

## The Purported External Hand in the Dhaka Regime Change

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### Introduction

The past few years have been quite eventful as far as geopolitics goes. Since 2019, the world has experienced ‘Three Major Strategic Shocks’ viz., the Covid-19 Pandemic, the expedited exit of the United States (US) from Afghanistan and the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian forces. With the supply lines being disrupted, the fallout for all major nations of the world has been immense as their depredations are still impacting economies, especially in case of the pandemic. Furthermore, other disputes around the world have continued to plague large sections of the population. The long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh has come to the fore once again, South Sudan is experiencing a genocide that has resulted in the killing of close to 3,00,000 individuals<sup>[i]</sup> and Israel is on a warpath in Gaza to eliminate every ounce of the influence of Hamas. The latter three (for the purposes of this article) have been referred to as the ‘Three Lesser Conflicts’.

It is at this time, on 05 Aug 2024, the Prime Minister (PM) of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, resigned from the country’s top political office and fled to India. She did so as a result of widespread rioting and looting in Bangladesh, with her fellow countrymen baying for her resignation. Bangladesh, as of this writing, is under an interim government headed by the Army Chief, General Waker-Uz-Zaman. Though, unlike the conflicts in Middle East and East Africa, this particular event– a coup– cannot even be termed as a conflict. Even though its strategic implications may far outweigh the three lesser conflicts, in the long run, it will possibly end up having greater implications than even the three major strategic shocks. This article is written to shed light on the various theories surrounding the perpetrator of the coup in Bangladesh (limited to the possible involvement of China and the US) and the strategic benefits to those accused of engineering it.

### United States

As soon as the news of the former PM’s flight to India surfaced, some geopolitical analysts begun propounding that the US had instigated the coup to install a more pliable entity in Dhaka. This theory is not without its own merits.

In May 2024, mere months before Hasina’s ouster, she presided over an internal meeting, wherein, she made claims that a ‘White Man’ had offered a ‘Hassle-free’ election provided she agreed to the demand of letting an air base of a foreign power being established in Bangladesh. Neither, the nationality of the purported ‘White Man’ nor the name of the foreign power was offered by her at the meeting.<sup>[ii]</sup> She further added that several Western nations, including the US and United Kingdom, are conspiring to create a “Christian state like East Timor”, taking parts of Bangladesh, Myanmar, and even India.<sup>[iii]</sup> There have been allegations by members of Hasina’s Awami League and even those of the opposition in Bangladesh, that it is the US who has ambitions of creating a base in the country for increasing their strategic reach into the region.<sup>[iv]</sup> For what it is worth, the US State Department dating as far back as Jun 2023, has categorically denied that there have been no discussions, as it respects ‘Bangladesh’s sovereignty’.<sup>[v]</sup> However, Sheikh Hasina did not acquiesce to the demands (if such were made) of the US.

If the above stated demands were indeed made, then it certainly points to a possible western influence hand in the coup in Bangladesh. A military base at St. Martin, an island off the Bangladesh mainland, would provide Washington a much-needed presence in the Bay of Bengal. Such an installation effectively provides it influence in the Indo-China and the Indo-Pacific region. It is important, especially for the latter region that the US increases its influence considering the contestation between Washington and Beijing over it which houses more than 2 billion individuals and contributes a major chunk to the global trade. An increased presence in the Indo-Pacific also allows the US to safeguard its interests in Taiwan, the annexation of which is an inalienable part of Chinese foreign policy.

Moreover, the abovementioned statement of the US denying any intention for installation of a base on Bangladeshi territory does not hold up under scrutiny. The State Department's explanation of not wanting US' military presence in the country as it respects the 'Sovereignty of Bangladesh' is weak at best, as the nation has military bases all over the world on the sovereign land of other countries.

The other side of this theory points to the creation of a Christian state out of the parts of the nations of Bangladesh, Myanmar and India. According to Sheikh Hasina, at the same meeting mentioned above, the Western nations have secretly joined hands with the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) and several regional insurgency groups, including Paresh Baruah, the kingpin of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).<sup>[vi]</sup> Though, on the surface, this theory sounds too good to be true. Unfortunately, it cannot be dismissed by New Delhi due to the belligerence in Manipur, wherein, the Kuki Christians are at odds with the Hindu Meiteis. Point to be noted here, is that it is neither the author's assertion that such is the plan of the US led West, nor is it a contention that it is not true. However, as a side note, it is not something that can be ignored completely. The US may or may not have such machinations in mind but what cannot be denied is the continuing insurgency in the northeast and that the ULFA and the KNF are sure to try and take advantage of the prevailing situation in the region.

## **China**

As far as China is concerned its international activities cannot be ignored. Long gone are the days of the Deng Xiaoping and 'Hide your strength, bide your time'. China's power projection, especially, in its local neighbourhood and has increased leaps and bounds in the past two decades. It has been kept itself invested in making itself indispensable in the region, especially in India's backyard. Beijing's outreach to the Taliban upon its accension to power and its overtures with Pakistan come to mind. Also, Beijing's 'Five Finger Policy' wherein it claims that Tibet is the right hand of China and Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh are the 'Five Fingers' that it considers China's responsibility to 'Liberate'.<sup>[vii]</sup>

Even as an academic exercise, the assumption that China has a hand in the regime change in Bangladesh cannot be dismissed. On one hand, the removal of Sheikh Hasina who was seen as a pro-India PM and a key ally who was an anti-Islamist politician, her presence at her country's top office reduced the Jihadi activities within her country.<sup>[viii]</sup> Further keeping in mind that it is the history of coups that the new power is quite the opposite of the dislodged one, one would not be amiss in assuming that the whoever assumes the seat of the PM from the interim government led by General Zaman would have a pro-Islamist stance. Such a situation creates problems for India especially as the main opposition party; the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is seen as having the same stance. Therefore, in such a case, the Islamist elements within the

nation who were earlier kept under check would have a free reign to cause India harm through the import of terrorism in various forms.

If the above holds true, then China had a vested interest in wanting the nation be led by an entity more aligned with its goals. Moreover, Bangladesh under Wajed was not popular with China's leadership. As evidenced by her recent visit to Beijing which was cut short for two reasons. First, she was apparently 'Upset' over Beijing's failure to fulfil its promise of financial support which was promised to be of USD 5 bn but later announced to be a mere USD 100 mn, second, Sheikh Hasina reportedly not being extended the appropriate protocol owed to a head of state.<sup>[ix]</sup>

On the strategic side of China's assumed role in the regime change, it makes less obvious sense for Beijing engineering the coup. Dislodging Hasina Wajed from the PM's post does not guarantee Beijing any undue influence in Bangladesh. One would assume that Beijing had the same plans as the US in wanting Chinese military presence in the Bay of Bengal and control over the Indo-Pacific and Indo-China regions. However, as of this writing, no plans of the Middle Kingdom to construct a military installation in Bangladesh are available in the public domain. Moreover, considering the tug of war both China and the US have been involved in over Islamabad's allegiance, despite the former investing heavily in Pakistan through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is an unsure assumption to make that Beijing would have more plans in another of India's neighbours, one would assume through the BRI. Especially, considering the overall failure of the BRI, in providing China with a substantial return on investment.<sup>[x]</sup>

## Conclusion

As of this writing, there are far too many variables concerning the coup in Dhaka to definitively the external hand in the regime change in Bangladesh or even a lack thereof. There is a paucity of information in terms of hard evidence and plenty in terms of assumptions and educated guesses. As mentioned above, the coup has, in the long run, the ability to be regarded as one of the three major strategic shocks due to the strategic implications of the event. However, at the same time, it might not also fall in the category of the three lesser conflicts and possibly have lesser effect than the former and more than the latter.

## Endnote

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<sup>[i]</sup> "Ethnic violence in Sudan raises genocide alarm as war rages on", Al-Jazeera, 13 June 2023, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/13/ethnic-violence-in-sudan-raises-genocide-alarm-as-war-rages-on>

<sup>[ii]</sup> "US Desperate For Military Base In Bangladesh; Conspires To Carve New State From B'Desh & Myanmar: PM", EurAsian Times, 25 May 2024, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://www.eurasiantimes.com/us-desperate-for-military-base-in-bangladesh/>

<sup>[iii]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[iv]</sup> "Menon: US wants Saint Martin's Island", DhakaTribune, 14 June 2023, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/313509/menon-us-wants-saint-martin%E2%80%99s-island>

[v] “The US Department of State has rejected all allegations in regard to taking over Saint Martin's Island in Bangladesh”, The Business Standard, 27 June 2023, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/us-did-not-discuss-taking-over-st-martins-island-respects-bangladeshs-sovereignty-state>

[vi] “US Desperate For Military Base In Bangladesh; Conspires To Carve New State From B'Desh & Myanmar: PM”, EurAsian Times, 25 May 2024, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://www.eurasiantimes.com/us-desperate-for-military-base-in-bangladesh/#googlevignette>

[vii] Suhasini Haidar, “History, the standoff, and policy worth rereading”, The Hindu, 18 June 2020, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/history-the-stand-off-and-policy-worth-rereading/article31854822.ece>

[viii] Asif Muztaba Hassan, “Bangladesh Cracks Down on Hardline Islamist Group”, The Diplomat, 19 May 2021, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/bangladesh-cracks-down-on-hardline-islamist-group/>

[ix] Nisha Anand, “'Upset' Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina cuts short her China visit: Report”, Business Standard, 13 July 2024, accessed on 7 August 2024.

[https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/upset-bangladesh-pm-sheikh-hasina-cuts-short-her-china-visit-report-124071300384\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/upset-bangladesh-pm-sheikh-hasina-cuts-short-her-china-visit-report-124071300384_1.html)

[x] Christina Lu, “China's Belt and Road to Nowhere”, Foreign Policy, 13 February 2023, accessed on 7 August 2024.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/13/china-belt-and-road-initiative-infrastructure-development-geopolitics/>

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