

## **CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONSHIP**

**[Speech by Mr. H. T. Imam  
Adviser to the Hon'ble Prime Minister]**

Ambassador Farook Sobhan,  
His Excellency James F Moriarty,  
General Firdous Mian,  
Colonel Shajahan,  
Distinguished guest and participants,

Aas-Salaamu-A'laikum and a very good morning.

I see a galaxy of political, intellectual, business and civil and military leaders here in the gathering. We gather here today at a time in which Bangladesh is placed in a defining period in its history.

2009 has been a landmark year in our country. It has ushered in a new democratic era, a government firm on sustaining this democracy and a vision of unprecedented far sight for the future. We have declared our goal to establish Bangladesh as a fast developing middle income country by 2021, the 50th year of our independence. And we aim to do so by transforming this nation through a comprehensive approach of inclusive development, democratization, regional economic integration and building a knowledge-based society. Indeed, we are pursuing our national development in line with the information age. We aim to build a Digital Bangladesh.

Of course, this year has also served as a reminder for our country, at times a brutal reminder. During this year, not only did we come out of another period of unelected rule in our history, but more than that, we are having to protect our democracy and our people against those forces that seek to discredit and destroy the very idea of an independent Bangladesh, that of a progressive, secular and liberal democratic state.

The savagery and inhumanity we witnessed during the BDR mutiny in February should serve as a sufficient reminder to us that these forces are out there and seek to damage not just our democratic order, but also the institutions that truly symbolize our national unity.

Because Bangladesh is at such a crucial moment in its history, I am pleased that the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) and the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), with active support from the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), have taken the bold initiative to hold what I believe will be a ground breaking workshop on National Security and Civil Military Relation in Bangladesh.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Vision 2021 reflects the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh. These aspirations seek national development to realize the vast potential of our country.

National development essentially includes the establishment of a truly participatory democracy in Bangladesh. Because in order to fulfil the aspirations of its people, in order to transform its society into an economically inclusive and prosperous society, Bangladesh requires a functional and sustainable democracy, to ensure the equality of citizens, efficient governance, social empowerment and the economic upliftment of the masses.

Distinguished audience,

The civil-military relationship serves as a fundamental basis for a functional and sustainable democracy. A country cannot afford to undermine the importance of maintaining such a relationship, for doing so leads to dangerous implications that adversely affect both democracy and national security.

Despite being founded on a struggle for democracy, Bangladesh has had to endure long periods of undemocratic rule. And this has not served us well as the direction of our state has varied at different times. As a result, national interest has varied at different times, causing severe detriments for national security. Today, we witness the impact of these detriments in the threats posed by the emergence of terrorist influences and Islamic extremism in the country.

For Bangladesh, it is now a matter of urgency to address the need to build a strong civil-military relationship, in order to ensure stability and the rule of law for our national development and to tackle the threats posed to our national security.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, the collective conscience of our nation has greatly matured in terms of the firm commitment to the democratic order. With a free press and vibrant atmosphere of political debate, the space to derail the democratic process has significantly narrowed.

Today, Bangladesh is also fortunate to have an armed force that has not just been in great service to our own nation, but also to the community of nations. As one of the leading contributors to United Nations peacekeeping operations, our armed forces have, over the past decade, actively taken part in the reconstruction of war ravaged countries across the world and have earned the respect, admiration and trust of the peoples of these countries.

Back home, in a country that frequently faces the wrath of nature in the form of devastating floods and cyclones; the Bangladesh Armed Forces play an instrumental role in disaster management. From supplying relief and reaching the most remote areas to

facilitating rehabilitation and providing immediate medical treatment, the armed forces perform their duties by deeply caring for the needs of victims. In fact, such is the interaction and cooperation between civil and military actors during such times of natural calamity, the area of disaster management is, without a doubt, a field of effective civil-military cooperation which complements the civil-military relationship in Bangladesh.

During the last two years of emergency rule, the Bangladesh Armed Forces also performed its due role in aiding the civil administration to maintain law and order and in preparing for national elections.

I recall their successful formulation of a comprehensive voter list with photograph and establishment of national ID card system during the period of the emergency. The use of technology and army personnel in making the voter list instilled a higher degree of public confidence in the preparation for national elections. Bangladesh finally held a historic election at the end of 2008, an election described by international observers as the most free and fair election in the history of our country.

The role of the armed forces in formulating the voter list and national ID card system and in the holding of an incredibly successful election stands as an extraordinary testament to their role in strengthening the electoral, and ultimately the democratic, system in the country. The voter registration period also served as a time for significant interaction between the people and the armed forces.

Distinguished guests and participants,

I believe that given the professional conduct shown by our armed forces in the past decade and the loyalty they have proven to the democratic process, Bangladesh certainly holds the potential to build a strong civil-military relationship that greatly complements national interest and security.

However my dear friends,

Despite holding such hope and optimism, we must acknowledge the existence of mistrust and grievances prevalent on both sides of the civil-military relationship. It is a cause of significant apprehension for Bangladesh's future.

Yes, we have laid out an elaborate vision of our desired future. Yet, the future holds a multitude of challenges as well. These are challenges that will truly test the strength of the civil-military relationship in our country. With the threat of terrorism and religious extremism, civil and military actors in Bangladesh will be required to realize true national interest and create mutual confidence to safeguard national security. And with the devastating impacts of climate change, even the field of disaster management will pose new difficulties that challenge the existing example of strong civil-military cooperation.

The underlining point is that Bangladesh must begin, in earnest, to build the required level of civil-military relations that serve its national interest, safeguard its national security and complement our vision to become a stable, prosperous and democratic country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Once again, I wish to stress the importance and urgency of holding such a workshop. I hope that during its sessions, participants will engage in frank discussions to identify and deliberate on the challenges to the national security and civil-military relations of Bangladesh and to explore the responses to these challenges. We must always bear in mind that a civil-military relationship of mutual trust and confidence is essential for our goal to establish a truly participatory democracy and achieve inclusive economic development in Bangladesh. A very good and appropriate example of civil and military cooperation is our office, the Prime Minister's Secretariat. The political leaders, military and civil officers work in perfect harmony at the PMO.

*I would like to see this relationship in a larger canvass.* May I add here that in the ultimate analysis it is the people who really matter. It is the people who can ensure security for the country. The best example is our war of liberation, which was truly a people's war. People of all classes, farmers, labour, teachers, students, professionals, members of the armed forces, civil officers, police, border guards coming from all classes and religion formed our Mukti Bahini (the freedom fighters) and liberated this country. The people within whole-heartedly supported and sustained this war.

In my personal view we should *not* use the words "civil-military" relations in a confrontational sense. *We all are children of this soil.* It is our people who are the sentinels of our independence. It is they, with the support of civil and military forces, who will overcome the enemy, from within and outside. I am confident, they can face upto the challenge of the militants today and tomorrow and in the future.

Distinguished guests, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

I express my gratitude to the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute and the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies for organizing such an important workshop on such a crucial issue of national importance. I also take the opportunity to express my deep appreciation of the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies for supporting BEI and BISS in holding this event, an event which I hope will be of a ground breaking nature. I would like to see this relationship in a larger canvass.

Thank you.