



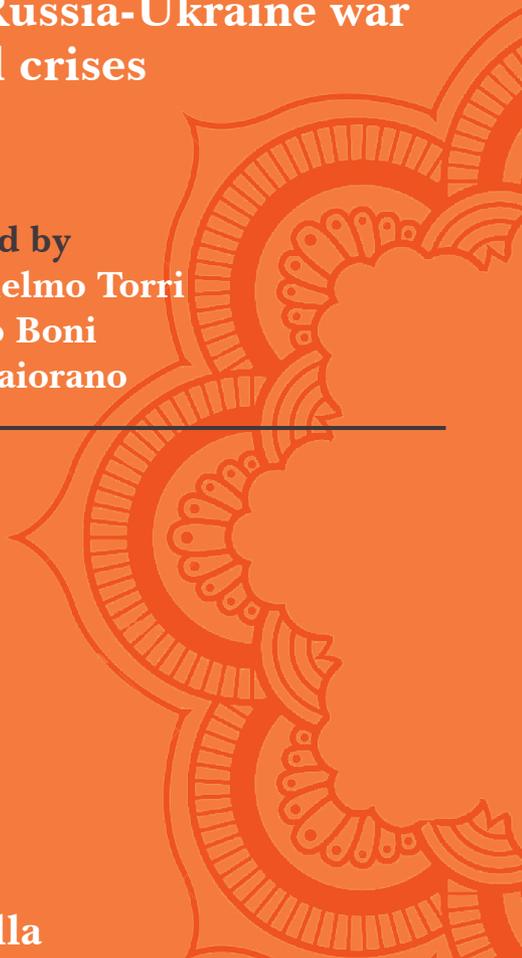
ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIII / 2022

Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



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

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

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ISBN 979-12-5496-365-0 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5496-366-7 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXIII, 2022

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it		www.viella.it	

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BANGLADESH 2022: CHALLENGING POST-PANDEMIC TIMES

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In 2022, Bangladesh was criticized at the national and international level due to poor protection of civil and political rights. The country experienced spiking inflation, also due to global post-COVID monetary policies, while floods brought again destruction to the northeastern districts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine contributed to increase the price of certain imports and halted supply chains. Bangladesh's reaction to the war and its internationalization at the UN was cautious, reflecting its traditional tendency to avoid neat alignments. Relations with India were at a high according to official sources, and were indeed characterized by frequent high-level visits and growing partnership in various fields. However, this was insufficient to bring solution to lingering bilateral disputes and halt the rise of anti-India sentiment in the country. Likewise, Dhaka's partnership with Beijing was not free from criticism, while major infrastructure projects aided by Chinese finances were inaugurated. No real progress could be made to ease if not resolve the Rohingya's plight.

KEYWORDS – Bangladesh; sanctions; inflation; post-COVID; dissent.

1. Introduction

This paper reviews the events occurred in Bangladesh in 2022 from the point of view of domestic, economic, and foreign policy. It does so based on data sourced from newspapers, reports and statements published by major government agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), and inter-governmental institutions. The paper features three sections, each dealing with domestic, economic, and international affairs, respectively. The first section looks at the situation of civil and political rights in the country. It is not new that in the country the space for dissent has been shrinking. However, in 2022 this issue received larger attention internationally due to the sanctions imposed by a U.S. agency on a Bangladeshi para-military force controlled by the Government, on the ground of human rights violations. Besides, the first section briefly reviews important developments concerning the status of Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh; law reforms; and the political situation in the Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT). The second section of the paper looks at the country's economic affairs, thus reviewing GDP growth, trade balance, monetary policy, inflation levels, fiscal policy. The third and last section focuses on foreign policy: it deals with Bangla-

desh's positioning vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war and salient aspects of its bilateral relations with India, China, and Myanmar.

2. *Domestic affairs*

The shrinking of civil and political rights and the deterioration of the rule of law in Bangladesh produced massive activism and journalist reporting both at the national and international level for years, ever since the Government took an authoritarian turn. From this point of view, the year 2022 did not see significant improvements, as reflected in various independent reports. In the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index for the year 2022, Bangladesh's score further decreased to 0.39 from 0.40 of the previous year. Bangladesh thus ranked 124th out of 139 countries in the world, and 4th out of 6 countries in South Asia ['Bangladesh' 2022a]. The country's score fell also in the *World Press Freedom Index* by Reporters Without Borders (RWB), resulting in 36.63 (50.29 in 2021) and placing Bangladesh 162th in the world (152th in 2021) ['Bangladesh' 2022b]. In Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2022* report, Bangladesh remained stable with a score of 39/100, thus qualifying as «partly free», like in the previous two years ['Bangladesh' 2022c]. Bangladesh reportedly underwent a 19-point decline in its aggregate score across the decade, which was one of the most dramatic 10-year declines observed in the Freedom House study [Repucci & Slipowitz 2022].

Through the years, the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Bangladeshi state and the corresponding worsening of human rights in the country became most visible in a number of phenomena, including the silencing of political opponents, first and foremost the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its supporters; the harassment and kidnapping of independent journalists; and the extra judicial killings of those who publicly voice their opposition to the government by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a special paramilitary force. In late 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) had sanctioned the RAB for human rights violation, a move which yielded its effects in 2022. On the one hand, as a consequence of the sanctions, extra-judicial killings and open use of violence in connection to the para-military agency appeared to drop. On the other, the Bangladeshi Government reportedly engaged in a campaign of harassment against dissidents and their family members and supporters. On 14th March 2022, a group of UN experts appealed to the Government to stop harassment of activists and family members of forcibly disappeared persons, who were targeted with renewed vehemence by government forces following the sanctions [United Nations 2022a]. However, the Bangladeshi Government rejected the U.S. sanctions. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina discarded the accusations of human rights violations by rewarding two sanctioned RAB officials with medals in January 2022, for the service they ren-

dered to the country in 2021 [Rashid 2022, 24 January]. In October 2022, U.S. Ambassador Peter Haas called for a reform of RAB in order for the sanctions to be lifted. The diplomat's remark met the prompt reply of RAB's new Director General, M. Khurshid Hossain, who maintained that the force does not require reform and that no input to reform it had been signalled from the Government. He added that RAB had provided the U.S. all information necessary to their enquiry [*The Daily Star* 2022g, 2 October].

Reportedly, rallies and events of the BNP (the major opposition party) were systematically obstructed by the police or the Chhatra League, that is the student union affiliated with the Awami League, the incumbent party [Bergman 2022, 17 June]. Cases of violent student activism in major university institutions saw the Chhatra League clashing with other student organizations of opposite political ideology [Rubel 2022, 26 May].

In June, in a letter addressed to the Bangladeshi Minister of Law Anisul Huq, Amnesty International urged the Government to drop the charges it had moved in 2021 against journalist Rozina Islam – 2021 *Free Press Award* awardee for most resilient journalist in 2021 ['Bangladesh: Letter to' 2022].

Another event which placed Bangladesh's freedom of speech under discussion, including on international news outlets, was the PMO's NGO Affairs Bureau's decision to cancel the registration of Odhikar in June. Odhikar is a prominent private Bangladesh-based NGO well-known for its monitoring of human rights violations in the country, including the publishing of open-access term reports. The NGO's application for registration renewal had been pending for years. The Government justified its eventual cancellation citing irregularities in the NGO's activities, discrepancies in the data of its publications, and the anti-national character of some of its undertakings, which it deemed responsible of having tarnished Bangladesh's international reputation [*The Daily Star* 2022c, June 7].

Soon after the de-registration of Odhikar, in August, Bangladesh received Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The official visit spanned over 4 days and took place on the Bangladeshi Government's invitation. The Government's stake in the visit was subject to speculation, and some suggested that the event provided it with an opportunity to whitewash its authoritarian character in the eyes of the international public opinion [*NetraNews* 2022a, June 21]. While in Bangladesh, Bachelet interacted with government officials and civil society, and visited the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar in order to discuss and appraise the human rights situation in the country. Bachelet wrapped up her visit with a press conference in Dhaka, during the course of which, while praising Bangladesh for «remarkable economic and social progress», and for providing «refuge to more than 1 million Rohingya refugees», she also stated that Bangladesh «continues to face challenges on the human rights front» [United Nations 2022a]. Among other recommendations, the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Government to ratify the

Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance and recommended the repeal and revision of certain provisions of the Digital Security Act [United Nations 2022a].

Having visited the camps of Cox's Bazar in the course of her visit, Bachelet's remarks also touched upon the Rohingya situation. She praised Bangladesh's effort in hosting the refugees and called on the international community to lend the country support in this endeavour. At the same time, she said to be «very worried about increasing anti-Rohingya rhetoric in Bangladesh, stereotyping and scapegoating Rohingyas as the source of crime and other problems» [United Nations 2022a]. In the refugee camps, the murder of popular Rohingya leader and activist Mohib Ullah in Cox's Bazar in September 2021 had been a shocking event for the community. In 2022, the Bangladeshi Government charged 29 Rohingya men for Ullah's murder and arrested some of them [*Aljazeera* 2022a, June 13]. The school Mohib Ullah had founded was among the private schools catering to Rohingya camp-dwelling children which were shut down by the Bangladeshi Government in 2022, on the ground of irregular paperwork [*Aljazeera* 2022b, March 29].

In August 2022, Grameen Telecom – presided by Peace Nobel Prize winner and founder of Grameen Bank, Md Yunus – was subject to investigation for alleged money-laundering by the Bangladesh Anti-Corruption Commission, in what appeared a case of unjustified investigation against individuals seen by the Government as political threats. A new report released in the same month by Netra News, a news outlet banned in Bangladesh, brought to the attention of the public information about a secret detention centre, known as Aynaghar (House of Mirrors), allegedly run by Bangladesh's Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) in the very capital city of Dhaka to detain high-profile dissidents who had been forcefully disappeared [*NetraNews* 2022b, 14 August].

In September, Bangladesh received yet another high-profile UN visit. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, Ian Fry, visited the country from 4 to 15 September 2022 [United Nations 2022b]. In the press conference ending his visit, Fry condemned the harassment of climate change activists who oppose climate-unfriendly policies and projects pursued by the Government. He called for a reform of the Digital Security Act (DSA) through which online activists are prosecuted for their views [*Newage Bangladesh* 2022c, 15 September]. In October, the Government presented the draft of the Data Protection Act, 2022, which, according to various commentators, instead of correcting the excesses and ambiguous definitions of the Data Security Act, violates Bangladeshis' rights to free expression and privacy [Rohman 2022, 17 October].

On the other hand, law reform saw an important step forward in gender equality in March, when the cabinet approved in principle the draft 'Ev-

idence (Amendment) Bill, 2022', a bill repealing existing provisions based on which a rape victim's «character» could be subject to questioning during trial [*Newage Bangladesh* 2022a, March 15].

On the front of work-place-related rights and safety, the year 2022 saw both positive and negative developments. On 22 March 2022, Bangladesh ratified the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), an International Labour Organization (ILO) fundamental convention aimed at the eventual eradication of child labour. So doing, the Bangladeshi Government completed the ratification of all ILO fundamental instruments [International Labour Organization 2022]. The ratification appeared ever more significant as it came in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed children in economically-vulnerable families to drop-off school and enter work to support the household economy.

A couple of months later, however, the country was shaken by a major man-made disaster. In early June a massive explosion followed by a fire, caused by irregular storage of chemicals, in a container depot in Sitakunda upazila near Chittagong, killed at least 49 people and injured 450, sparking criticism about work-place conditions and the frequency of industrial disasters in the country, which are not uncommon due to poor safety measures [*Dhaka Tribune* 2022, 5 June].

Last but not least, in June the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), a Chittagong Hills Tract (CHT) rebel group, presented a draft peace proposal addressed to the Bangladesh Government via a facilitator [Mahmud 2022, 14 June]. The CHT is a hilly area of Bangladesh, home to many groups which are ethnic minorities in the country [Faiaz 2021, 30 July]. The UPDF was born as an off-shoot of the Parbatya Chattagram Janasanghati Samity (PCJSS) when the latter entered into a peace accord with the Sheikh Hasina Government in the late 1990s to end conflict in the CHT, accord that the UPDF rejected instead. The UPDF offer of talks with the Government was seen as potentially significant to end ethnic strife in the CHT, where the two militant groups had been engaged in an extended turf war and minorities allege abuses from Bengali settlers and the Government.

3. *Economic affairs*

In 2022, as economies around the world were recovering to pre-COVID-19 levels, the war in Ukraine introduced strong disruptions to the recovery path. In October 2022, the World Bank revised down the GDP growth forecast of Bangladesh for financial year (FY) 22-23 to 6.1 per cent [*The Business Standard* 2022c, 6 October]. For the FY under discussion, it projected average growth in South Asia at 5.8 per cent, thus placing Bangladesh well above the average, as the third fastest growing country after the Maldives (8.2 per cent) and India (7 per cent). The Bank also found no significant

hurdles for the economy to rebound in the next fiscal year, and projected a 6.2 per cent economic growth for FY 23-24. It is significant to note that this projection is 80 basis points higher than the previous one by the World Bank for the same year. Similarly, the Asia Development Bank (ADB) cut down the growth projections for Bangladesh for FY 23 to 6.6 per cent, as stated in the September 2022 Asia Development Outlook report [Asian Development Bank 2022]. The above projections, however, were short of the Bangladeshi Government set target of 7.5 per cent for the 22-23 fiscal year [Bdnews24.com 2022, 9 June].

As far as trade was concerned, Bangladesh reported a trade deficit of BDT 236.2 billion (US\$ 2.25\$ billion) [‘Bangladesh Balance of Trade’ 2022] as of October 2022. Petroleum and oil (11 per cent) and food items (11 per cent) being significant components of Bangladeshi imports, elevated crude oil and food prices impacted the country’s import bills. This caused Bangladesh’s earlier trade deficit of BDT 150 billion (US\$ 1.43 billion) (beginning of 2021) to grow by 50 per cent approximately. Albeit Bangladesh did post outstanding export earnings of US\$ 52.08 billion in 2021-22 fiscal year, way above the target of US\$ 43.5 billion. In November 2022, Bangladesh reported the highest ever single month earnings of US\$ 5.09 billion of which garments contributed US\$ 4.37 billion. Notwithstanding the increasing exports, Bangladesh’s trade deficit widened on the account of the inflationary and currency pressures, whose impact was felt globally.

In July 2022, the average retail price of low quality (coarse) rice was Bangladeshi BDT 52 (US\$ 0.56) per kilogram, approximately 13 percent higher than the same period last year [United States Department of Agriculture 2022]. The retail price of high-quality non-aromatic (fine) rice too reached a record high around the same time [United States Department of Agriculture 2022]. On June 23, 2022, the Government of Bangladesh reduced the rice import tariff from 62.5 percent to 25 percent to encourage the private sector to import [The Daily Star 2022d, June 23]. From July 2022, it also imposed a ban on the export of aromatic rice and other key produce to control its price in the local market [The Daily Star 2022f, July 2]. The export ban was akin to measures adopted by other countries in the region, such as India and Afghanistan, in order to control the local prices [Jacob 2022, 19 September].

During the year under review, coincidental with the rising commodity prices, annual inflation rose rapidly, peaking at 9.52 per cent [‘Bangladesh Inflation Rate’ 2022] in the month of August. In the last 4 months of 2022, overall inflation came off its peak to 8.71 per cent helped by the retrace-ment in the prices of food products. Non-food product inflation remained high at 9.98 per cent in December 2022. The US Dollar Index rose from 95 in January 2022 to 115 in September, finally cooling off to 105 in December 2022 [‘United States Dollar’ 2022]. In line with the global currencies, also the BDT devalued by more than 25 per cent against the US\$, from 85 in

January 2022 to 103 in December 2022 [‘United States Dollar’ 2022]. Coupled with inflation, the strengthening of US\$ against the BDT impacted the foreign reserves further and created significant challenges for the country as a net trade importer with bills to pay in US\$.

According to the data by the Central Bank, depreciating currency and increasing current account deficit caused the Forex reserves to dwindle to US\$ 35 billion by November 2022, as compared to US\$ 46 billion of one year before [*Newage Bangladesh* 2022d, 23 October]. As a result, Bangladesh requested an IMF loan to curtail the situation, which was provisionally agreed upon at US\$ 4.5 billion [International Monetary Fund 2022]. The IMF reported that a «staff-level agreement» was reached for US\$ 3.2 billion from its Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and Extended Fund Facility (EFF), and approximately US\$ 1.3 billion from the new Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) [International Monetary Fund 2022]. Bangladesh became the third South-Asian country after Pakistan and Sri Lanka to receive loans from the IMF in 2022 [*Reuters* 2022, 10 November].

In July 2022, Bangladesh Bank (the central bank of Bangladesh) revealed its monetary policy aimed at curbing inflation and generating employment and GDP growth. The Monetary Policy statement (MPS) set the inflation rate target to 5.6 percent in FY 22-23. This estimate was less than the average inflation rate of 8.7 percent for the emerging and developing countries, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the monetary policy, the Bangladesh Bank increased its policy rate – i.e. the repurchase agreement (repo) rate – by 50 basis points, from 5 to 5.5 percent [Zamir Uddin 2022, 21 June]. This was in line with the measures adopted by banks worldwide grappling with the same issue, and resulted in an increase in the lending rates. Bangladeshi policy makers, other than increasing the repo rate, also had the option of increasing the lending rate cap currently set at 9 per cent or making it flexible. However, they choose not to exercise that option in their current set of measures. Given the domestic inflationary pressures and foreign reserve pressures due to the strengthening US\$, the national banks worldwide faced an extremely challenging year in 2022, faced by the major challenge of the well-known «unholy trinity» [Boughton 2003, pp. 1-3] or the «impossible trinity» of fixed currency exchange, free capital flow and a sovereign monetary policy.

The national budget of Bangladesh was announced on June 2022 by Minister of Finance AHM Mustafa Kamal for the fiscal year beginning on 1 July 2022 and ending on 30 June 2023. The total expenditure for the budget was US\$ 72 billion, an increase of US\$ 7.9 billion or 12.32 per cent from the previous fiscal year [*The Daily Star* 2022c, 30 June]. The deficit was US\$ 26 billion equivalent to 5.5 % of the GDP, 6.2 % lower than the deficit of FY 2021-2022 [*The Business Standard* 2022b, 9 June]. The Finance Minister identified the top five priorities of the budget as containment of the inflation caused by the COVID-19 fallout and the Russia-Ukraine crisis; support

to the agriculture sector; development of human resource; promotion of domestic investment and augmentation of exports value; job creation and rural development. In March 2022, the cabinet approved the draft export policy 2021-2024 with the aim of doubling Bangladesh's export earnings from US\$ 45 billion to US\$ 80 billion within the period by facilitating shipments of diversified, non-traditional goods and labour-based products [*The Daily Star* 2022a, 1 March].

The stimulus packages initiated by the government in the pandemic years saw fresh injections, the largest chunk of which was allocated to provide working capital to large industries and service sector firms (30,000 crore; US\$ 2.7 billion) and cottage, micro, small, and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) (20,000 crore; US\$ 1.8 billion) [*Newage Bangladesh*, 2022b, 28 July]. These two stimulus packages provided capital to the borrowing companies at 4.5 % interest rate, while the rest 4.5 % was to be borne by the government as a subsidy. However, fund disbursement appeared to be slow. Officials reported that till the end of 2022 the stimulus package received a tepid response from applicants since many borrowers, especially large industries, failed to repay previous loans thus did not qualify for new ones [Byron & Mahmud, 2023, 9 January]

While large borrowers not being able to repay loans is a frequent occurrence, a number of "loan scams" involving large private banks came to the surface in 2022. The highest profile case involved Social Islami Bank Ltd. (SIBL), which incurred in US\$ 1.6 billion loss after allowing two companies to import goods for years using letters of credit (LCs) that were defaulted [Taleb 2022, 28 November]. Gazipur Blithe Fashions Ltd and Sharp Knitting used SIBL-issued LCs to import raw materials for a total of BDT 165.72 billion (US\$ 1.65 billion) which they failed to repay, thus making SIBL liable. A letter of credit is issued by the bank to the companies importing raw material as a guarantee on behalf of the buyer company to the seller. The importer is then supposed to process the raw material into the final product, export it and repay the borrowed amount to the bank from the export proceeds. Investigations revealed that Sharp Knitting did not renew the licence of its bonded warehouse (production site) for years and yet was allowed to renew its LCs repeatedly. Bangladesh Bank found that SIBL allowed the company to open 889 back-to-back LCs over a period of 7 years without making any payment for them. Blithe Fashions Ltd did not even have a bonded warehouse. Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd (IBBL), the largest private sector bank of the country, also came under great scrutiny for alleged "loan scams" [Taiyeb 2022, 6 December].

Last but not least, India and Bangladesh received heavier monsoon showers in 2022, resulting in overflowing of the river system ['Satellite Detected Water', 2022]. In the beginning of May and throughout June, deadly floods hit the northeastern part of India and Bangladesh affecting over 9 million people and killing around 300 people ['Bangladesh: Key Immedi-

ate Need' 2022]. The floods submerged over 53,000 hectares of agricultural land in Bangladesh, caused issues of food security by damaging the crops and contributed to increasing inflation. Millions found themselves in urgent need of food and medical supplies ['Bangladesh: Joint Press' 2022]. In FY 2021-2022, Bangladesh had established a fund called 'Fund for Managing the Shocks of Natural Disasters' to provide emergency financial assistance to the low-income people. In the FY 2022-2023, it continued the program and allocated for it additional funds (US\$ 475 million approximately) [*The Business Standard*, 2022a, 9 June].

Overall, for the calendar year 2022, Bangladesh's economy performed well achieving a relatively higher real GDP growth while traversing a challenging period marked by supply chain disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, soaring inflation, and difficulty with foreign reserves. At the same time, it is also important to look beyond the headline GDP number and consider growth's inclusiveness and its impact on the life quality of the average Bangladeshi citizen since these did not necessarily grow along with GDP figures.

4. Foreign policy

While Bangladesh pursues an active foreign policy both within the region and beyond it, including through multilateral mechanisms, relations with India, China, and Myanmar remain particularly important to contemporary Bangladeshi foreign affairs. In the international relations system of South Asia, Bangladesh is a smaller country with traditionally close ties with India, a giant and immediate neighbour. Thus, maintaining positive relations with New Delhi remains Bangladesh's number one imperative. At the same time, Bangladesh forged with China an important economic partnership extending from trade (see Section 3) to development finance. Given India's uneasiness to growing Chinese presence in South Asia, Bangladesh finds itself at the centre of the India-China rivalry in the region and is faced with the task of balancing relations with both powers. The Naypidaw government, on the other hand, is Dhaka's main interlocutor (along with the United Nations) in dealing with the Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh, as the host-country of most of the Myanmar-origin refugees, has high stakes in their definitive repatriation, which have not been matched by Naypidaw's commitment. Thus, this third and last section dealing with Bangladesh's foreign policy reviews its relations with India, China, and Myanmar. Before doing so, it looks at Bangladesh's stance on the war in Ukraine, 2022's most critical international politics event.

From the point of view of Euro-Asian international relations, the war in Ukraine was the most significant event of 2022. Bangladesh's reaction was a balancing act, in line with the approach it typically adopted for navi-

gating other thorny super-power confrontations, like that between India and China in the South Asian region. Following the beginning of the war, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) convened in an emergency special session and adopted a resolution condemning Russia's aggression of Ukraine for violation of Article 2 (4) of the United Nations Charter and demanding immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. One hundred forty-one countries supported the resolution, Russia and 4 others voted against it, and 35 abstained. Bangladesh was among the latter group [Shovon 2022, 15 March]. In July, Sheikh Hasina urged the US to withdraw the sanctions imposed on Russia on the grounds of the cost they are imposing on all countries, especially developing ones like Bangladesh, by disrupting trade and put upward pressures on imports' prices [Prothomalo 2022, 7 July]. Bangladesh is traditionally close to India, a country that has similarly avoided to openly condemn the war. In recent times, New Delhi in turn moved closer to US through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), aimed at maintaining the status-quo in the Indo-Pacific and curb Chinese expansion – although India's decision not to openly condemn Russia following the invasion of Ukraine underlined an important divergence between New Delhi and Moscow. At the same time, Bangladesh has in China, a supporter of Russia against the US, an important economic partner and weapon supplier. Additionally, Bangladesh is suffering from trade disruption caused by anti-Russia sanctions, as Russia is for Bangladesh one of the destination markets of its large ready-made garments (RMG) industry, as well as a source of wheat and maize imports, and a development partner [Khatun 2022, 16 May]. As a consequence, Bangladesh has an interest in having the anti-Russia sanctions revoked and might find problematic to openly take sides in the conflict in a decided pro-US (vote in favour) or pro-Russia (vote against) sense. In light of this, Bangladesh's abstention can be read as an attempt to stand midway between the two positions.

Relations with India were characterised by frequent high-level visits and expanding economic partnership, but saw no significant progress in the resolution of long-standing bilateral issues such as water sharing and border management.

The bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh increased to US\$ 18.2 billion (US\$ 16.2 billion in exports and US\$ 2 billion in imports) in FY 2022, against US\$ 10.8 billion in FY 2021 [Bhardwaj 2022, 26 December]. Thus, Bangladesh remained India's largest South Asian trade partner, and India Bangladesh's second-largest trade partner, accounting for 12 percent of total trade.

River water sharing remained a major field of cooperation as well as contrast in Indo-Bangladeshi relations. On 25th August 2022, the two countries held the 38th Meeting of Ministerial level Joint Rivers Commission in New Delhi. The Indian delegation was led by Shri Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Union Minister for Jal Shakti. The Bangladesh delegation was

led by Mr. Zaheed Farooque, State Minister for Water Resources [Government of India 2022a]. The meeting's main outcomes were the finalized text for an MoU on Interim Water Sharing of the Kushiara river; further progress in the implementation of the 2019 India-Bangladesh MoU on the Feni river water sharing; India's extension of the time period of sharing of flood-related data to the benefit of Bangladesh [Government of India 2022a]. On the other hand, during the year under review, the major water dispute concerning the Teesta river saw little progress. The Teesta River dispute involves the Rangpur region of Bangladesh, whose complaint is that it receives an unfair share of the water from the river, which originates in India. Since water is a state subject in India, the problem remained the lack of agreement between Delhi's central Government and the state Government of West Bengal (India), from which the Teesta enters Bangladeshi territory. By the end of 2022, no treaty was signed to resolve it.

The Bangladesh Government was reportedly negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India, as well as other major trading partners. CEPAs would help Bangladesh cope with the loss of duty benefit which would follow its upcoming Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation [Cyrill 2022, 27 July]. The two countries already had a goods agreement in place under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), within whose framework New Delhi granted Bangladesh duty-free, quota-free access on all items except for alcohol and tobacco. A CEPA would introduce agreements on service trade and investment. On the other hand, the CEPA could double India's exports to neighbouring Bangladesh and boost trade dynamism in the Northeast region. In addition to this, in December 2022, the two countries declared they would enter negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA), as well as explore the possibility of settling trade balances in Indian rupees as an alternative to US\$ and other major currencies [Roy 2022, 7 September].

S. Jaishankar's visit to Bangladesh in April saw the Indian External Affairs Minister interacting with his counterpart A. K. Abdul Momen and calling on Prime Minister Hasina. Following the visit, Momen declared to have requested India's cooperation in getting the U.S. sanctions against the RAB lifted [Bhattacharjee 2022, 28 April]. Jaishankar commented on the visit in positive terms, tweeting that the two countries' «neighbourly partnership is progressing steadily» [‘Positive discussions’ 2022].

Similarly, in occasion of Hasina's visit to India in September 2022, both parties qualified the state of Indo-Bangla ties in very positive terms. The joint statement published by the Indian PMO, reported that «The two Leaders expressed satisfaction at the excellent state of bilateral relations... which is reflected in an all-encompassing bilateral partnership» [Government of India 2022b]. The talks covered all aspects of the partnership, including security cooperation, investment, enhanced trade relations, power and energy sector cooperation, water sharing of common rivers, water

resources management, border management, and combating drug smuggling and human trafficking. During the visit, seven Memorandums were signed in the areas of railways, science and technology, space technology and broadcasting among others [Sabarwal 2022, 6 September].

However, in between the two high-level visits, in the month of June, a new peak of anti-Indian sentiment was registered in Bangladesh. Following some derogatory remarks about prophet Muhammad by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) representatives, protestors took to the streets in Dhaka, urging Muslim countries to boycott India. Amidst the controversy, and to the dismay of Bangladeshi Islamists, the Bangladeshi Government refrained from taking a stance on the issue [Shafi 2022a, 17 June]. Popular perception of India as anti-Muslim was not new in Bangladesh where in 2021 Prime Minister Modi's official visit was met with mass protests incited by discontent with the citizenship policy pursued by its government back home, which are largely perceived as Islamophobic [Shafi 2022a, 17 June].

In December, Bangladesh and India held the 18th Joint Working Group (JWG) on Security and Border Management. The two delegations were led by additional secretaries from the Ministry of Home Affairs [Government of India 2022c]. According to the Bangladesh-based NGO Ain-O-Sailash Kendra, between January and December 2022 there were 23 documented deaths (by shooting; by torture) at the border, 15 cases of injuries, and 11 abductions ['Border Violence by BSF' 2023].

China remained Bangladesh main trade partner (see section 3, "Economic affairs") as well as an important development partner (Bangladesh is a signatory country of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)). In March, Prime Minister Hasina inaugurated the Payra coal-fired power plant, which was built by a Bangladeshi-Chinese joint venture with a China's Exim Bank's loan and had already started commercial operations in 2020 [*The Daily Star* 2022b, 21 March]. The power-plant was a main project within China's and Bangladesh's BRI partnership. The Prime Minister claimed that, with the Payra plant, Bangladesh achieved for the first time 100 per cent electricity coverage, i.e. electricity became available in every home in the country [*The Daily Star* 2022b, 21 March; Mortaza 2022, 16 September].

Another important China-funded project (Exim Bank loan of US\$ 5 billion at a 2 per cent interest rate) which saw developments in 2022 was the Karnaphuli underwater tunnel, whose status appeared to be nearing completion as the year turned to an end [*The Business Standard* 2023, 1 January]. Officially named Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel, this underwater tunnel is being built to connect the two sides of the Karnaphuli river in the port city of Chittagong, which is Bangladesh's commercial hub along with the capital city Dhaka.

Yet another memorable official inauguration was that of the bridge over the mighty Padma river. The bridge construction was sustained entirely by the Bangladeshi Government amidst technical challenges and

funding setbacks, thus Hasina's inauguration saluted the bridge as a success-against-all-odds, a proud moment and a demonstration of Bangladesh's coming of age. In this way, the completed bridge became an important symbol of Bangladesh's development «success story», so important to the AL government legitimacy. It might be worth noting that the Government had to work with fully local funding after the World Bank had pulled out of the project due to alleged corruption. The bridge linked the south-west of the country, which is comparatively less developed, with the north and the east, including Dhaka, and was projected to improve road connectivity considerably and produce important dividends for the country's GDP. Chinese contractor firms contributed to the implementation of the project, but its funds – as highlighted by the Prime Minister – were sourced locally. Indeed, following the inauguration, the Bangladesh Ministry of External Affairs reacted to allegations that Padma was a China-backed project with a press release in which it “categorically asserts that the Padma Multipurpose Bridge has been entirely funded by the GoB”, thus shall not be considered a BRI project [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh 2022].

It is to be noted that in November, on East Turkestan Day, in different cities of Bangladesh different groups took to the street to protest the violation of Uyghurs' human rights perpetrated by the Chinese Government [Aninews 2022, 12 November]. These were not mass gatherings, but rather small affairs when compared to the average turn-out for a protest in the country, but were nonetheless significant as they involved citizens from various walks of life and were staged in different locations across the country.

Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar remained complicated and the Rohingya repatriation plan to which the two countries had earlier committed saw no breakthrough. In September 2022, it was reported that an escalation of armed clashes took place in the Myanmar areas nearing the border. As a consequence of it, shelling fired from Myanmar kept on falling on Bangladeshi territory for a number of days, causing injuries among dwellers living on the Bangladeshi side of the border. Among them, a Rohingya boy succumbed to injuries. The Bangladeshi Government's adopted a diplomatic response, seeking to prevent ties with Myanmar from further deteriorating as working relations with the Southeast Asian neighbour are fundamental for making the Rohingyas' repatriation possible. Myanmar's ambassador in Dhaka Aung Kyaw Moe maintained that the shelling was caused by the Arakan Army, which is active near the border and in conflict with Myanmar's regular army [Shafi 2022b, 21 September 21]. As far as the long-dragged question of repatriation was concerned, the year did not see any concrete progress. Following her visit to Bangladesh, Bachelet had concluded that regrettably the conditions for a safe and sustainable return of the Rohingyas to Myanmar had not materialized yet. After meeting the Chinese Ambassador Li Jiming in Dhaka in October, Momen shared with

the media that Myanmar, as per information received via the Ambassador, said to be willing to take back the refugees upon verification [*NewsOnAir* 2022, 21 October].

5. Conclusion

In 2022 Bangladesh was faced with considerable challenges coming from different quarters. The destructive floods highlighted once again Bangladesh's vulnerability to natural catastrophes and the urgency of tackling climate change – a huge task ahead of the Bay of Bengal nation and the international community as a whole. Spiking inflation in the price of primary food items weighted heavy on common people. Although the Government showed goodwill in welcoming high-profile UN representatives to discuss the country's human right situation, state-led repression of dissent continued. As far as international affairs were concerned, the Rohingya dilemma saw no positive developments. Partnership with China and India were stable and sustained by frequent visits and progress in multiple joint projects, but not free from criticism. With its two giant neighbours, as vis-à-vis the invasion of Ukraine, Bangladesh kept engaging in a balancing act.

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