



ASIA MAIOR

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Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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BANGLADESH 2021: THE YEAR OF THE GOLDEN JUBILEE
AND THE SECOND WAVE OF PANDEMIC

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In 2021, the pandemic continued inflicting a burdensome disruption on the Bangladeshi economy, weighting heavier on the poor and the new poor. However, in terms of macroeconomic indicators, the economy gave signs of early recovery. Also, Bangladesh was declared ready to officially graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026. At the domestic level, the year 2021 recorded a continuation of previous trends. State authorities often used violence in different forms to police dissent. In addition to this, the year saw one of the worst episodes of religion-based violence, aimed against the Hindu minority, symptomatic of the rise of Islamic extremism in the country. The Rohingya crisis continued unfolding both domestically, with the Bangladeshi government relocating refugees from the mainland camps to Bhasan Char; and internationally, with the passing of a resolution by the United Nations General Assembly. Relations with China and India remained central to foreign policy, moulded by the new needs created by the pandemic, but marked by ups and downs. Anti-India sentiment was showcased in violent protests that accompanied a high-level visit to Dhaka. Moreover, as Delhi abruptly halted its vaccines supplies, Chinese «Covid diplomacy» confidently stepped in. Dhaka appeared decided to keep balancing different partners to keep its options open and avoid turning any partnership into an exclusive one.

KEYWORDS – Bangladesh; pandemic; LDC graduation; Rohingya; hybrid regime; democracy; extremism.

1. Introduction

This article is an account of the most important developments in Bangladesh's economic, domestic, and foreign affairs of the year 2021, based on national and international newspapers, reports and data produced by government, intergovernmental and non-government agencies. The first section, «Economy», offers an overview of Bangladesh's macroeconomic indicators during the financial year 2020-21 and of the measures adopted by the government to face the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It also offers an update about where 2021 placed Bangladesh on its route to graduation from the LDC (Least Developed Country) status. The second section, «Domestic Politics», covers three salient aspects of Bangladeshi politics from the point of view of domestic

affairs, namely: the continued erosion of its democratic institutions; the Rohingya issue, and in particular the relocation of refugees from Cox's Bazar's camps to Bhasan Char; religious extremism including its connection to dissent. The third and last section, «Foreign Policy», deals with Bangladesh's bilateral relations with China, India, and other countries in the region, as well as with the internationalisation of the Rohingya crisis at the United Nations.

2. *Economy*

2.1 *Macroeconomic situation in the «second wave» of pandemic*

Considering the devastating economic consequences of the pandemic, in 2021 Bangladesh seemed to fare relatively well in terms of general macroeconomic indicators. According to data compiled by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), in the fiscal year (FY) 2020-21, GDP growth (at constant prices) was 6.94%, vis-à-vis 3.45% of FY 2019-20.¹

| Bangladesh's GDP growth | | | | | | |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Table 4. Gross Domestic Product of Bangladesh at Constant Prices (Base: 2015-16) (Million Tk.) | | | | | | |
| Industrial origin sector | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| Total GVA at constant basic price | 19,874,276 | 21,174,759 | 22,730,011 | 24,551,474 | 25,473,623 | 27,257,642 |
| Growth rate | - | 6.54 | 7.34 | 8.01 | 3.76 | 7.00 |
| Tax less subsidy | 883,937 | 951,470 | 1,015,729 | 1,065,882 | 1,027,026 | 1,081,802 |
| GDP at constant market price | 20,758,212 | 22,126,229 | 23,745,740 | 25,617,356 | 26,500,649 | 28,339,444 |
| Growth rate | - | 6.59 | 7.32 | 7.88 | 3.45 | 6.94 |

Source: 'Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bangladesh, 2020-2021', Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Table 4 (https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/057b0f3b_a9e8_4fde_b3a6_6daec3853586/2022-02-08-08-05-3347c0f140caa82212bc87e82f6181c5.pdf)

Furthermore, according to the BBS, the gross national income per capita (per capita GNI) increased to US\$ 2,591 in 2020-21, compared to 2,326 of the previous FY.²

1. 'Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bangladesh, 2020-2021', *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics*, Table 4, p. 4. The fiscal year in Bangladesh starts on 1 July and ends on the next 30 June.

2. *Ibid.*

Bangladesh's GNI

Table 8. Per capita GDP and GNI at Current Prices
(Base: 2015-16)

| | | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
|----------------|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| GDP | (Mill.Tk.) | 20,758,212 | 23,243,073 | 26,392,479 | 29,514,288 | 31,704,694 | 35,301,848 |
| GNI | (Mill.Tk.) | 21,730,750 | 24,045,571 | 27,447,912 | 30,723,235 | 33,017,012 | 37,159,966 |
| Population | (Mill.No.) | 159.9 | 161.8 | 163.7 | 165.6 | 167.4 | 169.11 |
| Per capita GDP | (In Tk.) | 129,828 | 143,698 | 161,274 | 178,280 | 189,361 | 208,751 |
| Per capita GNI | (In Tk.) | 135,911 | 148,659 | 167,723 | 185,583 | 197,199 | 219,738 |
| Exchange rate | (Taka per US\$) | 78.27 | 79.12 | 82.10 | 84.03 | 84.78 | 84.81 |
| GDP | (Mill. US\$) | 265,227 | 293,773 | 321,464 | 351,251 | 373,959 | 416,264 |
| GNI | (Mill. US\$) | 277,653 | 303,916 | 334,319 | 365,638 | 389,438 | 438,175 |
| Per capita GDP | (In US \$) | 1,659 | 1,816 | 1,964 | 2,122 | 2,234 | 2,462 |
| Per capita GNI | (In US \$) | 1,737 | 1,879 | 2,043 | 2,209 | 2,326 | 2,591 |

Source: 'Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bangladesh, 2020-2021', Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Table 8 (https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/057b0f3b_a9e8_4fde_b3a6_6daec3853586/2022-02-08-08-05-3347c0f140eaa82212bc87c82f6181c5.pdf)

According to the Economic Review of the year 2021 by the Bangladeshi Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh's imports and exports showed signs of early recovery. The country received a record-high US\$ 24,777.72 million remittances in FY 2020-21.³ The stimulus packages earlier approved by the government to finance health expenditures and provide financial help connected to the pandemic were increased, for a total fiscal and stimulus packages worth Tk. 1.28 trillion (April 2021), equal to 4.2% GDP.⁴ The trade deficit widened mainly due to an increase in the value of imports triggered by the pandemic. However, the deficit incurred in the current account balance showed signs of improvement compared to the previous FY. Besides, the overall balance recorded a surplus despite the deficit of the current account balance, and the foreign exchange reserves also increased to US\$ 45 billion at the end of April 2021, enabling Bangladesh to provide loans to other countries (see «Foreign Policy»).⁵ In June 2021, the Ministry of Finance recommended the possibility of further expanding the budget for the following FY. The estimated budget deficit amounting to 6.2% GDP was meant to stimulate domestic demand and enhance exports, to support the country's ongoing recovery from the shock of COVID-19.⁶ However, independent analyses of the budget identified various issues such as gaps in the

3. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Finance, *Bangladesh Economic Review*, pp. 7-9.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 81.

6. Arun Devnath, 'Bangladesh to Keep Spending Loose to Beat Pandemic Fallout', *Bloomberg*, 3 June 2021. Compare with: Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Finance, *Budget at a glance*; and 'Bangladesh unveils record high budget, eyes growth momentum amid pandemic', *XinhuaNet*, 3 June 2021.

government data; a poor reflection of the reality of the second COVID-19 wave, including the needs of the new-poor created by the pandemic; an overall pro-business orientation to the detriment of poor and low-income groups, reflected in the limited resources allocated to critical sectors such as health, social safety net, employment generation.⁷

The government started its vaccination programme on 27 January 2021. Because electronic devices were necessary to use the vaccine booking system, vaccination was less accessible to marginalised and rural populations.⁸ According to UNICEF, by the end of December 2021, 28.44% Bangladeshis had received a second dose.⁹ Like in its initial phase, also in 2021 the pandemic resulted in increased poverty and malnutrition, school interruption, domestic violence.¹⁰ The vaccination programme, which initially relied on the AstraZeneca vaccine provided by India's Serum Institute, faced a crisis when India imposed a ban on vaccine exports (see «Foreign Policy»). The Bangladesh government suddenly found itself in a scramble to secure new supplies, which were offered by China and Russia. In particular, an agreement for co-production of the Russian Sputnik-V vaccine in Bangladesh was signed in April.¹¹

2.2. LDC Graduation

Graduation from LDC status is an important milestone in Bangladesh's history and politics as it stands witness to the country's socio-economic transformation and also represents a victory for the leadership of Prime Minister Hasina's Awami League. In its 40th plenary meeting on 24 November 2021, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Resolution A/RES/76/8, titled «Graduation of Bangladesh, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal from the least developed country category».¹² The resolution took note of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) recom-

7. Fahmida Khatun, 'Budget FY2022 addresses pandemic priorities only partially – Fahmida Khatun', *Centre for Policy Dialogue*, 6 June 2021; Debapriya Bhattacharya, 'Disadvantaged people neglected in the budget', *Centre for Policy Dialogue*, 6 July 2021.

8. Fahmida Khatun, 'Budget FY2022 addresses pandemic priorities only partially – Fahmida Khatun'; Debapriya Bhattacharya, 'Disadvantaged people neglected in the budget'.

9. UNICEF, *In the race to get jabs into arms, UNICEF has now delivered more than 100 million COVID-fighting vaccines to Bangladesh*, 28 December 2021.

10. Debapriya Bhattacharya, 'Covid-19 makes things worse', *Centre for Policy Dialogue*, 24 November 2021.

11. 'Deal signed for local production of Russian vaccine in Bangladesh', *New Age Bangladesh*, 21 April 2021.

12. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Economic Analysis, *Graduation of Bangladesh, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal from the least developed country category*, 24 November 2021. The resolution is officially categorized as A/RES/76/8.

mendation for the graduation of Bangladesh (and the other countries), thus marking the satisfactory completion of all procedures necessary to qualify for graduation.¹³ The General Assembly endorsed the recommendation received from the ECOSOC to grant an exceptionally long (five years instead of three) preparation period in consideration of the disruptive pandemic. The Resolution thus scheduled Bangladesh to formally graduate in 2026, and enjoy support measures reserved for LDCs until then.¹⁴

3. Domestic politics

3.1 Freedom and Democracy

The year 2021 recorded continued erosion of political and civil freedoms with numerous instances of political control over the police and the judicial process and violent repression of dissent. In Freedom House's 2021 rating of *Freedom in the World*, Bangladesh's record in political rights and civil liberties scored 39/100 like in 2020, thus qualifying as «Partly Free».¹⁵ The Democracy Index (DI) presented yearly by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) – which categorises countries as «full democracy»; «flawed democracy»; «hybrid regime»; or «authoritarian regime» – has consistently assessed Bangladesh as a hybrid regime since 2007, when it was demoted from «flawed democracy» status.¹⁶ In the 2021 DI, Bangladesh was again marked as a «hybrid regime» along with 33 others, ranking 75th among 167 countries. Bangladesh thus moved one position ahead from its 76th spot of 2020, on the backdrop of a general worsening of democracy index scores for more than 70 countries. Improving on «civil liberties» and losing in «political participation», its overall score (5.99/10) remained unchanged from the previous year, placing it 3rd in South Asia after India (6.91) and Sri Lanka (6.14) and followed by Bhutan (5.71), Nepal (4.41), Pakistan (4.31), and Afghanistan (0.32; 167th position).¹⁷

The Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar recorded 107 extra-judicial killings, 23 enforced disappearances, 134 arrests under the Digital Security Act for material deemed derogatory against the Prime Minister or the Awami League party or offensive of religious sensibility, and 114 attacks on journalists.¹⁸

13. Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations, *The UN General Assembly adopts the resolution on graduation of Bangladesh from the LDC category*, 24 November 2021.

14. 'UNGA adopts resolution on Bangladesh's graduation from least developed country category', *XinhuaNet*, 25 November 2021.

15. 'Freedom in the World 2022', *Freedom House*, 2022.

16. 'Democracy Index 2021: The China challenge', *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2022, p. 34.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 13-16.

18. 'Human Rights Report 2021 Bangladesh', *Odhikar*, 31 January 2022, pp. 7-8.

On 10 December, on the occasion of Human Rights Day and at the end of a virtual «Democracy Summit» organized by U.S. President Biden, to which Bangladesh was not invited, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and seven current and former RAB officers for human rights violations.¹⁹

In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) put together by Reporters Without Borders, Bangladesh scored 152nd out of 180, a step below compared to the previous year despite a slight increase in its overall score.²⁰ Over the years, the WPFI reflected the decline in the freedom of press in Bangladesh, which had started at the 144th place in 2013. In 2021, authorities continued repressing dissent by means of unlawful detention and torture, like in the case of jailed writer Mushtaq Ahmed's death in unclear circumstance in February; and the surfacing of evidence of abuse inflicted on cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, released from jail after Ahmed's release.²¹ Special tribunals, the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA),²² and concerns over national security were instrumentally mobilised to quell journalists who investigate corruption and mismanagement linked to government agencies. In 2021 various cases made headlines including in international media. For example, Rozina Islam, a reporter for the leading newspaper Prothom Alo investigating corruption at the Ministry of Health during the pandemic, was unlawfully arrested, harassed, accused of espionage, and even subject to financial investigation.²³ Also exiled journalists who wrote against the government were targeted through harassment against their families in Bangladesh or direct harassment by foreign branches of the Awami League.²⁴

19. U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Treasury Sanctions Perpetrators of Serious Human Rights Abuse on International Human Rights Day*, 10 December 2021; Ali Riaz, 'US sanctions on Bangladesh's RAB: What happened? What's next?', *Atlantic Council*, 16 December 2021.

20. 'Bangladesh', *Reporters Without Borders*, 2022.

21. 'Bangladeshi writer Mushtaq Ahmed dies in jail; cartoonist Kabir Kishore allegedly abused in custody', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 25 February 2021.

22. The Digital Security Act, as the name suggests, is a law aimed at regulating virtual spaces to ensure digital security. However, it has been used to persecute those who voice opinions critical of the government, thus effectively turning into a powerful instrument of censorship.

23. 'Bangladesh court orders probe into torture claims by cartoonist', *Al Jazeera*, 15 March 2021; 'Rozina Islam gets prestigious award for journalism', *Dhaka Tribune*, 3 November 2021.

24. 'Branch of Bangladesh ruling party files complaint against Sweden-based journalist Tasneem Khalil', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 12 October 2021; 'Bangladesh Police Arrest, Hold Sister of Journalist Living in US', *Benar News*, 8 October 2021; 'Leading Bangladeshi Journalists Harassed By The Awami League In The United States', *The Coalition For Human Rights & Democracy In Bangladesh*, 24 September 2021.

3.3 *Rohingya crisis*

In 2021, the Bangladeshi government relocated approximately 19,000 Rohingya refugees from the camps of Cox's Bazar to the island of Bhasan Char. The relocation had started in December 2020. Dhaka's stance on the Rohingya crisis remained unchanged: that the only solution lied in the definitive repatriation to Myanmar of the entire Rohingya population, which Bangladesh continued hosting with tremendous effort. At the same time, as disengagement from Naypyidaw's side and following political turmoil in Myanmar confirmed that sustainable repatriation was unviable in the foreseeable future, the Bangladeshi government remained faced with the challenge of providing shelter to an increasing population packed in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. On the one hand, over a million refugees continued living for prolonged periods in temporary shelters and in overcrowded conditions, amid limited access to basic services, lack of employment, growing frustration, and restrictions to their movement prescribed by Bangladeshi authorities. According to UNICEF, which is among the agencies active in the camps: «In 2021, 150 fire incidences, heavy rain, landslides, windstorms, lightening and flooding affected 44,615 households (208,709 people including 108,528 children), further displacing approximately 62,600 and killing 21 people (half of them were children) in the Rohingya camps».²⁵ The arrival of the pandemic to Bangladesh added to the difficulties. As per UNICEF, «as of 31 December 2021, 1,585,539 COVID-19 cases were confirmed in Bangladesh with 28,072 deaths. Of this figure, 17,760 cases and 257 deaths were in the host communities in Cox's Bazar District and 3,308 cases and 34 deaths were reported among refugees in the camps».²⁶ Efforts to extend vaccination to the refugee population resulted at the end of the year in «41.2 per cent partially vaccinated and 28.4 per cent fully vaccinated of the target population as of 26 December 2021».²⁷ Thus, from the government's point of view, the expensive task of continuing to shelter and manage the Rohingyas also added to the difficulty of dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. Additionally, the refugee issue was increasingly framed as a security one, as the refugee population was seen as susceptible to turn to crime and radicalisation. All these elements contribute to the necessity of de-congesting the camps, which the government implemented by investing in the development of Bhasan Char.

The relocation began after the island was provided with the infrastructure necessary to the refugee's settlement and livelihood, including roads, housing, schools, mosques, clinics, markets, ponds and agricultural plots, and embankments aimed at preventing flooding. However, the gov-

25. UNICEF, *Bangladesh Humanitarian Situation Report No. 58 (1 January - 31 December 2021)*, 3 February 2022.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

ernment's plan was seen as controversial. The main criticism were three. The first was that Bhasan Char, being a non-permanent island, was prone to flooding hence unsafe for human settlement; the second criticism was that refugees would be relocated against their will, as many were opposed to the idea of leaving the camps; the third was that the government was carrying out the relocation independently from the UN agencies and away from their scrutiny.²⁸ This situation changed in 2021, as in October the Bangladeshi government and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) allowing the UN agency to operate on the island. Furthermore, based on the agreement, which was not made public, refugees' movement within the island reportedly ceased being restricted and their departure for/ from Bhasan Char was henceforth made conditional to approval by both the Bangladeshi government and the UNHCR. The MoU was reportedly welcomed by the Rohingyas of Bhasan Char and possibly contributed to halting their attempts to leave the island, which had earlier resulted in drowning when some had escaped by boat in August.²⁹ The perception of Bhasan Char by external observers seemed to have changed, at least partly. Video footage of life on the island published by both outlets controlled by the Bangladeshi government and independent ones showed refugees in improved living conditions when compared to those existing in Cox's Bazar's camps. At the same time, criticism continued to be voiced, as it was unclear whether and how many people were relocated forcefully and what was the future of the «refugee island».³⁰ In addition, in September 2021 Mohibullah, a prominent Rohingya activist, was murdered in a mainland camp and circumstances that, as these lines were written, were yet to be clarified. His murder was a major blow to the articulation of Rohingyas' voice as well as to the morale of Rohingya civil society.³¹

28. Nazmul Ahasan, 'UN to operate on controversial Rohingya island it once criticized', *Devex*, 6 August 2021.

29. 'Bangladesh: Rohingya Laud Deal to Allow UNHCR to Operate on Bhasan Char', *Benar News*, 19 October 2021; United Nations, *UN and Government of Bangladesh sign Memorandum of Understanding for Rohingya humanitarian response on Bhasan Char*, 9 October 2021; 'UN and Government of Bangladesh sign Memorandum of Understanding for Rohingya humanitarian response on Bhasan Char', *Dhaka Tribune*, 15 August 2021; 'Desperate Rohingya Drown While Fleeing Remote Bangladesh Island', *VOA*, 23 August 2021.

30. 'Bangladesh and UNHCR: Revise and Release Bhasan Char MoU, Ensure Freedom of Movement for Rohingya Refugees', *Fortify Rights*, 15 October 2021; Daniel Sullivan, 'Refugees International Statement on UNHCR-Bangladesh Deal on Bhasan Char', *Refugees International*, 13 October 2021.

31. Arafatul Islam, 'Bangladesh: Who killed Rohingya leader Mohibullah?', *Deutsche Welle*, 5 October 2021.

3.4 *Religious minorities, extremism, dissent*

On 13 October 2021, in correspondence with the Durga Puja (an annual Hindu festival of celebration of Goddess Durga, important to Bengali Hindus in particular), a Hindu temple in Cumilla was attacked by a mob. The assault was triggered by an episode of alleged Quran desecration within the temple, which further investigation revealed having been staged in order to provoke Muslim reaction.³² The culprit, later arrested, had purposefully placed the Quran at the feet of the temple's idols and live-streamed the visuals on Facebook. The violence – which many recognised as patterned, planned actions rather than riots – left at least seven dead after the police resorted to firing onto the crowd.³³ In addition to this, it caused protests and attacks on Hindu shrines to spread to other localities in the country over various days, making it necessary for the government to deploy the border guards and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an élite police unit, to bring order back.³⁴

Furthermore, in retaliation of the events in Cumilla, anti-minority violence spread across the border to the neighbouring Indian state of Tripura, where Muslim people, shrines, and property became targets, raising questions about police connivance and involvement of Hindu nationalist groups in the events.³⁵ Following the events in Cumilla and other localities in the country, a representative of the Bangladeshi government allegedly declared the government's intention to return to the 1972 Constitution, which is deemed more secular as it does not include the clause making of Islam the state religion. It was a reform that had been earlier considered but never implemented. Other government sources, however, reportedly denied the government was keen on the measure.³⁶ The episode of communal violence, the worse in decades but certainly not an isolated one, raised again questions among the national and international public opinion about the Awami League's handling of Islamic extremism, the freedom and safety of religious minorities within the country, and the amount of protection minority victims receive from the police.

Far from being a domestic issue only, the status of minorities also carried weight in the balancing of relations with India, which was faced with

32. Sohrab Hassan, 'From whom will the minorities seek help?', *Prothom Alo*, 16 October 2021.

33. 'Seven dead after violence erupts during Hindu festival in Bangladesh', *The Guardian*, 16 October 2021.

34. Subir Bhaumik, 'Why did Muslim hardliners attack Hindus in Bangladesh's worst bout of communal violence in two decades?', *South China Morning Post*, 20 October 2021.

35. Hannah Ellis-Petersen & Redwan Ahmed, 'Hindu-Muslim violence crosses border from Bangladesh to India', *The Observer*, 31 October 2021.

36. Nayamina Basu, 'Why Sheikh Hasina govt is unlikely to restore Bangladesh's «secular» 1972 constitution', *The Print*, 25 October 2021.

specular minority issues, namely Hindu majoritarianism and Islamophobia. The direct link between Hasina's handling of Islamist groups at home, the rise of extremists to the detriment of both minorities and bilateral relations was clear from the counter-attacks which took place in Tripura (abovementioned) as well as the violent protests in reaction to Modi's visit to Dhaka in March 2021, which featured also attacks on Hindu shrines.³⁷ These protests were led by Islamist groups, which got involved in violent clashes with the police and units of the Chhatra League, the student organization affiliated to the Awami League. Both Islamists and pro-government groups like the Chhatra League had a record of using violence; on its part, the Bangladeshi police was accused of using unnecessary and excessive force to quell the events. In addition to this, as the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in March, questions were raised about the potential resurgence of pro-Taliban terrorist groups in Bangladesh.³⁸

4. Foreign policy

4.1 Relations with China

In 2021, China remained Bangladesh's main trade partner, followed by India and Japan. Although Beijing had granted tariff exemption to several Bangladeshi products to boost their export to China,³⁹ the trade balance remained strongly tilted in favour of China, with the latter's exports to Bangladesh further increasing in 2021, possibly as a consequence of the pandemic, along with Chinese investments. The Chinese government thus proposed Bangladesh to enter into a free trade agreement (FTA), as a way to boost its exports and also mitigate the loss of trade-related perks which would come along with its imminent LDC graduation.⁴⁰ The China-Bangladesh FTA was discussed on multiple occasions by representatives of the two governments in Dhaka during the year and a joint feasibility study was initi-

37. 'Bangladesh violence spreads after PM Modi visit, attacks on Hindu temples, train', *Reuters*, 28 October 2021.

38. Iftekharul Bashir, 'Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Security Implications for Bangladesh', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, Vol. 13, Issue 14, September, 2021, pp. 19-24; 'Bangladesh: Islamists emboldened by Taliban win in Afghanistan', *Deutsche Welle*, 25 August 2021; 'Taliban's gains in Afghanistan pose fears of JMB's resurgence in East: Experts', *The Economic Times*, 15 August 2021; Masum Billah, 'Bangladesh «on alert» for militants amid Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan', *South China Morning Post*, 26 August 2021.

39. Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 275-303.

40. Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, *Bangladesh in FTA talks with China: minister*, 6 January 2021; 'Chinese ambassador: About time Bangladesh, China signed FTA with investment deal', *Dhaka Tribune*, 9 June 2021; 'Beijing for expediting Sino-Bangladesh FTA', *The Financial Express*, 4 March 2022.

ated. At the end of 2021, according to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, the China-Bangladesh FTA was still «under consideration».⁴¹

During the emergency caused by the global pandemic, Bangladesh found in China a reliable partner. Bangladesh has been at the centre of the India-China rivalry in South Asia. In recent years, the two Asian hegemons competed also in the provision of anti-COVID-19 assistance, thus the so-called «COVID diplomacy» turned into an additional field of power assertion. As far as COVID assistance to Bangladesh is concerned, in 2021, China seemed to have gained in this field, losing no time to fill in the vacuum left by New Delhi as India faced its worst crisis during the pandemic. Bangladesh started its vaccination programme on 8 February 2021 administering the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India. However, the programme came to a halt when, in March, India stopped the supply to prioritise its domestic demand, after Bangladesh had received seven of the 30 million doses earlier agreed.⁴² China was quick to step in. In May, it despatched 1.1 million Sinopharm doses to Dhaka as a gift,⁴³ which followed the 100,000 doses already given away in March.⁴⁴ In August, the Bangladesh Health Ministry said the country was set to receive a total of 60 million Sinopharm doses, partly under the COVAX scheme and partly purchased by the government.⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ Furthermore, later in the month, the Bangladesh government, Bangladesh's Incepta Vaccines Ltd and China's Sinopharm signed a tripartite MoU for Incepta to supply 5 million doses per month, to be added to the mentioned 60 million Sinopharm doses previously agreed upon.⁴⁷ Following China's activeness on the vaccine front, the US started supplying vaccines to Bangladesh as well, both as a grant and as part of the COVAX initiative.⁴⁸

Bangladesh remained also actively involved in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The latest project under the BRI to achieve completion in

41. People's Republic of China, Ministry of Commerce, *China FTA Network*.

42. 'Health Minister: Bangladesh will get 5.4 million more Covid vaccine doses by August 15', *Dhaka Tribune*, 9 August 2021; 'India blocks vaccine exports in blow to dozens of nations', *Financial Times*, 25 March 2021.

43. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *China Will Gift the Second Batch of 600,000 Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine to Bangladesh*, 21 May 2021.

44. 'Covid-19 vaccine: China offers Bangladesh 100k doses', *The Daily Star*, 15 March 2021.

45. 'Bangladesh receives 1.7 million doses of Sinopharm vaccine under Covax scheme', *Dhaka Tribune*, 10 August 2021.

46. COVAX is a scheme to accelerate the development and manufacturing of vaccines and provide vaccines to every country. It is co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Gavi, and the World Health Organization (WHO). UNICEF is a key delivery partner.

47. 'Govt signs deal with Sinopharm, Incepta', *The Daily Star*, 17 August 2021.

48. US Embassy in Bangladesh, *U.S. Delivers an Additional 3 Million Moderna Vaccines to Bangladesh*, 21 July 2021.

Bangladesh was the Bangabandhu Bangladesh-China Friendship Exhibition Center (BBCFEC) designed by the Beijing Institute of Architectural Design built in the outskirts of Dhaka by the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), funded by China. The BBCFEC was inaugurated in October 2021.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, there were negative developments as well. In April 2021, at least five workers of the S. Alam power plant, under construction with Chinese funds, were killed by police bullets during an on-site protest concerning work conditions.⁵⁰ The unfortunate event reflected negatively on China and the perception of Chinese-sponsored projects considered that the S. Alam (where also Chinese workers are involved) is one of the China-Bangladesh mega-projects, and the protesting Bangladesh workers were reportedly overseen by a Chinese contractor.

In June, two Chinese-backed rail projects, which had been agreed upon in 2016, suffered a setback. The Chinese government reviewed its decision to finance the Joydebpur-Ishwardi double-line project quoting unsatisfactory preliminary studies. In addition, China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, the Chinese firm that had contracted both the Joydebpur-Ishwardi and the Akhaura-Sylhet dual gauge project, stepped out of both projects after the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Office (PMO) directed the Ministry of Railways to lower the cost of the projects.⁵¹

At the same time, Dhaka gave signs to resist what might be perceived as Beijing's explicit attempts to push Chinese strategic interest into the bilateral relation. The controversy that emerged in 2021 regarding the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is perhaps the best and most-cited example of Bangladesh's push back. It is a well-known fact that China is strongly opposed to the QUAD, which sees the United States, India, Japan, and Australia allied in a loose framework and is perceived by Beijing as anti-Chinese. In May, while responding to journalists in Dhaka, Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming said that Bangladesh should refrain from joining the QUAD as that would damage its relationship with China. On the occasion, he reportedly defined the QUAD as «a military alliance aimed against China's resurgence and its relationship with neighbouring countries».⁵² The Chinese diplomat's statement was soon rebutted by Bangladeshi Ministry of Foreign Affairs Abul Kalam Abdul Momen, who

49. 'Exhibition center symbolizing friendship with China opens in Bangladesh', *XinhuaNet*, 22 October 2021.

50. 'Banshkhali Power Plant Site: 5 workers killed as cops open fire', *The Daily Star*, 18 April 2021; 'Bangladesh: Police Shoot Dead Five Protesters at China-Financed Power Plant', *Benar News*, 17 April 2021.

51. 'Bangladesh orders significant cuts in 2 China-funded railway projects', *Hindustan Times*, 11 November 2020; 'China's about-turn throws Bangladesh railway projects into jeopardy', *South Asia Monitor*, 10 June 2021.

52. 'Relations with China will be damaged if Bangladesh joins US-led 'Quad': envoy', *The Daily Star*, 10 May 2021.

stressed that as a sovereign country Bangladesh decides its own foreign policy. Momen also commented that Bangladesh had not yet taken any decision regarding the QUAD and that the Chinese ambassador's statement was unexpected.⁵³ In addition to this, media were quick to capture a comment by Gower Rizvi, advisor to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, at a virtual event hosted by a London think tank. Rizvi declared that the relationship with China was not to the detriment of the one with India, which remained Bangladesh's most important partner. Rizvi's statement that «We are part of China's BRI but we are very willing to be a part of the Indo-Pacific relationship» was taken as a reference to the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy, within which the US sees Bangladesh as a «centrepiece», and which is supported by India.⁵⁴ This suggested that Bangladesh, despite the absolute relevance of the Chinese partnership, remained alert to keep its options open and avoid entering into the strategic sphere of China in any way which could potentially isolate it from other partnerships.

4.2 *Relations with India*

Bangladesh's relations with India have been improving in the course of the last decade under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. The year 2021 was no exception to this positive trend, as it saw various instances of good neighbourly relations – from India's development and humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh, to continued exchange of high-level visits. At the same time, several issues still remained unresolved. In 2021, major outstanding issues were the sharing of the waters of the transboundary Teesta River; border management; and political tensions connected to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) promoted by Modi's party in India. In particular CAA and NRCs had negative repercussions on Bangladeshis' perception of India, which came to be viewed as an Islamophobic and potentially dangerous neighbour.

The Indian Prime Minister's long-delayed visit to Bangladesh finally took place on 26-27 March 2021, preceded by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka on 4 March. Modi's Bangladesh trip was the first one abroad for the Prime Minister since the outbreak of the pandemic. The high-level visit was a long-awaited one. Initially scheduled to take place in 2020, it was eventually cancelled – officially due to risks connected to COVID-19 – after its announcement had caused protests in Bangladesh.⁵⁵

53. 'China warns of substantial damage to ties if Bangladesh joins US-led Quad alliance; Dhaka calls it aggressive', *The Economic Times*, 11 May 2021; 'China has crossed the line when talking about Quad: Foreign minister', *Prothom Alo*, 11 May 2021.

54. 'We're part of China's BRI but India our «most important partner»: Bangladesh foreign advisor', *The Print*, 24 March 2021.

55. 'People Protest Modi's Upcoming Bangladesh Visit', *Dhaka Tribune*, 2 March 2020; Diego Maiorano, 'Democratic backsliding amid the Covid-19 pandemic in India', *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies*, 2022, pp. 16-17.

Visiting Bangladesh in 2021, Modi joined in the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of Bangladeshi independence (1971) – in which India, at that time led by the Congress Party, had played a critical role. The Indian Premier also celebrated the Mujib Borsho, a year-long commemoration of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary, earlier scheduled for 2019-20 but later postponed to 2021 due to the pandemic.⁵⁶

The visit also offered an opportunity for the two Prime Ministers to review the state of bilateral relations and push forwards the India-Bangladesh partnership. At the end of the visit, Modi gifted to Bangladesh 1.2 million doses of the India-manufactured AstraZeneca vaccine, which Bangladesh had been already using, having earlier secured supply under a deal with India's Serum Institute.⁵⁷ Modi's gift was an expression of India's «COVID-diplomacy», another field where New Delhi faced Chinese competition in Bangladesh (see «Relations with China»). According to data by the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi, Bangladesh was India's top recipient of vaccines, as approximately 22.6 million doses were supplied to the country via multiple despatches throughout 2021, the supply being a mix of grants, commercial purchases, and doses delivered under the COVAX programme.⁵⁸

In the joint statement released after the state visit, the two governments defined the state of bilateral relations as «excellent» and the bilateral partnership as «all-encompassing [...] based on equality, trust and understanding that transcends even a strategic partnership».⁵⁹ The commemoration of 1971 featured prominently in the visit, and included various events. Among these, India's launch of a new scholarship scheme, the Suborno Jayanti Scholarships, to benefit 1000 Bangladeshi students, with 500 seats under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and 500 under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).⁶⁰ In the course of the visit, Modi and Hasina signed a total of 5 MoUs.⁶¹

56. Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development'.

57. 'India's Modi gifts Bangladesh 1.2 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine', *Reuters*, 28 March 2021.

58. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Vaccine Supply*, last updated 16 March 2022.

59. Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, *Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh*, 27 March 2021.

60. 'About SJS', *Suborno Jayanti Scholarships* (https://www.sjsdhaka.gov.in/sjs_index).

61. MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Disaster Management, Resilience and Mitigation; MoU between Bangladesh National Cadet Corps (BNCC) and National Cadet Corps of India (INCC); MoU on Establishment of a Framework of Cooperation in the Area of Trade Remedial Measures between Bangladesh and India; Tripartite MoU on Supply of ICT Equipment, Courseware & Reference Books and Training for Bangladesh-Bharat Digital Service and Employment Training (BDSET) Centre; and Tripartite MoU for Establishment of Sports Facilities at Rajshahi College Field and Surrounding Areas.

The Prime Ministers discussed the possibility of boosting partnership through trade liberalisation, cooperation in the jute sector; strengthening sub-regional cooperation in the fields of power and energy, including with Nepal and Bhutan; promoting overland connectivity through multilateral projects and enhancement of transboundary connectivity among land ports. They also renewed their commitment to the completion of ongoing infrastructure projects, including the implementation of the Katihar-Parbotipur-Bornagar cross border electricity interconnection. They also discussed the possibility of expanding cooperation to new sectors, including that of Biosecurity, proposed by Bangladesh as a relevant one in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the March visit, another matter of discussion was the Teesta River question, as Hasina reiterated Bangladesh's request for an interim agreement on the sharing of its the waters.⁶² Bangladesh had repeatedly asked for an increased water share, necessary to many Bangladeshis whose livelihood depends on the river. However, the agreement penned by the two governments in 2011 remained at a draft stage due to the opposition of West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, across whose state the Teesta flows in its Indian tract.⁶³ While in March Modi assured Hasina of India's commitment towards the finalisation of the deal, this appeared soon unlikely in light of the result of the West Bengal elections. In fact, the elections, held in May 2021, ended in a landslide victory of Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) and a sound defeat of the BJP, despite its sustained effort to capture the state.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, earlier in March, Modi and Hasina had inaugurated via video-link the Maitri Setu (Friendship Bridge) over the river Feni, joining Bangladesh with India's Tripura state.⁶⁵

Border control remained another cause of frequent tensions between Dhaka and Delhi.⁶⁶ From the two governments' point of view, besides sustained smuggling, deaths on the border were the most critical issue, which continued to be very real throughout 2021. While border violence makes victims among Indians and Bangladeshis alike, the latter consistently figure

62. 'Hasina seeks fair share of Teesta water to alleviate sufferings of millions', *United News of Bangladesh*, 27 March 2021.

63. Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development'; for further details, see: Amit Ranjan, *Contested Waters: India's Transboundary River Water Disputes in South Asia*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2021, Ch. 3: 'Water Disputes between India and Bangladesh'.

64. Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata Resists the BJP's Might, Wins Big in Bengal', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 19 May 2021.

65. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Prime Minister to inaugurate Maitri Setu between India and Bangladesh*, 7 March 2021.

66. Silvia Tieri, 'Migration, borders, and security discourses in the time of COVID-19: the case of migration from Bangladesh to India', *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies*, RSC 2021/81.

in higher numbers.⁶⁷ Bangladeshi NGO Odhikar recorded 29 human rights violations by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF).⁶⁸ In early 2021, India and Bangladesh renewed their pledge to fence those border tracts that had remained unfenced.⁶⁹ Also, Bangladesh repeatedly requested India to adopt a people-oriented approach to security and refrain from using lethal weapons.⁷⁰ It does not come as a surprise that border control constituted the object of discussion during high-level bilateral visits. In March 2021, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, while in Dhaka ahead of Modi's visit, made a remark that seemingly linked border killings with crime. This caused great displeasure in Bangladesh, since Jaishankar's statement was understood as a justification of the killings in the name of crime prevention.⁷¹ Later in the same month, while hosting Modi in Dhaka, Hasina «reiterated the request for 1.3 km Innocent Passage through river route along with River Padma near Rajshahi District, on humanitarian grounds», while the Indian side «requested for completion of border fencing at all pending sectors at the international border at the earliest, beginning from the Tripura (India) - Bangladesh sector».⁷²

Besides being a bilateral issue, in recent years Indo-Bangla border control and illegal migration from Bangladesh have featured prominently in the campaigning of the BJP in India's Bangladesh-bordering states, such as Assam and West Bengal. While BJP politicians have often accused Bangladeshis of «infiltrating» into the country and appropriate Indians' resources, the Bangladeshi government countered that «the perception that a lot of Bangladeshis are moving to India is not true».⁷³ On top of this, India's reputation in Bangladesh has worsened considerably following the passing of the CAA in the Indian Parliament and the debate on the status of Bangla-

67. 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', *Odhikar*, March 2021; 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (April-June) 2021', *Odhikar*, June 2021.

68. 'Human Rights Report 2021 Bangladesh', *Odhikar*, 31 January 2022, p.7.

69. 'India, Bangladesh Agree to Speed up Border Fencing', *The Hindu*, 27 February 2021; 'About 76 Pc of India-Bangladesh Border Covered by Fence: MHA', *ANI*, 3 August 2021.

70. 'Bangladesh Once Again Requests India to Use Non-Lethal Weapons at the Border', *The Daily Star*, 27 February 2021; 'BSF Must Use Non-Lethal Weapons on Border, Bangladesh Tells India', *The Hindu*, 21 July 2021.

71. 'India's Message on Border Killings Is Loud and Clear: Like It or Lump It!', *The Daily Star*, 11 March 2021; 'Killings along India-Bangladesh Border Because of Crime: Jaishankar', *The Hindu*, 4 March 2021.

72. Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, *Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh*.

73. 'Bangladeshis aren't termites – FM Abdul Momen Says Idea of Illegal Immigration to India Wrong', *The Print*, 27 March 2021.

desh's religious minorities that ensued in 2019-2020.⁷⁴ The CAA, in synergy with the NRC is seen as an Islamophobic law that criminalises Bengali Muslims.⁷⁵ In addition, it caused fears of a potential Muslim exodus from India into Bangladesh. Overall, these looming issues explain why Modi's visit to Dhaka in March 2021 was met with protests which soon turned violent, especially in Chittagong, resulting in 12 casualties at least (see also «Domestic Politics»).⁷⁶ Overall, India remained an important partner but, at the same time, its reputation kept suffering; and, with India's, that of Hasina's party which was seen, especially by its detractors, as excessively pro-India.

4.3. *Other relevant developments in regional and multilateral affairs*

The Rohingya crisis remained the major issue spanning the country's domestic, regional, and multilateral affairs. It is a well-known fact that Bangladesh has been the major host country for the Rohingyas who fled military violence in Myanmar since 2014 (and earlier).

Dhaka's plans to permanently repatriate the refugees have met with a lack of cooperation from the Myanmar government. In February 2021, a coup brought the military back to power in Naypyidaw, crushing hopes of a new era of democratic governance which the November 2020 elections seemed to have ushered.⁷⁷ After the coup, the Bangladeshi Mission to the UN issued a brief press release which read: «Bangladesh firmly adheres to and promotes democratic ethos. We hope that the democratic process and constitutional arrangements will be upheld in Myanmar. As an immediate and friendly neighbour, we would like to see peace and stability in Myanmar. We have been persistent in developing mutually beneficial relations with Myanmar and have been working with Myanmar for the voluntary, safe and sustained repatriation of the Rohingyas sheltered in Bangladesh. We expect these processes to continue in right earnest».⁷⁸

While underlying Bangladesh's proactive stance vis-à-vis a sustainable solution to the political crisis in Myanmar, the statement did not condemn the coup as such. The government avoided a stronger stance in order to

74. 'Bangladesh Foreign Minister Cancels Visit, India Brushes Away Speculation on CAB Link', *The Wire*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Cancels Foreign, Home Ministers' India Visits', *The Hindu*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Junior Foreign Minister Cancels India Visit', *The Wire*, 11 January 2020.

75. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy: building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 345-395.

76. 'Violent Protests Spread in Bangladesh after Modi Visit', *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2021; 'Four shot dead in Bangladesh's Hathazari after protest against Narendra Modi's visit turns violent', *Firstpost*, 27 March 2021.

77. 'Timeline - Myanmar's year of turmoil since the military coup', *Bangkok Post*, 25 January 2022.

78. Permanent Mission of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations, *Press release on the situation in Myanmar*, 1 February 2021.

keep the plan of Rohingyas' repatriation to Myanmar with the necessary cooperation of Naypyidaw viable.⁷⁹

Following the February coup, on 17 November 2021, the UN Third Committee (Human Rights) approved the resolution entitled «Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar» (A/C.3/76/L.30/Rev.1).⁸⁰ It was later adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 2021, at its 53rd plenary meeting.⁸¹ The resolution condemned the situation in Myanmar and called on the government to end the state of emergency. It also praised Dhaka's generosity for its sheltering of the refugees and urged the international community to offer support to Bangladesh. Many pointed out that, although the resolution carried political value for having been supported by a large number of countries, including China and Russia, it did not constitute any concrete step towards a solution of the crisis.⁸² At the end of the year, Bangladesh spoke again through its UN delegation to «the international community and the relevant UN agencies» calling for burden sharing in the management of the Rohingya refugee problem.⁸³

As far as South Asian affairs are concerned, it is noteworthy that in 2021 Bangladesh became a provider of financial assistance for smaller countries within the region. In late May, the Bangladesh Bank (BB), the country central bank, approved in principle a US\$ 200 million currency swap deal for Sri Lanka, aimed to help Colombo deal with the problem of its depleting foreign reserves.⁸⁴ It was the first instance of a South Asian country other than India offering macroeconomic support to another South Asian country.⁸⁵ Later in the year, in December, the Maldives sought and obtained

79. Roshni Kapur & Jasneha Sarma, 'Myanmar Coup and the Rohingya Crisis: Responses across South Asia', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 8 June 2021.

80. United Nations, Digital Library, Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights situations and reports of special rapporteurs and representatives: report of the 3rd Committee: General Assembly, 76th session', 2021.

81. United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 December 2021*, A/RES/76/180, 11 January 2022 (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3954767?ln=en>); Permanent Mission of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations, *UN adopts Rohingya resolution by consensus*, 17 November 2021.

82. Mohammad Zaman, 'After the UN resolution on Rohingya crisis, what comes next?', *The Daily Star*, 22 November 2021; 'UN Resolution Lacks Commitments To Address Protracted Displacement, Fails To Reflect The Gravity Of The Current Crisis In Myanmar', *Progressive Voice Myanmar*, 26 November 2021.

83. Permanent Mission of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations, *We urge the international community to scale up their efforts for burden and responsibility sharing to the Rohingya crisis –Ambassador Rabab Fatima at the UN*, 10 December 2021.

84. 'Bangladesh agrees \$200 million currency swap deal to help Sri Lanka', *BDnews24.com*, 26 May 2021; '\$250m currency swap: Sri Lanka gets first tranche of \$50m this week', *The Daily Star*, 18 August 2021.

85. Sanjay Kathuria, 'As Bangladesh Rises, Sri Lanka Finds India is Not the Only Neighbour With Deep Pockets', *The Wire*, 10 June 2021.

a US\$ 200 million long-term loan from the BB.⁸⁶ While standing witness to the extent of Bangladesh's macroeconomic growth, these measures also showed that Bangladesh might be able to play a more proactive role within the framework created by the increasing India-China rivalry in South Asia.

Last but not least, in November 2021, Bangladesh assumed the chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and hosted the 21st IORA Council of Ministers meeting in a hybrid format, in Dhaka and online.⁸⁷

5. Conclusions

In 2021, Bangladesh celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence on the backdrop of both achievements and challenges, the latest of which was the management of the pandemic's second wave. The long-awaited UN resolution scheduling Bangladesh to formally graduate from LDC status in 2026 set the ideal tone for the anniversary, as it epitomised the remarkable trajectory of the country that in its infancy had been notoriously dubbed an «international basket case». As 2021 offered a cue to reflect on its five decades of independence from Pakistan, there were also issues that made the celebration bitter-sweet. Among them, the violence against Hindus on the day of Durga Puja was possibly the most shocking one, as in the eyes of many Bangladeshis it cast a shadow on the very idea of Bangladesh as a «People's» Republic and a secular Muslim-majority nation-state, in the year of its golden jubilee.

86. 'Maldives seeks loan from Bangladesh', *The Daily Star*, 4 December 2021; 'Bangladesh to Provide USD 200 Million Loan to Maldives', *Corporate Maldives*, 16 December 2021.

87. 'Bangladesh assumes IORA chairmanship', *The Daily Star*, 18 November 2021; 'Official Press Release: 21st IORA Council of Ministers Meeting on 17 November 2021 held by the People's Republic of Bangladesh.', *IORA News*, 17 November 2021.

