

Understanding Bangladesh-EU Relations: From Aid Dependence to Economic Partnership

Md. Shariful Islam, PhD

**Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Rajshahi,
Bangladesh.**

Abstract

European Union (EU) remains one of the key priorities of Bangladesh foreign policy under Sheikh Hasina regime (2009-present). Notably, 58 per cent of Bangladesh's total exports go to the EU while the EU is the destination of 64 per cent of Bangladesh's total apparel exports worth US\$ 34 billion. Bangladesh enjoys zero-duty benefit to the EU market under the scheme of 'Everything but Arms' framework. Bangladesh has been enjoying this benefit since 1973. Bangladesh will formally leave LDC group in 2026. The EU is expected to extend the preferential market access benefit for Bangladesh for three more years till 2029. This will impact Bangladesh's future exports to the EU market. Thus, continuing EBA benefit in a new format or GSP plus facility, or zero-tariff benefit under the Free Trade Agreement would be the new area of focus of Bangladesh foreign policy under Sheikh Hasina regime. In fact, trade with the EU has transformed the lives of millions of people in Bangladesh. As a sign of friendship, the EU has allocated € 334 million (equivalent to US\$ 389.31 million) for Bangladesh to mitigate the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 global pandemic. In addition, EU has also announced € 90 million (equivalent to US\$ 104.91 million) for the garment workers in Bangladesh who lost the job due to the pandemic which demonstrates the importance that EU attaches to Bangladesh. More than 1000 garment factories in Bangladesh faced order cancellations worth US\$ 2.97 billion during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, more than one million garment workers faced losing their jobs. Against the above backdrop, the article investigates: How can one understand the growing Bangladesh-EU ties from aid dependence to an economic partnership under Sheikh Hasina regime? And why does EU matter to Bangladesh vis-à-vis Bangladesh to EU? This paper contends that promoting EU-Bangladesh relations is of the interests of both the parties. Although Bangladesh-EU relations are important from a ranging of issues, i.e. economic, security, political and other issues, except for some newspaper short pieces, no study is found on this issue, and this is where the rationale of this study lies. The study explores a number of possible areas where both the parties can engage further and foster their relations for the greater interests of the people of Bangladesh and EU.

Keywords: Bangladesh-EU, EU Aid in Bangladesh, Economic Partnership, Bangladeshi RMG in the EU market.

Introduction

The article investigates: How can one understand the growing Bangladesh-EU ties from aid dependence to an economic partnership under Sheikh Hasina regime? And why does EU matter to Bangladesh vis-à-vis Bangladesh to EU? It contends that promoting EU-Bangladesh relations is of the interests of both parties. Although Bangladesh-EU relations are important from a ranging of issues, i.e., economic, security, political and other issues, except for some newspaper short pieces, no study is found on this issue; which is also the rationale of this study. The study explores a number of possible areas where both parties can engage further and foster their relations for the greater interests of the people of Bangladesh and EU. And there is no alternative but to promote EU-Bangladesh relations.

Bangladesh-EU relations date back to 1973. In fact, EC food aid was the predominant feature in the beginning state of their relations, since post-war Bangladesh was facing a famine like situation. After Egypt, Bangladesh was the second largest food aid recipient in the world from 1975 to 1992.¹ And during the period between 1989 and 1994, Bangladesh became one of the top four recipients of EU food aid.² So, it is clear that just after the independence, in the growing phase of Bangladesh, EU saw Bangladesh as a priority in terms of endorsing food aid. It is noted that EC formal assistance to Bangladesh started from 1976.³

From food aid, EU has been a major development partner of Bangladesh, particularly to achieve food security, women's empowerment, good governance, and to improve the conditions of education, health and so on for the last several decades. EU is one of the major institutions that helps Bangladesh in accommodating the enormously large number of Rohingya refugees. EU had disbursed €46.8 million for humanitarian needs and disaster preparedness, while in 2023, till writing this article, the amount of endorsement in the same sector is €23.2 million⁴, thus, relieving Bangladesh from taking all the responsibilities of feeding and maintaining the Rohingya refugees. It would be quite difficult for Bangladesh to harbor the oppressed Rohingya minorities without having aid from foreign institutions, particularly EU. Therefore, EU is not only helping in the food sector but also in the disaster management and refugee crisis sector of Bangladesh. In fact, EU supports Bangladesh in a wider array of issues and events.

Both Bangladesh and the European Union share similar values, i.e. democracy, rules-based global order, multi-cultural and multi-polar world based on global peace and cooperation. The father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman formed Bangladesh's foreign policy in such a way that it promotes peace, cooperation and global security. In fact, Bangabandhu believed in cooperation rather than conflict, as reflected in his foreign policy dictum "Friendship to all, malice to none". Though more than 50 years have passed since the independence of Bangladesh, it has been following the foreign policy formulated by Bangabandhu due to its relevance to the present world political context. It should be noted that the core values of EU as

¹ Nita Pillai, *Food Aid for Development? A Review of the Evidence*. Edited by Edward Clay, Olav Schram Stokke, Ilford, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd 2000, pp. 196-220.

² Edward J Clay, Sanjay Dhiri, and Charlotte Benson. *Joint evaluation of European Union programme food aid*. Overseas Development Institute, 1996.

³ Muhammad Zamir. "Bangladesh and the EU: Moving forward together". *The Financial Express*, March 4, 2013.

⁴ See https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/asia-and-pacific/bangladesh_en#how-are-we-helping Accessed: 16.06.2023

mentioned above are almost identical to those of Bangladesh's. Thus, a long term cooperation between EU and Bangladesh can be prognosticated. While two entities share same values and believe in identical world views, there remains no barrier in terms of cooperation. In addition, recently, Bangladesh and the EU agreed to further deepen their bilateral relationship, and the dialogue took place on the eve of EU-Bangladesh relation's 50th anniversary.⁵ This implies the parties' interest in developing further cooperation.

The study is significant for a number of reasons and has theoretical and policy implications. First, a sound, sustained EU-Bangladesh relationship serves the interests of both the parties particularly for Bangladesh. Second, although the study is so crucial for Bangladesh since EU is one of the prime development partners of Bangladesh, very few studies have been conducted. So, the study fills the gap. Finally, the findings of the study might guide the policy makers of EU and Bangladesh to promote the bilateral relations.

This article is divided into four sections including introduction and conclusion. The first section briefly introduces the issue and aim of this paper. The second section discusses the aid dependency of Bangladesh, economic partnership between EU and BD, and the geo-strategic and socio-cultural interest of EU, while the third section examines the way forward for the further development of the EU and Bangladesh relationship. Finally, the fourth section concludes the paper with mentioning the major arguments.

Aid dependence

Since the beginning of Bangladesh-EU ties, EU aid has been the defining feature to rebuild the war-torn Bangladesh. According to data aggregated by the Bangladesh Ministry of Finance, as of 2010, the total volume of EU foreign aid to Bangladesh since 1971 was amounted to US\$52.6 billion. In the first decade of the independence of Bangladesh, EU foreign aid was amounted to US\$ 6.6 billion which was more than doubled in the second decade (1980-1990). In the third decade (1990-2000), EU foreign aid increased by 10 per cent to US\$ 15.6 billion while in the fourth decade (2000-2010), the volume increased to 16.2 billion.⁶ Table 1 demonstrates ODA disbursement of EU institutions to Bangladesh between 2009 and 2018. Most of the EU foreign aid comes to Bangladesh primarily in three forms: food aid, commodity aid, and project aid. In Bangladesh, EU mostly focuses on broadly three areas, e.g. human capital development; food security, nutrition, and sustainable development; and democratic governance. In 2001, Bangladesh and EU signed cooperation agreements covering trade, economic and development cooperation, human rights, good governance and the environment. Between 2014 and 2020, EU development aid to Bangladesh was amounted to € 655,000,000.⁷

According to the European Delegation to Bangladesh, since 1976, EU has been playing a crucial role in achieving food security in Bangladesh. The European Commission has a wide array of

⁵ BSS, Dhaka. 2023. "Bangladesh, EU Agree to Further Deepen Bilateral Partnership." The Daily Star. May 3, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/bangladesh-eu-agree-further-deepen-bilateral-partnership-3310311>.

⁶ Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh (2012). Bangladesh and Europe 2012. Dhaka: Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh, p.27

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/bangladesh_en

food security programmes in Bangladesh directly benefiting approximately 300,000 households (representing 1.5 million beneficiaries).⁸ The focus is on eradicating malnutrition by targeting the ultra-poor.

Table 1: ODA disbursement of EU Institutions to Bangladesh (US\$ million)

Source: OECD.Stat (2020). <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=Table2A>

Economic partnership

Trade

The EU collaborates closely with Bangladesh within the context of the EU-Bangladesh Cooperation Agreement, which was signed in 2001. This agreement opens up a wide range of potential areas for cooperation, including trade, economic growth, human rights, good governance, and the environment.⁹ About 58 per cent of Bangladesh's exports go to the EU market. More than 90 per cent of them is ready-made garments. In 2020, 19.5 per cent of total exports of Bangladesh went to the EU, making it the major trading partner of Bangladesh, while Bangladesh became the 34th largest trading partner of the EU in that year.¹⁰ Even in the first two months of the year 2023, according to EUROSTAT Bangladesh maintained the second place in terms of apparel shipment to the EU, which accounted for the 22.75 per cent of the overall apparel imports by the trading bloc.¹¹ It is also noteworthy to mention that the amount of clothing imported into the European Union (EU) from Bangladesh increased by 35.69% in 2022 compared to 2021.¹²

Table 2: Bangladesh's Trade with EU, 2007-2019 (€m)

Source: 2007-2011 is taken from European Delegation to Bangladesh (2012:23), data of 2012-2019 is taken from Directorate-General for Trade, EC (n.d.). 2012-2019 trade includes total goods.

Table 2 demonstrates that Bangladesh enjoys huge trade surplus with EU. The trade volume is also on increasing trend. Thus, EU matters for Bangladesh which remains the single largest export destination for Bangladesh over decades. Bangladesh mainly exports manufacture products to the EU market which is worth at €m 13500 in 2016, €m 13,906 in 2017, €m 14, 917

⁸ Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh, 2012, p.40-41

⁹ See https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/bangladesh_en

¹⁰ See https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/bangladesh_en

¹¹ Refayet Ullah Mirdha (2023, May 4). "Bangladesh retains second position in RMG export to EU". *The Daily Star*, May 4, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/bangladesh-retains-second-position-rmg-export-eu-3310546>

¹² The Business Standard. (2023, March 30). "Bangladesh apparel exports to EU grew by 35.69% in 2022". *The Business Standard*, March 30, 2023. <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/rmg/bangladesh-apparel-exports-eu-grew-3569-2022-608102>

in 2018, and €16011 in 2019 respectively. Among manufacture products, ready-made garments account for the major products for Bangladesh. Agricultural products including fish, food, and other live animals account for the second position in terms of Bangladesh's export volume to EU market. Bangladesh mainly imports manufactured products from EU, which account for the first position and machinery and transport equipment remain the second position in terms of total import value.

On the other hand, table 3 compares the deficit and surplus in terms of export and import among the major trading partners of Bangladesh during the fiscal year 2021-2022. The deficit of trade was enormously high with China and India, amounting to \$bn -23.09 and \$bn -12.38 respectively, while there was a handful amount of surplus with the USA. However, the difference is notable with the EU as the surplus was a soaring \$bn +21.33 in the same time period, which almost closer to the deficit with China. Thus it is needless to say that EU remains one of the significant trading partner for Bangladesh, and from 2007 to 2022 Bangladesh enjoyed surplus in trade with the EU. While the relation between EU and Bangladesh started with disbursing food aid in the year 1973, now the two actors has become trading partner.

Table 3: Bangladesh Export-Import Data (2021-2022)_MNI

Officially Bangladesh will become a developing country in 2026 which will affect Bangladesh's trade benefits with the EU as a LDC country. EU has extended three more years as a grace period for preparation which normally EU does not allow after a country's graduation. Notably, Bangladesh was enjoying the EBA benefits since 1973 as a LDC country which contributed to the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. In fact, EBA trade benefits becomes important for Bangladesh for a number of reasons. First, having more than 170 million people in 1, 47, 50 km, area with limited resources, it becomes important for Bangladesh to sustain the current growth level. In this context, sustaining the trade volume with the EU is essential. Second, 58 per cent of Bangladesh's total exports goes to the EU market. Bangladesh is the second largest ready-made garments producer in the world. Of total apparel exports, 64 per cent (worth US\$ 34 billion) goes to the EU market. Thus, if zero-tariff benefits are removed, Bangladesh's exports might face 8.7 per cent of duty impose.¹³ Consequently, Bangladesh's export volume will decline by 5.7 per cent annually if the EBA is not extended. It is worthy to mention that more than four million workers are directly employed in the garment sector in Bangladesh. As a result, tens of thousands of garment workers, especially women will be affected economically and socially. Third, the sheer competitor of Bangladesh garment industry is Vietnam, which has already signed a free trade agreement with the EU. As a result, Bangladesh apparels market in EU will be severely affected. Finally, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and impacts of the Russian-Ukraine war, Bangladesh economy is severely affected. In fact, the continuation of EBA benefits becomes important for Bangladesh economy. Therefore, Bangladesh has sent a request letter for the extension of trade benefits. Bangladesh Commerce Secretary, Md Jafar Uddin points out that 'In the letter we did not mention any particular period or any particular scheme. We sought the

¹³ Refayet Ullah Mirdha, (2020, June 29). "Bangladesh seeks extension of EU trade benefits even after LDC graduation". *The Daily Star*, June 29, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/bangladesh-seeks-extension-eu-trade-benefits-even-after-ldc-graduation-1922029>

continuation of the current EBA as we have been facing crisis in different ways due to the coronavirus pandemic'.¹⁴ Zero-tariff benefits to EU market will be continued till 2027 while Bangladeshi exporters demand the benefits for at least 10 years. Thus, continuing the trade benefits in other forms or free trade agreement with EU will be new area of focus of Bangladesh foreign policy formulations and executions.

Investment

The EU-Bangladesh Business Climate Dialogue was initiated in May 2016 at government level to jointly remove the barriers that obstruct EU trade and investment in Bangladesh.¹⁵ During the launching ceremony, EU Ambassador to Bangladesh, Pierre Mayaudon notes that political uncertainty, 'growing militancy' work as major challenge regarding EU investments in Bangladesh.¹⁶ However, it is expected that the formation of EU-Bangladesh Business Climate Dialogue would work to improve the trade and investment environment in Bangladesh. The sixth plenary of the Dialogue was held in Dhaka in December 2019, where all 8 EU Heads of Diplomatic Missions in Dhaka - Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, representatives from EU private sector participated. The EU delegation points out that various tariffs and para-tariff barriers impede European exports to Bangladesh, which needs to be addressed. From Bangladesh side, representatives from Commerce Ministry, Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, National Board of Revenue, and Bangladesh Bank participated in the dialogue.¹⁷

Regarding the increasing interest of European investors in Bangladesh, in an interview with the Daily Star, Nuria Lopez, managing director of Zalo Knitting and Arrow Sports Wear contends that 'It is because of a sizeable ready-to-work labour force of the country and its fast growing economy'.¹⁸ This point is significant enough to understand the necessity of Bangladesh for the EU. Bangladesh has a large number of population and they are ready to provide their labour in areas such as RMG, construction, power and so on. Therefore, investing on such sectors will benefit both EU countries and Bangladesh. It is no doubt that EU investment will create substantial employments in a number of sectors in Bangladesh. At the same time EU will also be benefited due to this ready-to-work labour force.

On the other hand, the nature of EU and Bangladesh relationship is changing. Traditionally, EU investment was centered on the development of education, health, food security and governance.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ bdnews24.com (2016, May 12). "EU-Bangladesh Business Climate Dialogue launched in Dhaka". Retrieved from <https://bdnews24.com/business/2016/05/12/eu-bangladesh-business-climate-dialogue-launched-in-dhaka>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Press and information team of the Delegation to Bangladesh (2019, December 8). Press Release: 6th plenary of EU-Bangladesh Business Climate Dialogue. Retrieved from https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/chile/71650/6th-plenary-eu-bangladesh-business-climate-dialogue_en

¹⁸ Refayet Ullah Mirdha, (2017, November 7). "European investors keen on Bangladesh". *The Daily Star*, November 7, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/european-investors-keen-bangladesh-1485082>

However, recently EU plans to invest in the green technology and infrastructure development of Bangladesh so that Bangladesh can have a smooth transition from its LDC status. In the words of EU Ambassador Charles Whiteley- “We are becoming a lot more focused on political issues, regional issues, and issues of mutual interests. We are also deepening cooperation in practical terms on the issues like ocean governance, climate change and renewable energy”.¹⁹ The Ambassador also expressed that EU is expected to grant 400 million euro to support wind and solar energy development in Bangladesh. This would also help Bangladesh achieve its target of 40 per cent renewable energy by 2041, up from the current 6 per cent.²⁰ The EU Delegation has already handed over a roadmap on the investment in the energy sector to the government of Bangladesh on June, 2023.²¹ Thus it is evident from the above discussion that EU is keen to invest in Bangladesh and help Bangladesh to change its LDC status by supporting infrastructure and renewable energy development. It also shows how significant the EU is to Bangladesh as well as how much priority the EU is giving to Bangladesh.

Geo-strategic interests of EU in Bangladesh

Globally, the European Union is gaining its reputation as an economic bloc, but factors such as geopolitics and the conditions of economy force the EU to widen its political leadership. The development of Russian military ambitions in international politics, the emergence of China as a global power, and the dynamic Middle Eastern landscape are some of the forces that are pushing the EU to expand its political horizons.²² At present, EU has become a world leader and one of the major actors in world politics. So, the presence and influence of EU in the major parts of the world including Bangladesh is in the greater interests of it. In fact, the geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh is clearly evident. As a result of these political contexts, the geographical position of Bangladesh is highly significant to the EU.

The location of Bangladesh makes it a strategically crucial actor in the arena of geopolitics. The country is surrounded by India from three sides and it shares land border with Myanmar. Towards the Bay of Bengal, out of 12 sea ports, Bangladesh has three sea ports; Chattogram, Payra and Mongla. In addition, due to its geography, Bangladesh is a natural gateway between South-East Asia and South-Asia. Thus any coordination between SAARC and ASEAN requires to include Bangladesh.²³ Additionally, Bangladesh’s position is significant for two reasons;

¹⁹ Porimol Palma. (2023, May 8). “50 years of Bangladesh-EU ties: EU plans to invest big in Bangladesh”. *The Daily Star*, May 8, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/50-years-bangladesh-eu-ties-eu-plans-invest-big-bangladesh-3314626>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹The Business Standard. (2023, June 1). “Investing in energy storage in Bangladesh: EU hands over a roadmap to government”. *The Business Standard*. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/energy/investing-energy-storage-bangladesh-eu-hands-over-roadmap-government-642366>

²² Munir Hussain. *The European Union: On the verge of global political leadership*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

²³ Zillur Rahman. 2021. “Bangladesh’s Geopolitical Position Provides for Unique Opportunities.” *The Daily Star*, November 4, 2021. <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/bangladeshs-geopolitical-position-provides-unique-opportunities-2221461>.

Asian Highway and Transit Way.²⁴ First, Bangladesh has a vital role in the completion of the Asian highway since it provides a more convenient and affordable route connecting India with countries in the south. Though the country has not yet joined the Asian Highway, its significance cannot be ignored. Second, Bangladesh is essential for India to transport goods and freights to its northern parts at a lower cost, and to connect with Nepal and Bhutan via the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh is the shortest route. Furthermore, Bangladesh is an influential member of BIMSTEC, and it is one of the key concerns of the EU to spread cooperation and connectivity in this area.²⁵ Thus to spread EU's influence in this area, Bangladesh remains a crucial factor. If it wants to sustain its global leadership position in the subcontinent as well as in South-East Asian countries, EU cannot ignore Bangladesh.

Furthermore, Bangladesh and the EU agreed to develop cooperation in the strategic areas.²⁶ Additionally, European Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis depicted the relationship between Bangladesh and the EU as multidimensional and strategic.²⁷ It was evident that these two parties would cooperate in strategic areas when they published their Indo-Pacific Strategy. By introducing its Indo-Pacific Outlook, Bangladesh has once again highlighted its non-aligned and balanced stance in the world, where the stability and prosperity of the region are crucial, with the aim of promoting peace. Bangladesh aims to engage all stakeholders in achieving this objective. The Outlook is based on four guiding principles-

- a. "Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's foreign policy dictum 'Friendship towards all, malice toward none.'"
- b. "Constitutional mandate on the conduct of international relations based on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful settlement of international disputes, as well as respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter; and striving for renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament."
- c. "Adherence to the relevant UN treaties and international conventions, as applicable, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)."
- d. "Constructive regional and international cooperation for sustainable development, international peace and security, humanitarian action, and fundamental rights and freedoms." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh).²⁸

Similarly, the Indo-Pacific strategy of the EU resonates the same norms and principles. The EU aims to promote the values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and international law while

²⁴ Md. Rezwatul Kabir, S.M. Rabiul Islam, Md. Milon Molla and Shoara Akter, "Geological Importance of Bangladesh in Geopolitics", in *Donnish Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 3(1), 2018, pp. 001-005.

²⁵ Christian Wagner, and Siddharth Tripathi. "New connectivity in the Bay of Bengal." *SWP Comment* 53 (2018).

²⁶ "Bangladesh, EU to Ink Partnership Deal." *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2023.

<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/bangladesh-eu-ink-partnership-deal-3316736>.

²⁷ "It's Strategic and Multi-Dimensional." *The Daily Star*, May 7, 2023.

<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/its-strategic-and-multi-dimensional-3313011>.

²⁸ See https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press_release/d8d7189a-7695-4ff5-9e2b-903fe0070ec9

promoting peace, security, prosperity, and sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region,²⁹ which are in line with the Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh. Thus to achieve EU's goal in the Indo-Pacific region, enhancing strategic cooperation with Bangladesh is a necessity.

On the other hand, the EU is now a leader in the world of ecology. Global environmental policy decisions now depend on what occurs in the EU, whether they relate to climate change, biodiversity, or chemical control.³⁰ So, the global decisions regarding environmental issues are largely relied in the perception of the EU. To sustain its leadership position in the global environmental policy decision, the EU needs to extend cooperation with Bangladesh. It is widely recognized that Bangladesh is a climate resilient country. Due to its location, the country is exposed to natural calamities. The people and the government of Bangladesh know how to fight with the environmental disaster. Therefore, it is essential for any climate related organizations to collaborate with Bangladesh for getting practical knowledge on managing climate change related catastrophes. The EU can grasp the opportunity of enhancing its practical knowledge of disaster management from Bangladesh. In a similar way, Bangladesh can be benefited from EU decisions that would reduce environmental pollution.

In addition, Bangladesh is one of the largest moderate Muslim countries in the world. Even with this large population, Bangladesh remains a non-communal country. Here, people of different religions live with harmony, which respects the norms of the EU. Moreover, Bangladesh is the major troops contributing country of peacekeeping missions of UN. Bangladesh Army has attained a good reputation in maintaining world peace by providing peace keepers to the UN. Thus Bangladesh is a crucial factor for harboring global peace. Similarly, the EU is also a promoter of peace, democracy and human rights. In 2012, it was awarded with the Noble Peace Prize. The EU was awarded due to its contribution to the peace, human rights, democracy and conciliation in Europe for six decades.³¹ Therefore, it is evident that the norms of the EU and Bangladesh is identical. Thus to sustain EU's leadership, strategic cooperation with Bangladesh is necessary.

Socio-cultural interests

Socio-cultural interests of the EU in Bangladesh constitutes a number of issues ranging from human rights to the preservation of historical sites. For instance, recently EU took part in funding a fascinating project called "Hidden Heritage", which includes an ancient infrastructure of Old Dhaka.³² The name of the building is "Haturia House" and it is also locally known as "Tiger House".

²⁹ étrangères, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires. n.d. "The European Union in the Indo-Pacific." France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. Accessed June 19, 2023. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/regional-strategies/indo-pacific/the-european-union-in-the-indo-pacific/#:~:text=With%20this%20new%20strategy%20and>.

³⁰ Jacques Le Cacheux and, Eloi Laurent. "The EU as a global ecological leader." in *Report on the State of the European Union: Is Europe Sustainable?* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 125-138.

³¹ See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2012/summary/>

³² Towheed Feroze (2022, September 18). "EU-Funded Hidden Heritage Cherishes History, Celebrates Old Dhaka!" *Prothomalo*, September 18, 2022. <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/1iigljb0yb>.

EU also believe in partnering with the civil society organization (CSO) of Bangladesh. On May 2022, EU and Bangladesh held the Joint Commission meeting in Brussels, where the organization put emphasize on the need for vibrant CSOs in Bangladesh.³³ Engaging with CSOs foster sustainable development and an effective democratic system since CSOs represents pluralism. The EU has published a roadmap for collaborating with the CSOs in Bangladesh. In the roadmap EU maintains while it is true that States are primarily responsible for development and democratic governance, CSOs and States can work together to address issues like poverty, growing disparities, social exclusion, and unsustainable development.³⁴ In that road map four priority areas were set for Bangladesh; Enabling Environment, Civil Society as Development Actor in Its Own Right, Capacity Enhancement and Accountability, and Uphold Human Rights.

Gender equality and women empowerment is one of the major interests of European Union in Bangladesh. The EU has been working in this sector in many countries, thereby helping millions of discriminated girls and women. It is notable to mention that EU has taken a project called “Our lives, our health, our futures: empowering adolescent girls and young women in Chittagong Hill Tracts to live with dignity and without violence” in Bangladesh. The goal of this project is to achieve gender equality by addressing questions of bodily and sexual autonomy at a pivotal stage in the lives of adolescent girls and young women. It focuses on disadvantaged indigenous people in a rural area that has experienced a protracted crisis. The 60 months (From 1/1/2019 to 31/12/2023) long project costs EUR 5,560,000, while the EU contributed EUR 5,000,000.³⁵ Therefore, the contribution of the EU in the area of women empowerment and gender equality, which is also the target of the government of Bangladesh, is commendable.

Way forward

Since the independence of Bangladesh, the remains one of the major aid provider and development partners of Bangladesh. The relationship between Bangladesh and the EU has changed over time. Previously, the engagement was defined by aid and support whereas now it becomes an economic partnership. In addition, Bangladesh is about to upgrade its status from LDC. Therefore, there is a need for further development and assuming the relationship from different perspectives. The following could be the possible areas for enhancing the relationship between these two actors.

Accelerating Economic Relations

³³ *The Daily Star*. 2022. “EU Stresses Need of Vibrant Civil Society, Raises Rights Concerns in Bangladesh”, May 21, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/committed-guarantee-rights-all-bangladesh-tells-eu-joint-commission-meeting-3028076>.

³⁴ “EU COUNTRY ROADMAP for ENGAGEMENT with CIVIL SOCIETY.” n.d. Accessed June 16, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_roadmap_for_enagagment_with_cs_en.pdf.

³⁵ “Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures: Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Chittagong Hill Tracts to Live with Dignity and without Violence. | EEAS.” n.d. Wwww.eeas.europa.eu. Accessed June 15, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/bangladesh/our-lives-our-health-our-futures-empowering-adolescent-girls-and-young-women_en.

The EU delegates in May 2014 expressed keen interest in investing in Bangladesh and asked for the removal of institutional impediments to investment, i.e. power, infrastructure and services sectors. But between 2014 and 2023, Bangladesh has progressed a lot in terms of infrastructural development including in the power sector. So, EU investment needs to be accelerated since Bangladesh has become an investment bonanza. Even in 2023, the EU handed over a roadmap containing the framework for investing in the energy sector of Bangladesh. The institution is expected to spend 400 million in the solar and wind sector. This is great news for Bangladesh as it is opting for clean and renewable energy.

In addition, the EU can invest in the Exclusive Economic Zones of Bangladesh, which were specially created for foreign investment. The EU should grasp this opportunity. It is worthy to mention that EU is the largest apparel exporting destination of Bangladesh, thus EU investment in this sector can be beneficial for both parties. Beyond this, the EU has the option to invest in the maritime economy sector of Bangladesh, which is largely unexplored. At the same time, the government of Bangladesh should make such policies so that the impediments to investment could be circumvented. Otherwise, attracting foreign investors will be difficult for Bangladesh in the long run.

Extending GSP and Comprehensive free trade agreement

Bangladesh's economic growth is significantly dependent on the export to the EU. 90 per cent of all apparel shipments of Bangladesh goes to the EU. In the table 3 it is showed that Bangladesh enjoys a substantial surplus in trade balance with the EU. The table also depicted the importance of EU import from Bangladesh. Even the EU Ambassador to Bangladesh Charles Whiteley also mentioned the significance of the EU and the EBA framework for Bangladesh. In his words- "EBA played a crucial role for Bangladesh in becoming the European Union's largest trading partner - today, more than half of Bangladesh's exports go to the EU, and the country recently even overtook China as the biggest exporter of garments into Europe."³⁶ Thus any kind of disruption in this export-import process will drastically affect the RMG sector and the whole economy of Bangladesh.

In recent time, Bangladesh has developed so much that it will be upgraded from its LDC status. As a result, the EU may suspend the GSP facility for Bangladesh, though it has already extended to the year 2029. Faruque Hassan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), has urged the European Union to increase the GSP transition time from the existing three years to six years. According to him, the extension will enable Bangladesh to get ready for a smooth transition out of the LDC category and maintain its growth momentum.³⁷ However, the suspension of GSP facility for Bangladesh will have a drastic impact. EU GSP facilities have a significant impact on Bangladesh's RMG industries, which will impact economic growth because of their impact on the country's export growth.³⁸ On the other

³⁶ Charles Whiteley. "A Thriving Partnership throughout the Decades". *The Financial Express*, February 26, 2023. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/a-thriving-partnership-throughout-the-decades-1677344565>.

³⁷ "BGMEA Chief Requests EU for Extended Transition Period." *The Financial Express*, May 13, 2023. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/bgmea-chief-requests-eu-for-extended-transition-period>.

³⁸ Md Rashedul Islam, and Kamruddin Nur Maruf, "Impact of EU GSP Facilities on Export Growth of Bangladesh: Especially on Readymade Garments Industry", in *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*,

hand the proportion of women in the workforce of RMG sector is 85 per cent. Out of 4 million garments worker 3.2 million are women and deprived and poverty stricken. Their participation in this cash generating industry improved their quality of life and social standing. The RMG sector offers women workers more chances of social and economic advancement.³⁹ Thus to safeguard the 4 million working people of the RMG sector, the EU must extend the GSP arrangement for Bangladesh.

Supporting the RMG sector of Bangladesh by providing GSP facility will signify the role of EU as an ecological and environmental leader. Recently, Bangladesh has made a revolution in building Green Factories. It is notable to mention that nine out of ten world's top green factories are in Bangladesh. Even Bangladesh is the ground of 171 LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified Green Garment Factories. In addition, 550 more factories are in the queue of getting LEED certification. Another amazing fact is that Bangladesh is running 42 out of 100 world largest green industrial projects.⁴⁰ It should be highlighted that the boom in green factory revolution is one of the major outcomes of the boom in RMG sector, which is basically the result of GSP facility. Therefore, it is like a chain reaction. If the RMG sector started to sink due to the suspension of GSP, it will trigger the termination of Green Factory revolution, which is a direct contradiction to the aims and goals of EU as an environmental leader. Thus, the EU need to extend the GSP facility to ameliorate its status as a global environmental leader.

EBA needs to be extended for Bangladesh for more years since millions of women are involved in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. So, the preferential access to market is also linked to the fates of those women and the status of their empowerment. As mentioned earlier, 85 per cent of garment workforce is women, which consists of 3.2 million. It is proven that, working in RMG helps to improve overall socio-economic conditions of women and women empowerment. As it is one of the major norms of the EU to eradicate gender discrimination and enhance women empowerment, the EU should not do such thing that impede these developments. So, this article suggests that EU needs to reconsider their EBA policy towards Bangladesh considering the overall socio-economic scenario of the country.

In absence of the GSP facility under the EBA arrangement, FTA (Free Trade Agreement) between the EU and Bangladesh could be a possible alternative. With all the tariffs and tax implemented, Bangladeshi product will lose competitiveness in the EU market. As a result, the amount of export will reduce in the future. In addition, without GSP, the price of Bangladeshi high quality apparel will rise. For this reason, the European market will lack the opportunity to buy high quality goods at a cheaper price. However, the European Delegation to Bangladesh provides no good news in this regard. The EU Ambassador Charles Whitely said that he saw no chance of FTA between Bangladesh and the EU in the near future due to immense complexity

volume 3, issue 9, September, 2014. Accessed June 18, 2023. <https://www.ijstr.org/final-print/sep2014/Impact-Of-Eu-Gsp-Facilities-On-Export-Growth-Of-Bangladesh-Especially-On-Readymade-Garments-Industry.pdf>.

³⁹ Afsana Mustafa, M. Serajul Islam, Saiful Islam, and Mahfuja Khatun, "Impact of RMG sector on livelihood change of women employees of Bangladesh", in *Social and Economic Geography*, volume 2, no.1, 2016, pp. 1-10.

⁴⁰ Md Saiful Islam, "Bangladesh's Success in Building Green Factories: A Silent Revolution in RMG Industry", *The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA)*, September, 2022. <https://www.cbgabd.org/2022/09/19/bangladeshs-success-in-building-green-factories-a-silent-revolution-in-rmg-industry/amp/>.

and lack of interest in the bloc.⁴¹ The article suggests that the EU authority and the Bangladesh government should engage in dialogue to overcome the complexities of making a free trade Agreement.

Broadening cooperation on traditional and non-traditional security issues

On 2021, Bangladesh and the EU held fourth Diplomatic Consultation. The consultations took place in a productive and friendly atmosphere against the backdrop of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence and the 100th birthday of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In the meeting, Bangladesh and the EU agreed to set up cooperation in the arena of climate change, connectivity and security as par with the EU Indo-Pacific strategy. Both parties also agreed to attend in regular political dialogues for providing strategic guidance on foreign and security policy cooperation. Bangladesh appreciated the EU support in times of COVID-19 crisis, as the institution provided €334 million for COVID-19 response and recovery.⁴² The EU also appreciated the leadership of Bangladesh in the CVF (Climate Vulnerable Forum) and invited Bangladesh to join in Green Partnership with the EU.⁴³ Bangladesh should think about the invitation of the EU for broadening its partnership.

The first Political Dialogue between Bangladesh and the EU took place in 2022. In the dialogue, the two sides discussed curbing violent extremism and combating terrorism. The government of Bangladesh reiterated its “zero tolerance” policy toward all manifestations and forms of terrorism. Both sides reaffirmed their shared stance on the importance of upholding pertinent human rights and humanitarian values in counterterrorism initiatives. The necessity for greater cooperation in the fight against transnational organized crimes, such as migrant smuggling, human trafficking, and money laundering, was also highlighted by the two parties.⁴⁴ However, there were still no concrete actions taken by these two actors cooperatively in these areas. Thus the article suggests the actor should increase their cooperation in these regards.

Food security

In terms of food security, EU is one of the major partners of Bangladesh since its birth in 1971. Even the relationship between Bangladesh and the EU initially commenced with disbursing food aid to Bangladesh in 1973, when a famine like situation was created in the country. Bangladesh ranked among the top four countries to receive food aid from the EU between 1989 and 1994.⁴⁵ From endorsing aid, EU contributed to the food security of Bangladesh.

⁴¹ “No EU-Bangladesh FTA in Foreseeable Future”. *The Daily Star*, October 28, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/no-eu-bangladesh-fta-foreseeable-future-3154221>.

⁴² “EU and Bangladesh Hold Fourth Diplomatic Consultations | EEAS Website.” n.d. [Www.eeas.europa.eu](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-bangladesh-hold-fourth-diplomatic-consultations_en). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-bangladesh-hold-fourth-diplomatic-consultations_en.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ “Bangladesh: First Political Dialogue with EU Takes Place | EEAS.” n.d. [Www.eeas.europa.eu](https://www.eeas.europa.eu). Accessed June 18, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bangladesh-first-political-dialogue-eu-takes-place_en?s=164.

⁴⁵ Edward J Clay, Sanjay Dhiri, and Charlotte Benson. *Joint evaluation of European Union programme food aid*. Overseas Development Institute, 1996.

For instance, the EU took a three years' project for the development of ultra-poor people who were suffering from malnutrition due to excessive food price. The project area comprises of four districts; Rangpur, Kurigram, Mymensingh and Netrokona. The EU contributed €2 million and 7200 households, 23,225 people, were the beneficiaries of the project.⁴⁶ A similar project was partially funded by the EU in 2006. This time it was on shrimp production and the EU sponsored the 66 per cent of total budget. The four years long project was aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of Bangladeshi Shrimp sector.⁴⁷ Due to this project, 0.19 million Bangladeshi shrimp farmers along with 3000 depot workers and 300 female workers was benefited.

There are also examples of collaborative actions of EU with other organization to enhance food security in Bangladesh. After the rampage of disastrous SIDR and AILA, the EU and FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization) had jointly taken FAO-EU Food Facility project. The aim of the project was to improve food security and support the lives and livelihoods of the marginalized farmers in the impoverished coastal area by helping the landless, marginal, and small farmers in the severely SIDR and AILA impacted 12 districts of South Western sections of the country.⁴⁸

In the first political dialogue with the EU in 2022, the Bangladeshi side reiterated its interest in expanding cooperation in food production, storage, and processing with the respective EU member states.⁴⁹ It is clear that Bangladesh wants to broaden its relationship with the EU in the food security sector.

Strengthening Blue Economy cooperation

Bangladesh collaborated with the European Union in a technical project titled EU-BGD Joint Collaboration on Blue Economy (BE). The project was for two years between August 2016 and July 2018. Maritime Affairs Unit under the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry coordinated the project. The aim of the project was to formulate a national vision for Blue Economy projects in Bangladesh. On 30 June 2018, the Maritime Affairs Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Union Delegation in Bangladesh jointly organized the first Blue Economy National Coordination Workshop under the EU-BGD Joint Collaboration on Blue Economy.⁵⁰ Under the project, Bangladesh has identified key Blue Economy sectors which need to be explored and harnessed.

Notably, Kenya is implementing a landmark project for advancing blue economy agenda with EU partnership. The project consists of three main components: Go Blue Growth, Go Blue

⁴⁶ See <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/food-security-strengthening-agricultural-capacities-ultra-poor-bangladesh>

⁴⁷ "Support to Boost the Quality of Shrimp Production in Bangladesh for the EU Market". n.d. European Commission.

⁴⁸ "FAO-EU Food Facility – SDA Bangladesh." n.d. Accessed June 18, 2023. <https://www.sdabangladesh.org/fao-eu-food-facility/>.

⁴⁹ "Ministry of Foreign Affairs." n.d. [Www.mofa.gov.bd](http://www.mofa.gov.bd). Accessed June 18, 2023. <http://www.mofa.gov.bd/site/page/7f568636-3f71-4668-80bc-104a69a32c90>.

⁵⁰ Pierre Failler, M. G. Hussain, Ahmed Al Karim, and Md Ashraful Alam, "Blue Economy National Coordination Workshop, jointly organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh and the European Union Delegation in Bangladesh", September, 2018, 36 p.

Environment and Spatial Planning and Go Blue Security. The timeline of the project is January 2021-2024, with an estimated budget EUR 24 750 000 million.⁵¹ The specific objectives of the project are blue economy development with a focus on employment opportunities, ensuring healthy ocean through proper management and empowering the local communities through strengthening their capacity and ensuring maritime security through enhancing maritime governance and strengthening maritime law enforcement agencies. According to the UNEP website, the project aims ‘to foster a “sustainable blue economy” in six coastal counties and generate more than 3,000 jobs for youth and women alone’.⁵² Bangladesh’s Blue Economy projects also require such massive funding from the EU.

Promoting people-to-people connections

The world has now become a global village. It is not surprising to see a Bangladeshi people anywhere in the world. It is well-known that globalization enhanced migration. Nowadays, a lot of Bangladeshi people live in European countries. According to the 2020 International Migrant Stock compiled by UNDESA, a total of 456,516 citizens of Bangladesh lived in Europe in 2020. Males made up 60 per cent of the total migrants, while females made up 40 per cent.⁵³ Table 4.1 to 4.4 depicted the overall number of Bangladeshi migrants in the European countries in 2020.

It is evident from the tables that a significant number of Bangladeshi people migrated to Sweden, Germany, France, Italy and Spain. The highest number of people migrated to Italy in 2020, which amounted to 135,468, whereas, the other countries harbored a low number of migrants. However, people to people cooperation is needed to enhance human security and development. Sometimes people are discouraged to migrate in such places where people to people cooperation is too low, or there is a negative sentiment about the migrants. It is a well-known fact that migrants and diasporas play a crucial role in the advancement of the host country and emigrating country as well.

Therefore, this article suggests that the EU and the government should focus in this area. They need to find out if there is a lack of people to people cooperation in other countries. To reap out the benefit of migrants’ economy Bangladesh needs to emphasize on sending skilled labor to the EU countries.

Technology transfers and knowledge sharing

At present, Bangladesh is no longer a poor country. In fact, Bangladesh is going through a transition phase to change its status from LDC. Therefore, it is one of the prime needs of Bangladesh to achieve self-dependency. To attain self-dependency in the domain of technology and knowledge is not a matter of days, and it takes a rather long time. Therefore, Bangladesh needs help from its partner countries and institutions. Currently, one of the prime focus of Bangladesh government is the renewable energy sector. The government of Bangladesh seeks

⁵¹ See <http://www.goblue.co.ke/>

⁵² UNEP, “New programme to support Kenya’s coast and blue economy”, March 30, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/new-programme-support-kenyas-coast-and-blue-economy>

⁵³ See <https://bangladesh.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11006/files/documents/bangladeshi-migrants-in-europe-2021.pdf>

technology transfer through EU collaboration.⁵⁴ The EU is also eager to invest in the wind and solar energy sector. As a result of this collaboration, Bangladesh will garner sufficient experience and knowledge in this sector.

In addition, Bangladesh is doing a great job in producing generic medicine. This could be another area of cooperation with the EU in terms of knowledge sharing and technology transfer. It is noteworthy to mention that Bangladesh is the inventor of the oral saline, which is saving millions of lives. Therefore, a substantial investment and sharing of technology in this sector can enhance the capability and capacity of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh also lacks the capacity to make apparel machineries as well as agricultural machineries, though these two sectors are crucial for the overall economy of Bangladesh. As a development partner of Bangladesh, the EU should support Bangladesh to attain its self-dependency in these sectors.

Cooperation in higher education level

The EU and Bangladesh cooperate in higher education level through the Erasmus Mundus Scholarship programme. Under this programme any student, teacher, researcher, or job holder with sufficient academic background can pursue higher study in the European Union countries. The amazing fact is that a person is entitled to complete his or her study from three different EU countries. Therefore, applicants get the rare opportunity of learning from a wide range of professors and different environments. They get to know different cultures and norms as well. The scholarship offers 193 different programmes from different fields, ranging from Engineering and pure Sciences to Arts and Social Sciences.⁵⁵

For the year 2022-23, 151 Bangladeshi students are awarded the prestigious Erasmus+ Scholarship, and Bangladesh ranked third in terms of the number of scholarship awarded worldwide.⁵⁶ These scholars will enhance Bangladesh and the EU countries academically and by providing their learned skills in the job sectors. Thus they will contribute to the economy of Bangladesh and the world as well. The article suggests that the government of Bangladesh pursue the EU to increase the number of scholarships awarded for Bangladesh.

In addition, scholarly engagement can also be possible between Bangladesh and EU countries. By exchanging teachers and researchers both parties can be benefitted. Bangladesh needs knowledge on technology whereas, as a climate resilient nation, Bangladesh can provide sufficient knowledge and lessons on how to fight natural calamities.

Climate change

⁵⁴ “Bangladesh Seeks Technology Transfer, Investment through European Collaboration”. *The Financial Express*, October 18, 2021. Accessed June 18, 2023. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/bangladesh-seeks-technology-transfer-investment-through-european-collaboration-1634475410>.

⁵⁵ See https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/scholarships/erasmus-mundus-catalogue_en

⁵⁶ “151 Bangladeshi Students Get Erasmus+ Scholarships for 2022-23.” *Prothomalo*, August 11, 2022. <https://en.prothomalo.com/youth/education/g3iosbujct#:~:text=151%20Bangladeshi%20students%20get%20Erasmus%2B%20scholarships%20for%202022%2D23>.

There is no doubt that the EU has gained a leadership position in the global environmental protection. Decisions on global environment depends on what happens in the EU, whether it be the biodiversity, chemical or climate change.⁵⁷ Thus the EU holds a greater responsibility in maintaining the environment to sustain its leadership position in this area of climate change.

The EU has been supporting Bangladesh to mitigate climate change impacts. In 2017, the EU granted 8 million Euro to support sustainable environment in Bangladesh. The name of the project was Local Government Initiative on the Climate Change (LoGIC), which aimed at helping local governments to enhance adaptation mechanism, and making communities more resilient to the climate change impacts.⁵⁸ In addition, on February 2022, the EU declared to grant Euro 18 million to invest in climate-smart infrastructures in Bangladesh along with five other South-Asian countries. Then name of the five years long project is “Accelerating Climate-Smart and Inclusive Infrastructure in South Asia (ACSIIS)” and the project would be implemented by IFC, a global development institution.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the EU allocated €600,000 to mitigate climate change in Bangladesh at the end of 2022.⁶⁰ The project is expected to develop knowledge and access to adequate finance to address the climate change impacts. Two NGOs (Non-Governmental Organization) Uttaran, and Education and Development Foundation (Educo) were to implement the project.

Recently, in the first political dialogue between the EU and Bangladesh, both parties agreed to initiate EU-Bangladesh climate dialogue as soon as possible. In addition, both actors underscored the importance of achieving the commitment of COP27 by putting special attention to climate change adaptation and mitigation. In that meeting, Bangladesh appreciated the EU’s commitment towards environmental issues, while the EU welcomed the Bangladesh’s decision to join Global Methane Pledge.⁶¹

Conclusion

The relationship between the EU and Bangladesh has completed its 50 years in 2023. During this long tenure, EU remains one of the major aid and development partner of Bangladesh. When the EU first disbursed food aid to Bangladesh, it was a newly born country with thousands of problem areas ranging from food to infrastructure and health to human security. The EU has seen the development process of Bangladesh throughout the years and cooperated in the process. However, Bangladesh has changed itself and started to upgrade itself from a LDC. Therefore, this article seeks to understand the relationship between Bangladesh and the EU, and the further areas of cooperation in the future given the dynamic condition of Bangladesh. In addition, the

⁵⁷ Jacques Le Cacheux and, Eloi Laurent. “The EU as a global ecological leader.” in *Report on the State of the European Union: Is Europe Sustainable?* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 125-138.

⁵⁸ See https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/19969_en

⁵⁹ “EU to Make \$21m Climate-Smart Investment in Bangladesh, South Asia.” *The Daily Star*, February 10, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/industries/investments/news/eu-make-21m-climate-smart-investment-bangladesh-south-asia-2958816>.

⁶⁰ “EU Grants Bangladesh €600,000 to Mitigate Climate Change”. *Bdnews24*, October 26, 2022. <https://bdnews24.com/environment/7ay4u2p2i>

⁶¹ See https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bangladesh-first-political-dialogue-eu-takes-place_en?s=164

article argues that the relationship between the two actors has changed from “Aid Dependency” to economic partnership.

First, Bangladesh was a major aid receiver of the EU. The aid receiving journey from the EU initiated in 1973, while the formal relation between the two commenced in 1976. In the period 1989 to 1994, Bangladesh ranked 4th among the top aid receivers of the EU. Thus the relationship is defined by aid dependency.

Second, the boom in the RMG sector of Bangladesh brought a major change in the dimension of EU-Bangladesh relationship. Due to the GSP facility under the EBA arrangement, Bangladeshi RMG products got an advantage in the European markets. Notably, 58 per cent of all exports of Bangladesh goes to the EU market and 64 per cent of RMG also follow suit. In addition, millions of women work in the RMG sectors of Bangladesh and researches have proven that the RMG sector has a positive impact on the socio-economic development and women empowerment of the Bangladeshi women. However, as Bangladesh is on the verge of graduation from the LDC, the EU wants to suspend the GSP facility. Experts believes that it will have a negative impact on the women. Thus, the article suggests EU should reconsider its decision about the GSP facility.

Third, the EU has an immense geo-strategic and socio-cultural interest in Bangladesh. Bangladesh and the EU both shares common Indo-Pacific view based on all inclusive cooperation and peace. Therefore, it is argued in the article that EU should enhance cooperation with Bangladesh to attain its aims in the Indo-Pacific region. On the other hand, EU has become an ecological leader and Bangladesh is a climate vulnerable country. Thus helping Bangladesh in climate adaptation and mitigation will help to sustain EU’s global leadership role.

Fourth, as argued in the article that the relationship between the EU and Bangladesh has changed to economic partnership, there is a need for furthering cooperation in several areas. The article suggests the EU to enhance economic cooperation with Bangladesh by extending GSP facility or creating a free trade agreement. Though the EU delegates do not see any chance of creating a FTA with Bangladesh due to complexity and lack of interest in the bloc, the article suggests the government of Bangladesh to negotiate in this regard.

Fifth, the article focuses on food security cooperation. It is seen that the EU remains a major partner in developing food security in Bangladesh. The article argues that more cooperation is needed in the processing and storing sector.

Sixth, the study discusses possible cooperation in the technology and knowledge sharing sector. The EU is already eager to invest in the renewable energy sector in Bangladesh. Its main focuses are wind and solar energy. However, the article argues that cooperation is also needed in the area of medicine production and agricultural machineries sector. The article also suggests to enhance the number of Erasmus Mundus Scholarships and increase the teacher and student exchange programmes between the EU countries and Bangladesh.

Bibliography

“Bangladesh, EU to Ink Partnership Deal.” *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/bangladesh-eu-ink-partnership-deal-3316736>.

“Bangladesh: First Political Dialogue with EU Takes Place | EEAS.” n.d. [Www.eeas.europa.eu. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bangladesh-first-political-dialogue-eu-takes-place_en?s=164](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bangladesh-first-political-dialogue-eu-takes-place_en?s=164).

“Bangladesh Seeks Technology Transfer, Investment through European Collaboration.” *The Financial Express*, October 18, 2021. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/bangladesh-seeks-technology-transfer-investment-through-european-collaboration-1634475410>.

bdnews24.com (2016, May 12). “EU-Bangladesh Business Climate Dialogue launched in Dhaka”. <https://bdnews24.com/business/2016/05/12/eu-bangladesh-business-climate-dialogue-launched-in-dhaka>

“BGMEA Chief Requests EU for Extended Transition Period.” *The Financial Express*, May 13, 2023. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/bgmea-chief-requests-eu-for-extended-transition-period>.

BSS, Dhaka. 2023. “Bangladesh, EU Agree to Further Deepen Bilateral Partnership.” *The Daily Star*, May 3, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/bangladesh-eu-agree-further-deepen-bilateral-partnership-3310311>.

CACHEUX, Jacques Le, LAURENT, Eloi. “The EU as a global ecological leader.” in *Report on the State of the European Union: Is Europe Sustainable?* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

CLAY, Edward J, DHIRI, Sanjay, and BENSON, Charlotte. *Joint evaluation of European Union programme food aid*. Overseas Development Institute, 1996.

Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh (2012). *Bangladesh and Europe 2012*. Dhaka: Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh.

étrangères, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires. n.d. “The European Union in the Indo-Pacific.” France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. Accessed June 19, 2023. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/regional-strategies/indo-pacific/the-european-union-in-the-indo-pacific/#:~:text=With%20this%20new%20strategy%20and>.

“EU COUNTRY ROADMAP for ENGAGEMENT with CIVIL SOCIETY.” n.d. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_roadmap_for_engagement_with_cs_en.pdf

“EU and Bangladesh Hold Fourth Diplomatic Consultations | EEAS Website.” n.d. [Www.eeas.europa.eu. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-bangladesh-hold-fourth-diplomatic-consultations_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-bangladesh-hold-fourth-diplomatic-consultations_en).

“EU to Make \$21m Climate-Smart Investment in Bangladesh, South Asia.” *The Daily Star*, February 10, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/industries/investments/news/eu-make-21m-climate-smart-investment-bangladesh-south-asia-2958816>.

“EU Grants Bangladesh €600,000 to Mitigate Climate Change”. *Bdnews24*, October 26, 2022. <https://bdnews24.com/environment/7ay4u2p2i>

FAILLER, Pierre, HUSSAIN, M. G., KARIM, Ahmed Al, and ALAM, Md Ashraful, “Blue Economy National Coordination Workshop, jointly organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh and the European Union Delegation in Bangladesh”, September, 2018, 36 p.

“FAO-EU Food Facility – SDA Bangladesh.” n.d. Accessed June 18, 2023. <https://www.sdabangladesh.org/fao-eu-food-facility/>.

FEROZE, Towheed. 2022. "EU-Funded Hidden Heritage Cherishes History, Celebrates Old Dhaka!" *Prothomalo*, September 18, 2022. <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/1iiglj0yb>.

HUSSAIN, Munir. *The European Union: On the verge of global political leadership*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

"It's Strategic and Multi-Dimensional." *The Daily Star*, May 7, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/its-strategic-and-multi-dimensional-3313011>.

ISLAM, Md Rashedul, and MARUF, Kamruddin Nur, "Impact of EU GSP Facilities on Export Growth of Bangladesh: Especially on Readymade Garments Industry", in *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, volume 3, issue 9, September, 2014. <https://www.ijstr.org/final-print/sep2014/Impact-Of-Eu-Gsp-Facilities-On-Export-Growth-Of-Bangladesh-Especially-On-Readymade-Garments-Industry.pdf>.

ISLAM, Md Saiful, "Bangladesh's Success in Building Green Factories: A Silent Revolution in RMG Industry", *The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA)*, September, 2022. <https://www.cbgabd.org/2022/09/19/bangladeshs-success-in-building-green-factories-a-silent-revolution-in-rmg-industry/amp/>.

KABIR, Md Rezwanaul, ISLAM, SM Rabiul, MOLLA, Md Milon, and AKTER, Shoara, "Geological Importance of Bangladesh in Geopolitics", in *Donnish Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 3(1) 2018, pp. 001-005.

"Ministry of Foreign Affairs." n.d. www.mofa.gov.bd. <http://www.mofa.gov.bd/site/page/7f568636-3f71-4668-80bc-104a69a32c90>.

MIRDHA, Refayet Ullah (2017, November 7). "European investors keen on Bangladesh". *The Daily Star*, November 7, 2017. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/european-investors-keen-bangladesh-1485082>

MIRDHA, Refayet Ullah (2020, June 29). "Bangladesh seeks extension of EU trade benefits even after LDC graduation". *The Daily Star*, June 29, 2020. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/bangladesh-seeks-extension-eu-trade-benefits-even-after-ldc-graduation-1922029>

MIRDHA, Refayet Ullah (2023, May 4). "Bangladesh retains second position in RMG export to EU". *The Daily Star*, May 4, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/bangladesh-retains-second-position-rmg-export-eu-3310546>

MUSTAFA, Afsana, ISLAM, M. Serajul, ISLAM, Saiful, and KHATUN, Mahfuja, "Impact of RMG sector on livelihood change of women employees of Bangladesh", in *Social and Economic Geography*, volume 2, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-10.

"No EU-Bangladesh FTA in Foreseeable Future". *The Daily Star*, October 28, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/no-eu-bangladesh-fta-foreseeable-future-3154221>.

"Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures: Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Chittagong Hill Tracts to Live with Dignity and without Violence. | EEAS." n.d. www.eeas.europa.eu. Accessed June 15, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/bangladesh/our-lives-our-health-our-futures-empowering-adolescent-girls-and-young-women_en.

PALMA, Porimol. (2023, May 8). "50 years of Bangladesh-EU ties: EU plans to invest big in Bangladesh". *The Daily Star*, May 8, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/50-years-bangladesh-eu-ties-eu-plans-invest-big-bangladesh-3314626>

PILLAI, Nita, *Food Aid for Development? A Review of the Evidence*. Edited by Edward Clay, Olav Schram Stokke, Ilford, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd 2000, pp. 196-220.

Press and information team of the Delegation to Bangladesh (2019, December 8). Press Release: 6th plenary of EU-Bangladesh Business Climate Dialogue. Retrieved from https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/chile/71650/6th-plenary-eu-bangladesh-business-climate-dialogue_en

RAHMAN, Zillur. 2021. "Bangladesh's Geopolitical Position Provides for Unique Opportunities." *The Daily Star*. November 4, 2021. <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/bangladeshs-geopolitical-position-provides-unique-opportunities-2221461>.

"Support to Boost the Quality of Shrimp Production in Bangladesh for the EU Market". n.d. European Commission.

The Business Standard. (2023, March 30). "Bangladesh apparel exports to EU grew by 35.69% in 2022". *The Business Standard*, March 30, 2023. <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/rmg/bangladesh-apparel-exports-eu-grew-3569-2022-608102>

The Business Standard. (2023, June 1). "Investing in energy storage in Bangladesh: EU hands over a roadmap to government". *The Business Standard*, June 1, 2023. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/energy/investing-energy-storage-bangladesh-eu-hands-over-roadmap-government-642366>

The Daily Star (2022, May 21). "EU Stresses Need of Vibrant Civil Society, Raises Rights Concerns in Bangladesh", *The Daily Star*, May 21, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/committed-guarantee-rights-all-bangladesh-tells-eu-joint-commission-meeting-3028076>.

UNEP, "New programme to support Kenya's coast and blue economy", March 30, 2021. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/new-programme-support-kenyas-coast-and-blue-economy>

WAGNER, Christian, and TRIPATHI, Siddharth, "New connectivity in the Bay of Bengal", in *SWP Comment* 53 (2018).

WHITELY, Charles. "A Thriving Partnership throughout the Decades". *The Financial Express*, February 26, 2023. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/views/a-thriving-partnership-throughout-the-decades-1677344565>.

ZAMIR, Muhammad, "Bangladesh and the EU: Moving forward together", *The Financial Express*, March 4, 2013.

"151 Bangladeshi Students Get Erasmus+ Scholarships for 2022-23." *Prothomalo*, August 11, 2022. <https://en.prothomalo.com/youth/education/g3iosbujct#:~:text=151%20Bangladeshi%20students%20get%20Erasmus%2B%20scholarships%20for%202022%2D23>.

Websites

https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/asia-and-pacific/bangladesh_en#how-are-we-helping
Accessed: 16.06.2023

https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/bangladesh_en

https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/bangladesh_en

https://mofa.gov.bd/site/press_release/d8d7189a-7695-4ff5-9e2b-903fe0070ec9

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2012/summary/>

<https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/food-security-strengthening-agricultural-capacities-ultra-poor-bangladesh>

<http://www.goblue.co.ke/>

<https://bangladesh.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11006/files/documents/bangladeshi-migrants-in-europe-2021.pdf>

https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/scholarships/erasmus-mundus-catalogue_en

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/19969_en

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/bangladesh-first-political-dialogue-eu-takes-place_en?s=164

About the Author

Md. Shariful Islam, PhD is an Associate Professor in International Relations at the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh. Islam is also an adjunct Research Fellow at the KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs, Dhaka. Some of his latest publications include, *Blue Economy Diplomacy for Bangladesh: Contexts, Challenges and Opportunities* (2023, AHDPH and CBGA, Dhaka), *Fifty Years of Bangladesh-India Relations: Issues, Challenges and Possibilities* (2021, Pentagon Press, New Delhi); *COVID-19 Global Pandemic and Aspects of Human Security in South Asia: Implications and Way Forward* (2020, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, co-authored with Delwar Hossain); 'Understanding Foreign Policy of Bangabandhu: Principles, Priorities and Diplomatic Strategies', BIISS Papers, No. 30, November, 2021. Islam pursued Honours and Masters Degree in International Relations at the University of Dhaka. Mr. Islam also holds a Masters and a Doctoral Degree in International Relations from South Asian University, New Delhi. His research interests include Foreign Policy of Bangladesh, Maritime Affairs, Blue Economy Diplomacy and Economic Diplomacy. E-mail: shariful_ruir@ru.ac.bd