

Victoria Nuland visits Bangladesh, demanding it support US-NATO war drive against Russia

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Top US diplomat Victoria Nuland visited Bangladesh on March 20, aiming to force Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government to align with the US-NATO war drive against Russia.

Nuland's tri-nation South Asian tour from March 19 to 23 that included India and Sri Lanka, also sought to closely integrate the countries into the broader US strategic offensive against Russia and China.

According to the US Department of State, the purpose of the trip by the Under Secretary for Political Affairs was "to strengthen economic partnerships and deepen ties in the pursuit of peace, prosperity, and security in the Indo-Pacific region."

Despite that diplomatic language, Nuland's intervention in the region is striking. She is infamous for her role in preparing the 2014 fascist-led coup that overthrew the elected pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, and installing a pro-Western regime.

In Bangladesh, Nuland, held a meeting, known as the eighth US-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue, with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abdul Momen.

After the meeting, Nuland told the press: "This is a moment for all free nations and all free people to stand together with the people of Ukraine" to end the war, the *Daily Star* reported on March 21. Her call had nothing to do with ending war but with lining up countries behind the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

Momen indicated the Bangladesh government's desire to keep balancing between the US and Russia, despite Nuland's pressure. He said that during the discussions he had "underscored Bangladesh always wants peace, and that the conflict [between Russia and Ukraine] needed to be resolved through negotiations."

Nevertheless, both sides agreed to a draft General Security of Military Information Agreement

(GSOMIA), the *Times of India* reported on March 20, highlighting the growing military ties between the US and Bangladesh. Nuland said the GSOMIA "is the gateway to being able to do more on the security front."

Washington's pressure exerted through Nuland's visit had an immediate impact. During a UN General Assembly special session on March 24, Bangladesh voted, along with 139 other countries, for a resolution "demanding aid access and civilian protection in Ukraine" and accusing Russia of creating a "dire humanitarian situation" in Ukraine.

Bangladesh justified its vote on the pretext of the "humanitarian situation." This was a shift from its earlier stance of being among 34 countries, including India, Pakistan and China, who abstained on a March 2 UN resolution that reprimanded Russia and demanded that it immediately withdraw its military forces.

Hasina's Awami League government has been balancing between the US-NATO alliance and Russia-China because the country depends on both camps for trade and foreign investment. The country's major share of exports goes to the US and the European Union. According to the Bangladesh Shipping Agents Association, about 51 percent of exports go to Europe, 25 percent to the US, and 4 percent to Canada, the *Hellenic Shipping News* website reported on January 31.

On the other hand, the Awami League government is reluctant to loosen relations with Russia, which supplies wheat, fertilizer, machinery, fresh and dried fruit. Bangladesh exports apparel, jute, frozen foods, tea and leather to Russia. Two-way trade is worth over \$US1 billion a year.

Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry president Md. Jashim Uddin told *Benar News*: "The sanctions have disrupted the normal trade. Many

port authorities dropped Bangladeshi export items from the ships destined to Russia.”

Russia is also constructing Bangladesh’s biggest power plant, worth \$13.48 billion—the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant—financed by a Russian government loan of \$12.65 billion. The plant, with 2,400-megawatt capacity, is expected to meet more than 9 percent of country’s electricity needs.

Amid the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the government wants to avoid falling out with the US-EU, fearing that the country would not only lose investment, export earnings and International Monetary Fund and World Bank financial aid, but also face punitive actions.

To exert pressure, the US has seized upon human rights abuses by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in Bangladesh. The US imposed sanctions in December against the RAB and some of its officials on “charges of gross violation of human rights, including extrajudicial killings,” *New Age* reported on March 20. This timing was well calculated prior to the Russian invasion. Nuland declared that the US was never going to be silent on these issues.

These sanctions have intensified tensions between the two countries. On March 28, speaking at the 18th anniversary of the RAB, Hasina said the sanctions were “an abominable act,” adding that the US government does “not take any action against any member of their forces for their criminal activities.”

The RAB is a notorious paramilitary force that conducts extrajudicial killings and the repression of opposition party members, journalists and rights activists. However, US concern about its abuses is hypocritical, not least because it helped train RAB forces according to WikiLeaks.

Moreover, US military forces are infamous for their own war crimes and atrocities throughout the world, including the Middle East and Afghanistan. Washington also turns a blind eye to the abuses of its allies and partners such as Saudi Arabia. Washington’s real concern is to pressure the Bangladeshi government to distance itself from China.

The US and its allies have been silent or made limited superficial criticisms when RAB has been deployed to suppress workers’ protests. In May 2018 Hasina’s government unleashed a brutal crackdown under the pretext of an “anti-drug” operation, killing more than

150 people and arresting about 21,000. The US State Department simply urged the government to investigate the extrajudicial killings to “fully meet its human rights obligations.”

Dhaka is desperate to get the RAB sanctions lifted. In the discussions with Nuland, Momen suggested ending the sanctions. Nuland was presented with a dossier on measures the government was taking to improve the RAB’s “human rights records.” Nuland noted “progress” by the RAB during the past three months—but nothing else.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is due to meet Momen on April 4 in Washington to discuss “security and defense issues.” The meeting will also mark 50 years of diplomatic relations, established in 1972 when the US formally recognised Bangladesh after its split from Pakistan.



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