I would like to begin by thanking Dan Runde and CSIS for organizing today’s event on Bangladesh’s development success story. This year, we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence and the 100th birth anniversary of the founding Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Keeping the twin celebrations in mind, I feel that sharing our nation’s development success story is most time befitting.

When Bangladesh was born in 1971, it was known to the rest of the world as a very poor country suffering from hunger and natural disasters. Our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman laid down the basic foundations of a prosperous Bangladesh on the ashes of the war-ravaged country. He could not finish his work as he was brutally assassinated in 1975. For a long time, Bangladesh’s economic development and social progress remained slow and tentative in the absence of strong leadership.

The most dramatic economic and social transformation has taken place during the last one decade. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has enjoyed an uninterrupted decade of economic prosperity. With an annual growth rate of nearly 7% during this period, Bangladesh has been one of the fastest growing countries in the world. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh has been one of the few countries to achieve respectable GDP growth. Today, Bangladesh has attained food self-sufficiency with a much larger population. Cyclones and floods remain common, but the death toll is dramatically lower. Poverty is significantly down, and we are ahead of our larger South Asian neighbors in most economic and social development indicators.
Bangladesh’s economic growth and social progress is receiving a great deal of attention, but the full narrative is still missing. In my presentation, I would try to provide a general overview of how the government and various societal actors have contributed to Bangladesh’s transformation, each according to its comparative advantage.

The story of Bangladesh’s development journey should begin with the transformation of the **agricultural sector**. Food production has tripled in the last 50 years. The government has played the lead role in introducing high yielding varieties of rice, developing irrigation system, subsidizing fertilizer and pesticides, removing import restrictions on agricultural machinery, and providing credit to farmers through Bangladesh Agricultural (Krishi) Bank. Public investments in roads and bridges have facilitated marketing of agricultural produce by connecting villages with major cities.

The next important milestone in our development journey, the growth and expansion of ready-made garment (RMG) industry, owes primarily to the private entrepreneur class, who have made good use of favorable government policy. The ready-made garment industry has transformed Bangladesh’s agrarian economy to a manufacturing one. I hope that former BGMEA President Rubana Huq will elaborate on this subject.

The participation of women workforce in our economic activities is very high not just as a Muslim majority country but also globally. Ready-made garment industry alone provides employment to more than 3 million women. The government’s emphasis on girls’ education and various NGO-run self-employment programs have helped empower women. We look forward to hearing more on it from BRAC’s Managing Director Tamara Abed.
Money remitted by expatriate Bangladeshis, which was close to $25 billion last year, is another important pillar of Bangladesh economy. Individual Bangladeshis, not government or NGOs, can rightfully claim credit for this. However, the governments’ recent introduction of a 2% cash incentive on foreign remittances has significantly increased remittance through formal banking channels.

Last but perhaps the most attractive dimension of our development journey is how we have translated economic growth into social progress. Bangladesh has achieved rapid progress in many social and human development indicators including health, education, and demographic outcomes. The massive government investment complemented by a strong presence of NGOs have been behind this feat.

Our development partners have been another important player in our development journey. Foreign aid from bilateral and multilateral sources have helped Bangladesh reduce poverty, improve public health and education services, disaster management capacity building and transportation network. As the Ambassador of Bangladesh to the United States, it gives me great satisfaction to say that the United States has been an old and consistent development partner of Bangladesh. The United States is also the largest destination of our exports, the largest source of foreign direct investment, and an important source of technology and training. It is important that our both countries provide adequate policy support to further expand bilateral trade and investment. I am hoping that Ambassador Farooq Sobhan and Ambassador Dan Mozena will further elaborate on this subject.

*Challenges ahead*
Bangladesh faces challenges too. COVID-19 pandemic has slowed our economic growth and has negatively impacted on poverty reduction. We need to diversify our export basket, moving away from the heavy dependence on textile and ready-made garments. As we lose trade preferences upon graduation from LDC category, our productivity must be improved significantly to maintain competitiveness. Huge investment will be needed to provide skills to our workforce, and FDI to create jobs for them. Climate change poses serious threats to our agriculture and infrastructure. Since 2017, Bangladesh has been sheltering over 1 million forcibly displaced Rohingya population from Myanmar, which is also creating enormous strain on our economy and society.

Ladies and gentlemen: The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina seeks to harness the dynamism of a market system while creating economic opportunities and good human development outcomes for the entire population, with special attention to workers’ welfare and social protection for marginal groups. With support from development partners, and through its policy actions and public investments, the government wants to create a conducive environment that helps unleash the entrepreneurship of both the private sector and NGOs. Bangladesh’s development journey is an ongoing process, and I hope to collaborate with Dan to share with you more about this journey in future.

Thank you.