Ambassador M. Humayun Kabir is the Vice President of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), Dhaka. Mr. Kabir was a career diplomat for 30 years; he retired from government service as Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh in September 2010. His last foreign assignment was in Washington, DC as Ambassador of Bangladesh. Mr. Kabir also served as Bangladesh Ambassador to Nepal and High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand.

Earlier, he served as Deputy High Commissioner in Kolkata. During his long career, he served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in various capacities and in Bangladesh missions abroad, including in Bangladesh Embassy in Washington, DC, Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations in New York and Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata, India, among others. Before joining the diplomatic service, Mr. Kabir was a faculty member and taught at the Department of Political Science, and the Department of Law, University of Dhaka during the period 1977-1980. His current research interest areas include accountability in governance, public policy, including foreign policy, South Asian affairs, energy, skills and professional development and migration, among others. He regularly delivers lectures on global issues, including diplomacy, global governance, branding and competitiveness at various universities, trade bodies and public and private training institutions in Bangladesh. He has several publications to his credit, and he is a regular commentator to media outlets in Bangladesh and abroad.

The following interview of Ambassador Humayun Kabir is conducted by Professor Singh (hereinafter referred as HK and PSS respectively in the following transcription).

PSS: I am extremely honored to interview Ambassador Humayun Kabir at his home in Dhaka. He has kindly agreed to spend some time with us. We are very delighted to have him as a part of our oral history work on China and China studies in South Asia. Our conversation will be based on various aspects and dimensions of how China has been viewed, understood, engaged and analyzed by academics and by people who have had a practitioners experience in the case of Bangladesh and also other countries.
HK. I am very grateful to you for including me in your project. I also formally welcome you to my home and Dhaka. I hope our conversation will perhaps bring out information that will benefit scholars in their research. I am a practitioner and I have seen things from near and far. Let me highlight that I may not be able to live up to the rigour of scholarly research. However, my comments and views are based on a general line and my experiences as a practitioner in the field of diplomacy.

PSS: Oral history interviews are not structured and are not formal. The idea is an informal conversation and in our project we have defined people who qualify for an interview are those people who are at a stage of life where they are not competing for anything. The conversation is not influenced by being conscious of what will be a good or a bad view and they are people who can reflect back decades of experience. This will ensure a certain kind of objectivity and a sense of purpose. There is a large canvas and they can look back and see how things had evolved. So the idea is to have an informal conversation. Sometimes out of 300 pages only 3 pages could inspire someone to write a book. This is how oral history interviews are done in all fields.

In the first question we try to go back as far as possible. Would you have any memory, at what stage of your childhood, or adolescent, did you first hear the word China?

HK: China came to us very early in our life. The memories of the war between India and China in 1962 were strong and we remember China came out victorious. Thus we remember China as a power trying to establish its footprint in this part of Asia. I would say, I distinctly remember in 1964-65 we were in school; and China then became a part of Pakistani kind of a process and the Chinese revolution had become very famous. We were not there to see the revolution of 1949; however, we heard that Mao Tse Tung had initiated some reforms in China. In school we also knew that China was undergoing a major transformation and the Red Book became very famous with Mao Tse Tung’s quotes and other things. It was a fashion amongst the youngsters to read the book and try to understand what was happening. Honestly at that time we did not understand much but we definitely understood something significant was happening in China.

Slightly down the line when we were at the end of school life in 1967-68, the Vietnam War was raging and China was emerging as a game changer. Vietnam was fighting and China was helping
them against the United States. Thus China was emerging as a power against the American imperialism. China symbolized a fight for emancipation, for independence and for new ideas. In 1967-68 this is how we experienced China in the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. China inspired the youngsters towards left politics. I myself was an activist at that time and indeed Mao Tse Tung’s ideas inspired a generation. In fact, even today the senior most leaders in Bangladesh’s political system are influenced by the left of center paradigm dominated by the supporters of Soviet and Chinese brands of socialism. These ideas influenced many people and we are from the time when a good number of people were influenced by the left ideology.

PSS: Very interesting, Sir. You mentioned Mao’s Red Book and the left of center liberation movement. In fact now extremely over debated China-Pakistan’s relationship started here in East Pakistan. Because of this left of center liberation, China had engaged Pakistan and much of people to people engagement, most official engagement and almost all the defence collaborations were in East Pakistan. So China’s relationship with East Pakistan was more grounded, entrenched, rooted and firmer then West Pakistan, which becomes visible later. So it is very interesting to know that you belong to the generation of people who had a greater understanding and awareness of the revolutionary China to begin with. Did this create a generation that was not necessarily inspired by power of China but definitely by the left of center movement?

HK: I can clearly admit to you that I was a freedom fighter in 1971 and it was a great honor for me to have that kind of opportunity. That was an opportunity that comes once in many generations. So I am proud of that and I was living in India, Dehradun. If you see the larger landscape of the Bangladesh liberation war, you will see that the whole idea behind the war was with respect to the political component and the economic component and behind the economic component was the left of center movement of either the Chinese or the Soviet variety. But the movement was more about ensuring social justice, economic justice, and emancipation of the people and so on so forth. After Bangladesh was established as an independent country the government was influenced by that thought process and we developed a country on the lines of the left-of-center movement and slightly on a socialist orientation. The four principles of the constitution that we developed at that time represented the left-of-center ideology but now everything has changed and Bangladesh has now emerged as the most entrepreneurial nation in South Asia.
PSS: It is very interesting to see after inspiring the liberation movement and also the leadership of the movement, the opposite happens and China refuses to recognize Bangladesh.

HK: Thank you so much for reminding me about that. What happened during the liberation is that, the people’s flexible aspirations and the government’s ridged structure collided with each other. We were fighting for a cause, which was attaining our freedom and independence from Pakistan and Pakistan unleashed military atrocities on the people of Bangladesh. We stood up and fought for upholding our dignity and honour. For us it was an expression of self-dignity but it was a different issue for Pakistan and China. For China, it was an issue of strategic balance. With the emergence of Bangladesh China perceived that it had perhaps lost a strategic asset, which they had found in Pakistan. I think perhaps China suffered from a distorted perception of the emergence of Bangladesh. China also refused to recognize Bangladesh as it was engaging in a larger mission of opening up to the United States and they took Pakistan’s help for the same. Moreover, completing the mission without any interruptions was the Chinese priority. For China, the Chinese-US relationship was more valuable than what was happening in East Pakistan. In my judgment China was more strategic in outlook and so it overlooked the reality that was being unfolded in Bangladesh.

PSS: China was facing an internal turmoil and it was changing in a very different direction. Mao’s era was coming to an end. The transition was very uncertain; many new leaders were coming up and going. So internally China was equally in turmoil, just like Bangladesh in those years before, during and after the liberation war.

HK: You are right, the 1960s and 70s were difficult times for many countries. There were many changes in various countries; armed struggle for independence was going on in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos and Zimbabwe, just to mention a few. As you mentioned China was also undergoing an internal transformation. The generation that led the Chinese revolution in the 40s was gradually giving way to a new generation of leadership. Furthermore, China was making a strategic shift as its relations with the Soviet Union also soured in 1969 following border clashes between the two countries. Consequently, China was looking for an alternative
and the US loomed large as a new ally in their strategic plan. Pakistani help was critical in this strategic shift. Bangladesh somehow got caught into this turbulence. However, subsequently China amended its position and eventually recognized Bangladesh in 1975. Since then the relationship has grown quite fast.

PSS: Would you describe this period as a shift from inspiring generations to a period where two countries gave more importance to their benefits rather than their logical relationship? China did recognize Bangladesh but this relationship was not the same as before. It was a relationship driven by a cost/benefit analysis.

HK: Absolutely, even China started changing its ideological orientation by then. For instance in the 1960s we heard about the Chinese involvement in many countries to promote social revolutions for establishing communism. However, in the 70s China moved away from that ideological stance and tried to take into account the new reality that was emerging. It took note of the new alignment that was taking place in South Asia as well, particularly after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation. China accepted the reality and dealt with it as it was.

PSS: With this shift, for example, you mentioned that a whole generation from schools and colleges were inspired by the Left and socialist ideologies. However, the relationship gradually became deideologized. What was the effect on Bangladesh because of such a shift in the left movement?

HK: Oh, thank you very much for raising this issue. This morning I was at a university talking to the MBA executive students and I told them the following. The whole of South Asia and I would particularly mention Bangladesh because it symbolizes the new orientation away from ideology. For example, Bangladesh was born through an armed liberation war. This was one of the major foot-prints of the 1960s. Bangladesh emerged as a left-of-center state with high socialistic content in its organization of state. However, few years after the independence we realized the
state centric arrangement adopted during and after the liberation war was not giving the required benefits.

Bangladesh’s liberation was a social revolution and millions of people contributed to the movement. The new state was a functional result of a social revolution. So I call Bangladesh, a society driven State. The government that came to power after independence and the one that followed gradually realized that the Bangladesh society has lot of potential. Unless the potential of the people was tapped and the state driven bureaucratic structure lifted, Bangladesh would not be able to realize its full potential. The ground reality was well read and government’s policy quickly shifted to facilitate unleashing of the social energy. What you see today is a Bangladesh driven by new entrepreneurial ideas and new energy in the people. In another sense, Bangladesh has become the most capitalist state in South Asia.

PSS: No one can beat Bangladesh in ready-made garments, for example!

We will shift to the next part, you being a diplomat and not only a part of society, how did you join the Foreign Service? In the process of becoming a practitioner, while reading a book or attending a lecture or learning a language, when did you [as a professional] first come across China?

HK: China kind of captured the imagination of our generation. This was due to two reasons. Firstly China countered the US imperialism and secondly it was seen as an icon of revolution around the world. We belong to that generation. That is how my love for China came out.

PSS: So now we were moving to your career as a practitioner. We were discussing about your training or may be your visit to China. Because then you enter a country you were inspired by and have thought about earlier.

HK: My physical entry to China came little late. However, we had the opportunity to work, watch and interact with the Chinese. My focus was South Asia and the West. In the sense, I did a couple of postings in Nepal and India in South Asia and in the US and the UN in the West.
PSS: The diplomatic core was always in touch [regarding China?].

HK: When I served in Nepal, China was in the picture. I do know different people have different interpretations. China always loomed large in the scheme of things we did during our career.

PSS: Which were these years in Nepal?

HK: I was in Nepal from 2003-06 and I was in Calcutta (India) from 1991-94 and then again from 1999-2001.

PSS: These were active years especially for India.

HK: When I was in India in the early 90s, India was opening relations with China as a consequence of Rajiv Gandhi’s historic visit to China in 1988. Then, it was followed up by Indian Prime minister Narasimha Rao’s visit in 1991. The Indo-Chinese relationship was warming up. As diplomats from neighboring country, we had an obvious interest in understanding the dimensions and depth of the evolving relationship and what impact it would have on Bangladesh’s relationship with India and China. Even in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs I spent lot of time working on the South Asian desk and the UN desk. China was always in the mix in a positive or a negative way.

What I found from a Bangladeshi perspective is that China is a good friend of Bangladesh since it recognized Bangladesh as an independent country in 1975. Since then basically China has been able to do two things in Bangladesh. It has been consistent in its relationship with Bangladesh. During the last 35 years we have seen that the bilateral relationship has grown steadily without any hiccup. This is, we think, one positive element to note in Bangladesh and China’s relationship. Another thing, I would like to bring to your notice, is that China has enjoyed a kind of consensus in political establishments in Bangladesh.

PSS: However, the impression of the Awami League and other parties [Bangladesh National Party] is different outside Bangladesh.
HK: That is the perception, but I can tell you one thing: China is one country that enjoys a similar perception of both the major political parties in Bangladesh.

PSS: Thank you so much for saying because the BNP is assumed to be closer to China.

HK: That is the perception, but realistically on a more professional front one good thing we see about China is that it has been able to establish a consensus with the major political parties of Bangladesh. China has also emerged as a consistent business partner with Bangladesh. For Bangladesh, there are two major import sources, one is China and the other is India. So Bangladesh is maintaining good trade relations with China. Bangladesh also has duty-free access to the Chinese market; off late for around 400 products. The business relationship has worked very well on both sides. In addition China has been a supporter of major economic projects in Bangladesh.

Major investment in Bangladesh has taken place from China. China has invested in many projects. So, from all these perspectives, the relationship is stable, growing nicely, and I will say, it is an almost trouble-free relationship. I must also tell you that Bangladesh not only believes that Bangladesh-China relationship should be smooth but also believes that China should maintain a good relationship with other South Asian countries, including India. We don’t want China and India to compete with each other because that itself works as a negative element for us. As we are thinking about Bangladesh in the 21st century, it can be a bridging nation in the region. For example it can be a bridging nation between India and China. It can also be a bridging nation between South and South East Asia and also between South Asia and China. Bangladesh looks at itself as a bridging nation. It wants to maintain a good relationship with the new growth centers of Asia like India, China and ASEAN. We believe that the Indo-Chinese relationship will make Bangladesh realize its larger objective of becoming a hub in the interregional collaboration.

PSS: You have made a very important point Sir; that there is consensus among the political elite in Bangladesh about engaging China. Secondly you have mentioned Bangladesh as a bridge between the various growth centers. I believe that besides the different growth stories of China and Bangladesh there are multiple other factors and forces in operation. On a larger perspective
beyond economic factors what are the key drivers of the relationship between China and Bangladesh. Likewise what would Bangladesh see in China besides the economic factors?

HK: We visited China last April [2012]. The Bangladesh Enterprise Institute [BEI] had a dialogue with the Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations [CICIR], Shanghai Institute of International Studies [SIIS] and in Beijing we had a meeting with the Chinese Strategic [Studies] Institute. One thing that came out in a recurring fashion from these meetings was that even China has a kind of concern about the rise of extremism and, if you look at the recent Bangladeshi foreign policy, you will see that on one hand we have taken a very decisive stand of not to be soft on any kind of extremism inside the country and also not to allow Bangladesh territory to be used any in other country for the same purpose. The Indian insurgents who used to take shelter in Bangladesh have been removed very decisively.

Bangladesh has also engaged in cooperation with India and the United States to fight the rise of any kind of extremism. I believe here, that China and Bangladesh have a common concern and China doesn’t want any opportunity or an environment to be created where such a phenomenon can take root. Thus, I see on this issue a convergence could emerge among Bangladesh, India, and China. US could also be a partner in this process. Another area where these four countries can collaborate is keeping the opportunity of international trade open. For example when we were talking to the Chinese they mentioned something interesting. The Chinese wanted to cooperate with the US so that the sea link remains open for international trade and in this context they have a flexible outlook. Instead of seeing the Americans as a threat the Chinese demonstrated a kind of readiness to build up a partnership with the US in this particular area. This is a common area of interest for Bangladesh and India as well, as both of them are emerging as important trading nations in the region.

Thus, there is a common purpose of keeping these opportunities open and free from any interruption for our mutual benefits. The last and third area where we can cooperate is the area of connectivity. The former American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had mentioned about the value of restoring the Southern Silk Road. Please look at the evolving economic scenario. India is growing economically, so is China and their growth is connected with each other. When I was in Kathmandu in 2006 the Indo- Chinese bilateral trade was just USD 14 billion. Last year it was
USD75 billion and I feel in the next ten years it could reach to USD 200 billion. It is likely that in the process China could become the largest trading partner of India.

PSS: It is little ambitious though. The Chinese are big trading partners [even] with the US.

HK: Things are shifting really fast and Indo-Chinese trade could gain new heights. In this context connectivity could be a big factor. Bangladesh is looking to become the regional hub for economic activity. It is working on connectivity with India, Nepal and Bhutan. It has also given a proposal to Myanmar. We are also looking down the line to get connected with China as well. In this way East Asia, South East Asia and South Asia can be connected with one other. I can also bring another element in this mix. Just yesterday, I was reading that in the US congress two days back [in March 2013] there was a hearing on interregional connectivity with a particular focus on South and South East Asia. According to the press report on the Hearing the US believes that the regional connectivity will be beneficial to promote trade and economic activity, and perhaps help in global recovery. This was a good news and supports the idea of interregional connectivity for larger economic growth and prosperity.

PSS: That brings me to a more specific question. You have looked at South Asia as a region. China’s influence on the region is unstoppable in recent years. At present China is an Observer of the SAARC, and everyone knows, the most active observer country. There are talks of upgrading China to a full Member. How would you view that possibility and what is the sense of approach amongst Bangladeshi elite of this possibility?

HK: An interesting question. If you allow me, I would like to start from a negative perspective. China in South Asia was seen from two prisms. The first one is the Pakistan prism, that is: China is the balancer of an asymmetrical relationship within South Asia. The second one is the India prism that is looking at China as a competitor to the Indian resurgence in South Asia and beyond. In these two perspectives one common element is that they are looking at each other as competitors and a kind of competitive perception defines the relationship among the involved States.
My sense is that the frame of relationship is changing. Even my Indian colleagues have also written about it. The truth is that while the competitive element is still relevant in this relationship, we are fast moving away from it and inching toward a collaborative paradigm. This means that we are conscious about our interests but that does not mean we have to have a conflict with our neighbors or have a frame of mind dominated by the thought of conflict alone. For example, look at how the trade relationship has been growing between China and India and among other countries in the region. It is possible that 20 years down the line Indo-Chinese trade could reach 300 billion dollars mark. That would surpass any other considerations in the relationship between the two countries. There would be a complete paradigm shift. I admit the Indo-Chinese border problem may persist but they would be ignored or kept under the carpet. The relationship would bloom in other areas creating newer dimension of collaboration.

We in Bangladesh believe that when the SAARC was created it would be a new forum and we were proud to promote the idea and be the first country to host the first summit in 1985. Since then our perceptions and priorities have changed. When the SAARC was created there was some degree of uneasiness among some Member States about the intentions of others. We are now looking at a larger space for collaboration. In the 1980s when Bangladesh promoted the idea of SAARC India was apparently hesitant to join the process and perhaps was not sure about the objectives SAARC wanted to achieve. However, now India is more comfortable with it, and has been promoting the cause of SAARC. India is promoting SAARC because it is a larger forum and it promotes Indian interests, business, and allows India to become a regional leader. If I would extend that logic, I would like to believe that we are going from a competitive era to a collaborative era and we can fight competition through collaboration or they could coexist in some way or the other. However, I feel collaboration will still dominate. In that framework our bilateral relationship could also grow in a multi dimensional way. As for example, we believe that Bangladesh could serve a hub for interregional economic collaboration and the proposed deep sea port in Sonadia in Southern Bangladesh could serve that purpose.

PSS: That is another major area I would like to engage, if you allow.

HK: We believe that the deep sea port in Sonadia should be a Port of Peace, for example. We want India, China, US and others to participate in the construction and perhaps management process. We want everyone to join hands with us in this project. We believe that the deep sea
port could serve the interest of everybody and the interests do not always need to be conflicting, they can be collaborative as well. If we can develop that level of trust and confidence amongst ourselves China’s membership in the SAARC may not pose a big problem. Rather, it could allow us to engage China in a more constructive way in larger format of collaboration. We can develop a new framework of relationship that can be positive outcome for all of us. So, if we come out of the current conflicting mindset and cultivate a collaborative mindset it can be a win-win situation for everyone.

PSS: I am delighted you mentioned about Sonadia! There are different takes on these issues. Hambantota [in Sri Lanka] was the same story where they [Colombo] wanted India and European Union to come aboard. Some of these projects land up, let me use a harsher word may be India-centric term, in China’s lap. Location wise Sonadia is far more critical to entire South Asia especially India. Chinese are creating these ports as commercial facilities. However, intentions can change overnight; capacities take a long time to build. This brings me to the larger question about the shift from suspicion to partnership potentially cooperation. What is the understanding of the people of Bangladesh? Has that shifted or is it only the corporations that talk the language of partnership? Do the people on the street think that Bangladesh still needs to be cautious and suspicious? Has the view on the streets changed in Bangladesh about China?

HK: I think, there have been a change and an evolution in the thought process of the people in Bangladesh. Let me begin with India. When the transit issue was first raised, there was strong resistance to this idea. I personally remember a discussion on this issue in 1992 when the current President of India, Pranab Mukharji, was the Planning Minister in Narasimha Rao’s government. He raised the issue back in 1992 and requested Bangladesh to allow the transit facilities to India. It was on the card for a long time but due to certain constrains and policy hesitation progress could not be made. However, now if you look at the evolution of things in the last few years the public has accepted the fact and they are showing a positive attitude toward this idea. Here, I should also mention that Bangladesh is a nation that has fought for its independence and we are very proud people. We are not ready to accept the hegemony of anybody in whatever form it comes, let me be very clear on that. We fought and broke the Pakistani hegemony and arrogance of power and everyone should read this signal clearly. Having said that I must add that we want
good relations with all our neighbors, including India and China; we understand the changing realities in the larger regional context.

I have myself written on the need for developing connectivity in larger context. I believe that connectivity should be the new buzzword in the 21st century in our interregional relationship and it should be explored in all its dimensions. It should be noted that transit forms only one part of this vast canvass. Recently, I submitted a paper to an Indian journal on highlighting these aspects. So while we want to take Bangladesh-India relationship on this issue forward, we would expect our Indian friends will also appreciate that we have larger vision on the issue of connectivity. I think that is a fair kind of expectation, which could accrue benefit to all stakeholders. The same applies to our approach to China. We don’t want China to engage negatively with India, notwithstanding the fact that there could be some irritants. We have problems with China as well. We have a trade deficit with both India and China. Whenever opportunities arise we tell our positions to China on this issue and try to resolve it through peaceful means. In the current time frame, I believe the people of Bangladesh would look at issues from their own merits and not from an ideologically driven point of view. So, from this perspective, I believe we would welcome and appreciate support from all friends.

PSS: We are assuming that in China and in South Asia there is some momentum towards cooperation and collaboration, which were overshadowed by mistrust in initial decades. Looking at a larger picture if you take Asia, there is an assumption, and correct me if I am wrong, there is another tension emerging between China and the US about the Indo-Pacific formulation, about the ‘offshore-balancing’ formulation and the Trans Pacific Partnership. These formulations indicate, while China today is the largest trading partner of all countries, leaving a dozen countries, US is the anchor for security [for everyone]. There are two parallel streams moving simultaneously, one is leading the security structure and the other is leading the economic partnership. Would that tension, in any way, will impact the relationship of China-South Asia or China-Bangladesh.

HK: Yes. We are seeing some tensions rising and, as you have rightly pointed out, the security structure is dominated by the United States. And, last year [2012], when President Obama pointed out on realigning or shifting the pivot to Asia, I thought security is one component of that and people also say there could be many other elements to the security issue as well. The
three components the US is looking at are: reinforcing their traditional partners in the region and they are doing that already, another is finding new political friends in the region, I think Bangladesh and India could fall in that category, and finally realigning the economic relationship through both bilateral and multilateral network, the Trans Pacific Partnership comes in that category.

My sense is that the Americans are increasingly getting closer in commercial and economic relationships with China. So, on the one hand, they [US] are trying to rebuild or reenergize their security network, which some people read as encircling China or putting a structure around China, on the other hand building an economic infrastructure to serve their interests in a dynamic way. There is every reason to believe that economic relationship will dominate this century. Yes traditional security thoughts will play some role and create some tension; South China Sea and East China Sea being the live examples. But, we have also seen how careful US is in not raising the temperature in the region. At the same time, China is equally realistic and sensitive to the needs of other states. I can give you one example. When we were visiting China last April [2012], we raised this issue with our Chinese friends and they admitted that they did not know all the tricks to manage the unfolding tensions. They said they were learning from their initiatives and if something worked well they advanced and if that did not work they moved back.

In my view this is a pragmatic and mature approach and they [China] do not seem to be driven by an ideological approach. They are not doing things for the sake of doing. They are taking every element into consideration and that reflects a kind of humility on the part of Chinese leadership. It was amazing to see how openly they acknowledge their deficiency in understanding and test the ground to find a solution. I think this is a good approach. My sense is that, for China, the economy will dominate the relationship for the next 20 years, and behind the economy are military and other forces that get developed. It is likely that the US will continue to dominate the global security set up as a single country but at the same time multiple centers of power are emerging. Although one would see the Indo-US relationship or read the relationship in that light but I think India has its own mind and India will assess its relationship with China, with the US, with South Asian Countries and other Countries. So, thinking that India would jump in a kind of collaboration against someone does not seem likely.
In my sense, from a security point of view, we might see multiple powers operating at the same time but I wouldn’t be surprised if I see, down the line, an unwritten collaborative mechanism, A pan-Asia security network where everybody will take everyone’s interest into account and make a balance, not negatively but positively. As the economy grows, I think and I am sure, you will agree that India needs a peaceful environment to rise economically. China has followed the same trajectory and will continue to do so. So from both Indian and Chinese perspective and I would say from the US perspective a peaceful environment, which can underpin continued economic growth would remain as a priority.

For all the major powers a peaceful global and regional environment is a must. If they are engaged in a security misstep, it will create a negative environment for all of them. My sense, neither China nor India nor the US would like to see anything happening like that. Here, I see a silver lining. Although, there is tension in the short term, but from a long term perspective these powers need to cooperate and collaborate with each other for their own benefit. I am not talking about their mutual benefit but for their own benefit. My sense is that whatever happens with regard to the security structure they will collaborate on the economic front and they might find a suitable security structure to promote the objective.

PSS: You are currently the Vice President of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute which I know also does foreign policy and security issues within its domain. How much of China, besides engaging China by visiting it and talking to Think tanks, is a part of the work of your institute as a issue?

HK: It is one area of our interest. In fact, I must tell you, if I count in terms of percentage, India takes 20-30 per cent of our attention. The same is for China and the US. It is a kind of balanced attention. The Americans have the largest economy. They have security interest, economic interest, political interest, alliance interest, partnership interest, etc in South Asia and many of these issues are extremely relevant in the case of Bangladesh-US relationship. India is our largest neighbor. We have the largest border with India so we have to be careful of border management with India. In fact, the next two rounds of dialog that we are going to carry out with India from BEI would be on border management. With regards to economic issues with India, the country is our largest import source, a potential export destination and also a potential investment partner.
for us. We are also looking at India as a major market and as India grows we would like to take a share of India’s economic growth. So we have to pay a great deal of attention to India.

China is also our economic partner. China is involved in a number of projects in Bangladesh. It has been a consistent support to Bangladesh. We would like to believe that China could be a potential market for Bangladesh in the future, just like India for Bangladesh. As China grows, some of its industries will relocate and we want to benefit from that shift. China will import more and we also want to benefit. From a multiple perspective, we believe the three major powers: India, China and the US, are our partners and we want to benefit from their growth.

PSS: The diplomatic core and the Foreign Service officials in Dhaka, who have interest in China, how connected are they? Are there occasional meetings amongst these people? Secondly are they connected to academia, who have similar interests? Sometimes these two work in two different streams. Finally are the officials and academia connected to policy making in the government?

HK: I go back to your last point. There is much to be desired on this issue. If you ask me if there is academic feedback in the policy making, I am not sure till what extent is that expected or valued. The meetings between diplomats and academics take place occasionally. These discussions are not regular. I hope more such discussions to take place. These days one needs to understand the nuances of policymaking and how things are shaping up. For example before going to China, I did not know how nuanced the Chinese policy could be with regard to the US. We thought the Chinese and the Americans are competing; but in some areas they are collaborating. They expect each other’s support in some areas. For example with regard to South China Sea, the Chinese are saying that they are testing and learning. It is humility for a country like China when they say that are moving ahead step by step. So, my sense is that it will be good to have more collaboration between the academic world and the policy world. Unfortunately what is happening now is not regular and consistent. I wish the reverse should happen.

PSS: What is the coverage of China, particularly in your print media?
HK: China and India both enjoy good visibility in the media. Don’t be surprised if I tell you Bangladeshi media is more outward [looking] then Indian media. This is because Bangladesh has always been more concerned about what is happening in the outside world and if you look at Bangladeshi newspapers most of the time foreign news dominates. Media gives great coverage to the foreign news.

PSS: In the last five years you have watched foreign affairs in general especially with China. Is there anything Bangladesh could have done differently to maximize the relations in the five years when China was ignoring Bangladesh [after its liberation]?

HK: Oh, you are talking about the early period. Well we tried but China had different priorities. Right from 1972, we put our best diplomat to deal with China; we sent our best diplomat to China. We tried to make China understand the reality but as I had mentioned at the beginning China was eyeing at the US particularly for two three reasons. Firstly, after their negative experience with the Soviet Union in 1969 China wanted a balancer and the US fit into that slot. Secondly China was seeking to end the Vietnam War, which was taking place on its border. Obviously it was not a comfortable experience for China. Having experienced the impact of Korean War, China was nervous and they wanted to get the US out of their back. I think these two issues were dominating their thought process. For the Chinese, anything else could wait and not these two priorities. Opening up to the US was a major focus for them in the early 1970s and that absorbed most of their attention. But since they recognized Bangladesh in 1975 they have been consistent and reliable partner.

PSS: What are the other critical problems between Bangladesh and China besides the trade deficit and how can the trade deficit be tackled?

HK: China as we have discussed is a major player and has its own objectives. I will not discount the possibility of a divergence in Chinese objectives sometime. We in Bangladesh are straight and pragmatic and we are aware of our abilities and our limitations. So as a modest partner we want to make the best utilization of the available scenario. The problem with relatively modest or
small countries is that their ability to influence the situation may be dependent on the objectives and approaches of larger partners. This problem is a challenge and it prevails in the Bangladesh China relationship as well.

PSS: Thank you very much. I do hope we can continue our exchange of ideas.

You are always welcome!