the expansion of terrorism in the region. Bangladesh has a key position in India's 'Look East Policy'. The main sector of Indian investment in South East Asia is infrastructure. In the region, India attempts the development of communications such as ports on the Bay of Bengal, trans-border railways connecting India more directly with its remote north-east regions or the superhighway connecting India with Southeast Asia.²² Regional connectivity is a key factor to develop trade and investments. Last but not least, India, as well as the US and China, have obvious interests in Bangladesh's energy resources. Both countries are interested in fostering bilateral ties.

The Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Shahidul Haque, visited India from 19th to 21st March 2014, on invitation from his Indian counterpart, Sujatha Singh. At the meetings, the Minister of External Affairs, the Indian National Security Adviser, and the secretaries of several ministries took part. The visit had a rather formal character, considering the approaching end of Manmohan Singh's mandate. No decision was taken about sensitive issues such as the sharing of the Teesta waters that, in absence of an agreement, gave rise to many years of disputes, or regarding the land and sea boundary controversies.²³ The Teesta dispute ended on 7th July 2014, when the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague awarded Bangladesh 19,467 km² of coast out of the 25,602 km² in the Bay of Bengal, leaving 6,135 km² to India. It was a historic settlement, putting an end to a 40-year controversy between Bangladesh and India.²⁴

Before the 2014 Indian general elections, the favourite candidate, right-wing leader Narendra Modi, was seen in Bangladesh as a controversial figure, particularly because of his pre-election statements against illegal

²² 'Bangladesh Post Elections 2014: India's Challenges and Options', *IPCS Web Site*, 20 January 2014; 'Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh: Designs and Network in India', *ibid.*, 7 November 2014.

²³ 'Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary in New Delhi: Why Now', *ibid.*, 1 April 2014; 'India-Bangladesh Relations: Significance of the Teesta Water-Sharing Agreement', *ibid.*, 23 April 2014; 'A Ray of Hope for India-Bangladesh Relations?', *ibid.*, 1 July 2014.

²⁴ 'India-Bangladesh: Can the Maritime Boundary Resolution Rebuilt Faith?', *ibid.*, 24 July 2014.

Bangladeshi immigration, which had raised much concern in the country. After the elections, Modi's proposed measures to combat illegal immigration from Bangladesh provoked an anti-Indian uproar in Dhaka. However, those initial fears have, to a large extent, been dissipated by some positive diplomatic developments. The visit of the Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary to India was followed by a trip by the External Affairs Minister of the newly elected Indian government, Sushma Swaraj, to Bangladesh from 25th to 27th June 2014.²⁵ The Indian minister defined the visit as «extremely fruitful and satisfying» and once back to New Delhi, she claimed that her visit had resulted in «an excellent beginning in addressing each others' concerns and work together with the spirit of good neighbourliness».²⁶ The Indian Foreign Affairs Minister met several top-level Bangladeshi politicians: the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the President Abdul Hamid, the Bangladeshi Minister of External Affairs A.H. Mahmud Ali, the leader of the opposition, Raushan Ershad, and the former prime minister, Khaleda Zia. The crucial moment of Sushma Swaraj's visit was her speech to the civil society, held at the Bangladesh Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS). The Indian Foreign Minister opened her talk «with a message of friendship and goodwill from the newly elected Government in India» and went on speaking about «comprehensive and equitable partnership» between the two countries, and «mutual beneficial relations, youth development and youth-led development». She mentioned the enormous human sacrifice that united India and Bangladesh in the 1971 war and defined «Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman as the architect of Bangladesh».²⁷

The evidence that Sushma Swaraj's visit was not just diplomatic smoke but had some political substance was given by a few concrete steps taken in the following weeks. Visa relaxation for children under 13 and citizens above 65 was implemented. The Indian deputy Minister of External Affairs and the Minister of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), General V.K. Singh, visited Bangladesh on 23rd and 24th August 2014. The trip was carefully prepared through a meeting with the Chief Ministers of the Northeastern States, held in Guwahati, just before his visit to Dhaka. Manik Sarkar, the Tripura's Chief Minister, asked for transit facilities by road, rail and sea through Bangladesh to the landlocked Northeast. Access to the waterways is a demand of the entire region since the partition. Besides connectivity, trade and commerce have been the keywords of Gen. Singh's visit to Dhaka. He spoke about India's intention to increase bilateral trade between Bangladesh and India.²⁸

²⁵ 'Dhaka as the Gateway to India's Look East Policy', *ibid.*, 27 June 2014.

²⁶ 'Sushma Swaraj leaves for home after Bangladesh visit', *The Economic Times*, 27 June 2014.

²⁷ 'India-Bangladesh: After Sushma Swaraj's Visit', *IPCS*, 21 July 2014. Sheik Mujibur Rahman was popularly referred with the honorary title of *Bangabandhu*, namely 'Friend of Bengal'.

²⁸ 'India and Bangladesh: The Northeast Thrust', *ibid.*, 27 August 2014.

At the end of 2014, the 31-member Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs chaired by Shashi Tharoor recommended in «overall national interest», to settle the India-Bangladesh boundary dispute through an exchange between Delhi and Dhaka of enclaves and territories in «adverse possession» of either country. If an agreement was finalized, India would receive 2,777 acres of land and Bangladesh 2,267. The possible settlement has been defined as an example of good diplomacy and it would also set a precedent for the solution of the Sino-Indian border dispute.²⁹

6.2. *A multilateral regional policy*

Bangladesh's foreign policy is facing a new era. It may be more appropriate to say that Bangladesh is developing its own foreign policy for the first time. The country is no longer the passive target of other nations' policies or a mere recipient of external aid, as it has been since its foundation. The incumbent Sheikh Hasina's government has already started to develop a regional multilateral policy, which received a much greater impetus after the Awami League re-election in 2014. As one of the founding members of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh has an increasingly prominent role within the organization. After including Nepal and Bhutan in 2004, BIMSTEC has seven members. The founders are India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. It covers an area stretching from South to Southeast Asia, «with over 22% of the world population and a collective GDP of nearly \$2 trillion». The group has an impressive geopolitical and economic importance. The third BIMSTEC summit, held in Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital, from 3rd to 4th March 2014, was the occasion for Sheikh Hasina to launch intensive diplomatic activity. The Bangladeshi prime minister, who led a delegation of 54 members, met with his counterparts in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar, and with Myanmar's opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. The government of Bangladesh is particularly interested in improving trade and cooperation with Myanmar. Both countries wish to be part of the road connectivity project for the construction of the highway connecting India to Thailand through Bangladesh and Myanmar. The two countries are also planning to build seaports in Sittwe and Kyaukpyu to run a shipping line. In 2011, it was decided to establish the permanent secretariat of BIMSTEC in Dhaka, which started functioning in May 2014.³⁰

Bangladesh is also a member of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) forum for economic cooperation, which held its second meeting

²⁹ 'India-Bangladesh LBA: Setting the Right Tone', *ibid.*, 9 December 2014.

³⁰ 'East Meets West: Bangladesh and the BIMSTEC Summit', *IPCS Web Page*, 17 March 2014.

in Dhaka in June 2014. BCIM aims at establishing an economic corridor along the old Southern Silk Road, connecting the Bay of Bengal, India's Northeastern Region, Bangladesh and Myanmar to Southwest China. One of the BCIM objectives is to integrate the economies of India, China and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (FTA), representing 7.3% of the global GDP. India aims at reaching the Chinese market, as well as balancing China's influence in the region through a multilateral BCIM-FTA integration. A further convergence between BCIM and BIMSTEC is also possible in the future.³¹

Bangladesh is not only the 'gateway' of India's 'Look East Policy', but it has its own 'Look East Policy'. Bangladesh has obviously much to gain and nothing to lose, from an economic point of view, in pursuing a regional foreign policy. Southeast Asia indeed is not only one of the world's most hectic and attractive economic areas, but it is also the destination of Bangladeshi labour; above all, Singapore and Malaysia.³²

Regional connectivity includes energy cooperation. In early 2014, Bangladesh agreed to provide India a power corridor passing through its territory and allowing the transmission of 6,000 MW of hydroelectricity from Arunachal Pradesh to Bihar. In exchange, Bangladesh will receive 500 MW. This was the third bilateral energy agreement. The previous two were signed in 2013. The first was a power grid to allow the transmission of 500 MW of energy from India to Bangladesh. The second was the establishment of a joint venture between India and Bangladesh to construct a 1,320 MW coal-fired power plant at Rampat Upazila.³³

6.3. *Bangladesh, China and Japan*

The new foreign policy of Bangladesh aims at extending much beyond the region and includes the other Asian giants, besides India. A busy round of meetings took place from May to September 2014, between Bangladesh, China and Japan. From 25th to 28th May, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, was in Japan. A visit to China followed, in quick succession, from 6th to 11th June 2014. Finally, the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, was in Dhaka for less than 24 hours on 6th September 2014.³⁴

The first remarkable result of the Bangladesh-China summit was four military agreements signed on 12th May, in the presence of a Chinese delegation led by Chief Marshal of the People's Army, Air Force General Xu Qiliang. The treaty included Chinese free of charge training and logistic

³¹ 'BCIM and BIMSTEC: Two Competing Initiatives for Northeast India?', *ibid.*, 20 May 2014.

³² 'Dhaka as the Gateway'.

³³ 'India-Bangladesh: Enhancing Ties through a «Power Corridor», *ibid.*, 21 April 2014.

³⁴ 'Japanese PM arrives September 6', 13 August 2014 (<http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/08/13/japanese-pm-arrives-sept-6>).

support to the Bangladeshi army. Through the years, Bangladesh and China signed several bilateral agreements regarding trade, military sales, energy, transit and cultural exchanges. In March 2014, Bangladesh commissioned two navy frigates from China. In April, the two countries signed an agreement on the sale of two submarines to Bangladesh, which included the establishment at Kutubdia Island, in the Cox Bazar District, of a base for 035G diesel-electric Ming submarines, to be completed by 2019. Between 2009 and 2013, China supplied 82% of Bangladesh's arms imports, including anti-ship missiles, tanks and fighter airplanes. Low costs and loan facilities are the reasons for Bangladesh's arms purchases from China, even though the armed forces are not happy with the quality of Chinese military goods. Chinese arms are the cheapest in the world.³⁵ China's financial support to Bangladesh has increased significantly in the last three years. The largest-ever infrastructure project in Bangladesh, the Padma multipurpose bridge, is to be built by China Major Bridge Engineering Company. China is also engaged in constructing a rail bridge over the Jamuna River and a high-speed railway between Dhaka and Comilla.³⁶

In 2014, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the construction of a 1,320 MW power plant in Moheshkhali sub-district. The launch of the first Bangladeshi satellite, *Bangabandhu*, was the outcome of the technical and infrastructural cooperation with China. On the other side, China is interested in entering the Bay of Bengal for its strategic importance and its energy resources. China is engaged in the modernization of Chittagong port. This project meets Bangladesh's need to develop its naval infrastructure. China is competing with India and the US for access to the strategically important Indian Ocean region. From this perspective, Bangladesh is becoming a strong player in regional balances. It is acquiring, for instance, an increasing weight within the BCIM, as proved by the BCIM-EC meeting held in Dhaka in June 2014.³⁷ As a result of the May 2014 Sheikh Hasina visit to China, an agreement was signed for Chinese assistance in the construction of a power plant in Patuakhali and a multi-lane road tunnel under the river Karnaphuli. Chinese president Xi Jinping emphasized Bangladesh's role along the 21st century Maritime Silk Road.³⁸

While Sheikh Hasina's visit to China in May 2014 was part of a series of meetings and exchanges which took place over the last few years, the visit to Japan ushered a new phase in bilateral relations between the two countries. Moreover, the visit of the Japanese premier to Dhaka in September 2014 was the first official trip to Bangladesh of a high member of the Japanese government for 15 years. The respective prime minis-

³⁵ 'Bangladesh: A New Thrust towards East Asia', *IPCS Web Site*, 6 June 2014.

³⁶ 'Bangladesh, China and Japan: Dhaka's Delicate Balancing', *ibid.*, 17 September 2014.

³⁷ 'Bangladesh-China: Respective Objectives and Strategies', *IPCS Web Site*, 30 May 2014.

³⁸ 'Bangladesh: A New Thrust'.

ters signed a 21-point Comprehensive Partnership Agreement which engaged Japan to support Bangladesh's development programmes. Since 2007, the number of Japanese companies operating in Bangladesh has increased from 61 to 176, and aid from Japan amounted to \$11 million in 2013. Japan is also engaged in large-scale investments in Bangladesh.

An agreement has been signed on infrastructure developmental projects in Bangladesh: the construction of the Ganges barrage scheme; a multimodal tunnel under the Jamuna River; a multimodal Dhaka Eastern bypass; the Padma rail link connecting Dhaka-Jajira-Bhanga-Narail-Jessore; the construction of an inland depot at Dhirasram; and the purification of four rivers around Dhaka. Japan offered its support for capacity-building in nuclear security and safety. Japan's engagement in Bangladesh's infrastructural development amounts to \$6 billion over the next five years for the implementation of the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B), which includes the construction of a deep sea port at Chittagong. The area is supposed to become a base for the supply of energy and the construction of superhighways across the country. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed for the reservation of facilities for Japanese investors in five Export Processing Zones in Bangladesh.

Japan has also promised a loan of \$1.18 billion in the next fiscal year for five energy and city developing projects in Bangladesh. Japan dictated some conditions for its financial support, such as competitive incentives, and improvement in infrastructure and in labour supply.

Like India and China, Japan also has its strategic interests in South Asia, above all, connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean regions, in order to provide a larger space for Japan's economic goals. The relations between Bangladesh, India, China and Japan are based on mutual interests. Sheikh Hasina aims at making Bangladesh a middle-income country by 2021. This objective cannot be pursued without strong foreign investment. Bangladesh must, therefore, maintain friendly relations with all its powerful neighbours. Significantly, during Abe's visit, Bangladesh announced the withdrawal of its candidacy as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council from the Asia Pacific group in 2016–2017.³⁹ Was it a courtesy gesture to leave the place to Japan, in order to ingratiate it and further improve and consolidate bilateral ties?

6.4. *Bangladesh and Russia*

Outside East and South Asia, Bangladesh's main partner is Russia. Significantly, on 27th March 2014, Bangladesh, along with 57 other members, abstained from voting at the UN General Assembly resolution for Russia's

³⁹ *Ibid.*; 'Bangladesh, China and Japan'; 'Abe's Successful Visit to Dhaka: Two Political Challenges', *IPCS.*, 15 September 2014.

annexation of the Crimea. Messages followed from the Russian Ambassador to Dhaka, acknowledging Bangladesh's stand. The most remarkable detail in this story is Dhaka's explanation of its abstention: Bangladesh does not want to get involved «in the new cold war between Russian and the US», according to the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement. This statement takes us back to the cold war times. It reveals that the cold war climate, fuelled by the US, cannot go unnoticed. Thirdly, Bangladesh and other countries continue to choose and propose a line of foreign policy based on multi-polarism, although not necessarily non-alignment. Bangladesh's abstention has been sharply criticized and Dhaka was charged as having turned its back on the Western countries and the US, which are very much committed to Bangladesh's development. Dhaka has cordial relations with Russia since Sheikh Hasina's taking office in 2009. She visited Moscow in 2013, signing the largest arms deal in Bangladesh's history and obtaining a loan for the construction of Bangladesh's first nuclear power plant, for an estimated cost of \$2 billion.⁴⁰ In November 2013, Bangladesh supported Ekaterinburg instead of the United Arab Emirates as a candidate for World Expo 2020. Russia (and India) supported Sheikh Hasina's government during its critical post-election days, in early 2014.⁴¹

6.5. *Bangladesh within the UN*

Bangladesh's 360 degrees foreign policy is summarized by its participation in the 69th UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2014. It was also the 40th anniversary of Bangladesh's membership at the UN. Sheikh Hasina led a 184-member delegation. For the first time, Bangladesh acquired a remarkable visibility at the UN. The UNGA was the occasion for a number of meetings and for promoting Bangladesh's economic interests. The most important meetings were those with the UN Secretary, General Ban Ki-moon, the Commonwealth Secretary General, Kamalesh Sharma, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and US president Barack Obama. Sheikh Hasina also met the Norwegian, Nepalese and Belarusian prime ministers, the Commonwealth heads of government, US businessmen and a delegation of Bangladeshi expatriates. Even though these meetings may have had limited practical results, they at least represented a chance to promote Bangladesh and establish or strengthen ties for future developments. The Hasina-Modi meeting was the most meaningful, for several reasons. Firstly, it was the first ever meeting between the two prime ministers and, therefore, it was also much awaited. Secondly, it was important for the two leaders to get to know each other and continue to cultivate positive bilateral ties for the future. In

⁴⁰ During Hasina's first mandate, Bangladesh purchased from Russia 10 MiG-21s.

⁴¹ 'Is Bangladesh's foreign policy becoming India and Russia-centric?', *ibid.*, 15 April 2014.

spite of the change in the political leadership of India, the BJP government seems to be willing to adopt the line of its predecessor and maintain cooperative relations with Dhaka. During India-Bangladesh talks, Mr Modi praised Bangladesh and defined it as «a model for fighting terrorism».⁴²

6.6. *Bangladesh-US controversial relations*

Last but not least, US-Bangladesh relations deserve specific attention. The US expressed sharp criticism regarding the democratic correctness of the 2014 election results, decrying as inappropriate the Awami League's decision to fight them in spite of the BNP's abstention. The real reasons for the barely concealed US hostility towards Sheik Hasina's government, however, seem to be different. The special ties between India and Bangladesh have irritated Washington: India has been granted access to Bangladeshi ports and road networks; Indian companies have obtained exclusive rights on Bangladesh's gas reserves; Bangladesh's market has been flooded with Indian goods; taxes have been increased on Japanese imported cars, while being lowered on Indian cars; and the Indian telecommunication company, Bharti Airtel, has obtained tax advantages over other foreign companies. This policy – largely the outcome of Sheik Hasina's decisions – is defined as «irrational» by the US and the media which support the North American country. Also, India is charged with interfering with Bangladesh's internal affairs and exerting a hegemonic role in South Asia.⁴³ These factors interfere with American interests in the region, where Bangladesh is seen as an increasingly important player.

Firstly, Bangladesh straddles the new land and sea Silk Road envisioned by Washington, which should connect Central to Southeast Asia, passing across Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and China. Secondly, Bangladesh, with its large and growing middle class, is becoming a very attractive market. Finally, Bangladesh's skilled labour is a resource for industrial investments. The US is the largest market for Bangladesh's ready-made garments, the pivotal industrial production of the country. All the above-mentioned are economic advantages that the US could reap depending on Bangladesh's (and India's) attitude. The US expects to corner a conspicuous share of the huge economic gains to be made across South and Southeast Asia

⁴² 'Bangladesh: Diplomatic Manoeuvres at the UNGA', *ibid.*, 20 October 2014.

⁴³ In 2011, Chuck Hagel – whom President Barack Obama was to nominate Secretary of Defence on 7 January 2013 – had declared that India made use of its influence in Afghanistan against Pakistan, thus increasing instability in the region. '«India financed problems for Pakistan» from Afghanistan: Chuck Hagel', *The Express Tribune*, 26 February 2013.

and around the Bay of Bengal. However, the increasingly close Delhi-Dhaka connection obviously disturbs Washington.⁴⁴

7. *Economy and social issues*

South Asia's economic growth was 5.4% in September 2014 and 6.1% is expected for 2015. The optimistic forecasts for 2015 stem from the expected reforms of the Indian government to revive economic growth and from Bangladesh's and Nepal's sustained expansion.⁴⁵ Bangladesh's economic growth is supported by remittance inflows and by a strong internal demand.⁴⁶

Bangladesh's economy has grown rapidly since 2009 and it doubled the results of Khaleda Zia's government in 2006. This is considered one of Sheikh Hasina's main successes.⁴⁷

Thanks to Sheikh Hasina's intense diplomatic activity, bilateral trade with Myanmar amounted to \$100 million in 2014; it should reach \$500 million after the construction of the Sittwe-Kyaukpyu shipping line and 1 billion by 2020.⁴⁸

In spite of these encouraging results, in 2014 foreign investors adopted a cautious approach, fearing possible new political unrest due to the still precarious political situation.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, since the Bilateral Investment Protection and Promotion Agreement (BIPPA) signed by India and Bangladesh in 2009, the latter country became increasingly attractive for Indian investors. The main sectors where Indian companies have invested are power transmission lines, telecommunications, textiles, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, glass, plastics and engineering. Indian investments in Bangladesh in 2012 amounted to \$2.5 million and contributed to creating 51,653 jobs.⁵⁰ The South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Working Group, held in Kathmandu in November 2014, noted the progress of transport connectivity projects, but it recommended the completion of the still missing links, in order to transform transport corridors into economic corridors, and to promote multimodal transport connectivity to increase trade and investment opportunity among existing

⁴⁴ 'India-US chasm opens over Bangladesh', *Asia Times*, 21 January 2014; 'Bangladesh-US: Long Term Agendas over Short Term Fall-Outs', *IPCS Web Site*, 30 April 2014.

⁴⁵ 'Regional Cooperation Operations Business Plan South Asia 2015-2017', *Asian Development Bank*, December 2014.

⁴⁶ 'Growth Hesitates in Developing Asia', *Asia Development Outlook Supplement*, December 2014.

⁴⁷ 'One and only one'.

⁴⁸ 'East Meets West'.

⁴⁹ 'Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary'.

⁵⁰ 'India and Bangladesh'.

(and possibly future) corridors. Electricity transmission is the priority of SASEC Energy Working Group, with India as the hub interconnecting the projects of the SASEC countries. The use of regular ADB country-specific funding for national projects with regional implications is expected.⁵¹

Per la prima volta nella storia del Bangladesh, un primo ministro uscente ha vinto per la seconda volta consecutiva le elezioni. Questo è quanto è accaduto a Sheikh Hasina e al partito da lei guidato, la Lega Awami, a seguito delle elezioni del gennaio 2014. Sia l'opposizione, rappresentata soprattutto dal Bangladesh National Party (BNP) e dalla Jamaat-e Islam (JI), sia una parte della comunità internazionale hanno commentato negativamente tale risultato elettorale e il modo stesso in cui è stato raggiunto. Si è rimproverato infatti a Sheikh Hasina di avere voluto tenere le elezioni nonostante la decisione da parte del BNP e del JI di non parteciparvi. Una critica, questa, che non tiene conto del fatto che il mandato di Sheikh Hasina fosse giunto alla sua scadenza naturale e che sarebbe stato pretestuoso e antidemocratico rimandare i tempi delle elezioni in seguito a un'arbitraria imposizione da parte dei partiti d'opposizione. Sul fronte estero, le principali critiche all'esito elettorale sono arrivate dalla Gran Bretagna e dagli Stati Uniti. Quelle statunitensi sembrano essere state motivate non tanto dalle asserite questioni formali, quanto dal fatto, ben più sostanziale, che durante il governo di Sheikh Hasina il vigoroso rinserrarsi dei rapporti fra Bangladesh e India potrebbe tradursi in una diminuzione dell'influenza di Washington su Dacca.

Nel 2014 è poi proseguito il processo agli imputati per i crimini commessi durante la guerra civile del 1971, anche se con minore durezza di quanto non sia accaduto nel 2013, quando si era arrivati a due condanne a morte e a un'esecuzione.

Il secondo governo di Sheikh Hasina ha proceduto in due direzioni: sul piano interno, ha avviato un processo di democratizzazione e, sul piano internazionale, ha inaugurato una nuova politica estera, centrata sui rapporti regionali e volta a sfruttare al massimo la posizione strategica del Bangladesh per ottenere investimenti e vantaggi dai partner economici. Il Bangladesh si affaccia sul Golfo del Bengala, un'area doppiamente importante per i suoi giacimenti di gas naturale e per i collegamenti marittimi est-ovest. Inoltre, il Bangladesh si trova proprio al centro del crocevia tra Asia meridionale, Cina e Sud-est asiatico, lungo la direttrice di una rete di connessioni stradali, ferroviarie e marittime che gli Stati Uniti definiscono significativamente «Via della seta marittima del 21° secolo».

⁵¹ 'Regional Cooperation Operations Business Plan'.