



Geopolitics of India-Bangla Connectivity Projects

Khalid Saifullah

Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Article Info

Article history:

Received August 25, 2020

Revised September 24, 2020

Accepted November 10, 2020

Available online December 2, 2020

Cite:

Saifullah, Khalid. (2020). Geopolitics of India-Bangla Connectivity Projects. *Global-Local Interaction: Journal of International Relations*, 1(2).

* Corresponding author.

Khalid Saifullah

E-mail address:

khalidsaifullahir96@gmail.com

Abstract

Bangladesh and India are neighboring countries of south Asia sharing a huge border. The location of Bangladesh creates an obstacle for connectivity between Indian states. India is eager to connect its north-east zone through Bangladesh. Again, Both China and USA have deep political interest in Bangladesh and Bay of Bengal. In this situation, Bangladesh has to consider the ongoing connectivity projects as a geopolitical game. Granting connectivity projects with India whether it is beneficiary or harmful to Bangladesh is still debatable. Bangladesh has chance to use connectivity as a tool of economic development. But if Bangladesh cannot balance between regional powers, Bangladesh might be the next shatterbelt. This paper aims to show the geopolitical context whether Bangladesh would be beneficiary of connectivity or not.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Connectivity, South Asia, Security, Indo pacific strategy

Introduction

Bangladesh and India both are South-Asian countries sharing common ethnic background and colonial experience. Bangladesh has 4156 km international border with India which is the fifth longest border in the world.¹ Bangladesh lies in an important position in the connectivity between mainland India and north-east India. India has to use "Siliguri Corridor" which is strategically vulnerable for her.

India always tried to use Bangladeshi land for convenient access to north-east India. But, as it was a political decision of Bangladesh, no government dared because of public sentiment. Again, after regime change of Bangladesh in 2008, India has taken several measures to make connectivity using Bangladeshi soil. Such as direct transport service between West Bengal and Tripura, repairing and activating rail connections, using Bangladeshi rivers for naval transportation etc. Though, India is focusing on India-Bangladesh connectivity but it can be used as India-India connectivity (Transit). Bangladesh has not such infrastructure to provide so called transit. So, India is providing loan to Bangladesh for developing infrastructure.

Again, Bangladesh has deep economic relation with China. China's geo-strategic relation with Myanmar, expectation from Bangladesh are also to be considered to make a balance. Because of Bangladesh's geo-political importance, both India and China are eager to use Bangladesh to contain other country.

The New Shatterbelt?

According to S. Cohen, shatterbelt is marked by intra-regional conflicts and the rivalry of extra-regional powers. A region becomes a shatterbelt because of the policies that major powers pursue. These policies may, of course, be driven by that region's resource endowment or strategic location.² Shatter belts are the main crisis hot spots of global crisis. The Middle East and Southeast Asia were shatterbelt according to Cohen. The Shatterbelts of the 1970s – sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, are no longer Shatterbelts, but the Middle East remains one.

When Cohen marked shatterbelt areas, China was not so prominent in South Asia. But, in 2020, nuclear armed India and China can play the role of USA and USSR of the cold war era. Bangladesh might become next shatterbelt because two regional major power China and India have contradictory interests in this country. China and India have regular border clash and disputes over territory. Connectivity projects taken by India in Bangladesh may not be welcomed by China. This Sino-Indian rivalry may cause serious problems in Bangladesh if Bangladesh cannot balance it properly.

Literature Review

According to Sanjay Kathuria, Nadeem Rizwan, Bangladeshi firms have chance to be key investors in the Northeast India. Energy supply from Nepal and Bhutan can ensure cheap source of energy

which is very important for the development of Bangladesh. Increased investment, trade, people to people contact would have positive impacts for Bangladesh.³

Anu Anwar (2019) said intensified strategic rivalry between China-India would be beneficiary for Bangladesh, because both countries would like to take Bangladesh into their own orbit. China, would come with billion dollar investments and technical support. New Delhi would try to increase diplomatic and cultural ties with Bangladesh. India and China will try their best for the competition for dominance in the Bangladesh and Bay of Bengal.⁴

Commodore M Zakirul Islam argued Bangladesh may also use the China card in setting terms with India like what being used by Sri Lanka and Maldives. As China is eager to use Bangladeshi ports and other facilities to operate in the Bay of Bengal region, Bangladesh may use this leverage to bring India in favorable terms during settling bi-lateral issues.⁵

Importance of Connectivity

After the partition of India in 1947, Muslim majority areas of Bengal were under East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh). Again, North Dinajpur district of West Bengal was of Muslim majority but it was given to India to use as a corridor to enter north-east India otherwise there would be no direct link between north-east India and rest of India. This is now known as "Siliguri Corridor"⁶ which is a narrow passage between Bangladesh, China, Nepal and Bhutan. The narrow Siliguri Corridor which at one point is less than 27 kilo meter (17 mi) wide, remained as the only bridge between the northeastern part of India and the rest of the country.

India has to use this corridor make connection with seven of its hilly states called Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. As using this corridor is time consuming and expensive, India always tried to use Bangladeshi land for easier connectivity. Again, the north-east zone is landlocked and it has no access to sea.

China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar have border North-Eastern region of India. Only one percent is domestic boundary and the rest is international.⁷ The Seven Sisters have the people with racial and tribal difference, they were always non-participation in the national government. Again, Christianity has strong presence in Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland.

The north-east states had a tradition of insurgency. India also claimed that Some regimes of Bangladesh patronized those insurgencies. By 2015 the level of insurgency declined severely. Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh were free of insurgency. According to the government records, in the first quarter of 2017, there were no extremist incidents in Tripura and Mizoram. There was also a declining trend in Assam, and Nagaland.⁸

As insurgency is almost abolished, the north-east India would be a great place of investment as it is full of natural resources. Economic development in this area would also have influence on neighboring Bangladesh. So, India is surely benefited from the connectivity projects like repairing and activating rail connections, using Bangladeshi rivers for naval transportation, constructing highways for road transportation etc.

Present Connectivity Status

Connectivity projects includes both land, air and naval connection. As land connectivity is less expensive and India is in need of it, it is focused here mainly. But, in future use of Bangladeshi seaport will include. There are two integrated check post called Petrapole (West Bengal)-Benapole, Agartala (Tripura) - Akhaura. There are also 34 Land Customs Station, which are used for goods export-import. About 22 of them are used for immigration.

Though there are many land ports, only some ports have important geographical proximity. Such as Benapole which is only 80 km away from Kolkata (capital of West Bengal), Akhaura land port which is only 6 km from Agartala (Tripura). Banglabandha which is only 8 km from Siliguri (2nd largest city of West Bengal), 61 km from Nepal and 68 km from Bhutan. Bilonia land port which can ensure Indian entrance in Chittagong etc. Dhaka, Khulna, Chittagong, Rajshahi have direct bus service with Kolkata. Dhaka has also with Agartala and Shillong. Rail connection between Benapole-Petrapole, Gede-Darshana, Radhikapur- Rahimanpur are also present.⁹

Again, Dhaka has direct flight service with Kolkata, New Delhi, Chennai and Guwahati. Again, Chittagong has also direct flight with Kolkata. In April 2019, first cruise ship between Dhaka and Kolkata introduced. It seems that there are numerous ways for connectivity through rail, road and air. India has also made visa processing easy.¹⁰ In 2012, there was only .48 million Bangladeshi visitors in India, the number has grown fast. In 2017, more than 2 million Bangladeshi visited India. Besides

tourism, Bangladeshis also visit India for medical treatment and shopping as some Indian products are cheaper compared to internal market.

Why Present Connectivity and Cooperation are Not Enough?

Though Bangladesh is in important geographical position, Bangladesh cannot use this tool fully. Because of weak infrastructure and political complexity Bangladesh is unable to use its geographical card. Again there were some bilateral and multilateral initiatives for increasing cooperation but they were not successful. Such as in 3rd June, 2015 experimentally road transit was introduced. But, the process was quite unsuccessful. Again, in June, 2016 Bangladesh allowed naval transit and let India to use Ashuganj Bandar. But, only 13 shipments have completed through this port. Bangladesh only earned 2.8 million BDT duty from this process.

Again, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) had signed a framework MVA in June 2015 to enable movement of passenger and cargo vehicles across borders among the four countries. The landmark MVA was signed by Transport Ministers of the BBIN countries in Thimphu, Bhutan on 15 June 2015. This agreement would allow member countries registered vehicles to enter others territory under certain terms and conditions. Rate of customs and tariffs will be decided by the respective countries and then approved by multilateral committee.¹¹ Bhutan has not ratified it yet. Again in 23 April, 2018, there held a trial run of Bangladesh – Nepal direct bus service through India. But, this project has no further update.

As a result, present connectivity measures are not sufficient. Bangladesh has to use connectivity tool to change trade imbalance and become more important in geopolitics. A proper set up can make connection of Nepal, Bhutan, India, Myanmar and China through Bangladesh.

In present time regional organizations are quite successful. ASEAN and European Union are great example. The ASEAN countries are engaged in a process to transform ASEAN into a real economic community by the end of 2015. ASEAN tries to ensure free flow of goods, services, investment, capital, skilled labor. EU has some successful achievements. Like, creating allied front against outside aggression, make travel visa free, creating more jobs, taking environmental issue seriously, more consistency in the protection of human rights etc.

Bangladesh also tried to make such regional community called South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It is a regional intergovernmental organization. SAARC member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. SAARC covers 21% of the world's population and 3.8% (US\$2.9 trillion) of the global economy (2015), it has much opportunity but because of mistrust between India and Pakistan, SAARC cannot function well.

Again, there is another regional organization called the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). It covers 1.5 billion people and having a combined gross domestic product of \$3.5 trillion (2018). Countries dependent on Bay of Bengal are its member states— Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand. BIMSTEC has Free Trade Area Framework Agreement (BFTAFA) BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement. But, this organization has not started to function fully.¹²

In this situation Bangladesh has not many options and she cannot ignore her geopolitical reality. Bangladesh has to allow more connectivity projects with India. Such as

1. Cross border Road Network improvement projects are being implemented by Bangladesh Road and Highway Department. In this project 600 km roads of 8 national highway are under development.
2. Bangladesh is creating infrastructure of ASIAN Highway which would connect mainland India and north-east India through Tamabil land port.
3. India-Bangladesh friendship bridge-1 is being built on Feni river which would allow India's entrance in Chittagong port.
4. Bangladesh has signed in Protocol in Inland water transit and trade. It has three waterways connecting Kolkata, Dhubri(Asam), Karimganj (Asam), Dhulian(West Bengal) with Bangladeshi inner naval ports. At present there are 12 port of call. Bangladesh and India each has six.
5. Bangladesh and India have 8 colonial rail interchange. The old Siliguri-Sealdah route to be reopened by 2021 running through Bangladesh. Chilahati-Haldibari border in north Bengal would be used for this. The link was inactive since 1965 Indo-Pak war.¹³
6. Tripura-Akhaura rail line is very important because it connects north-east India with India through Bangladesh. 45km rail link will ensure direct rail link between India and Chittagong seaport. This route can play significant role in future.

7. Starting Rajshahi-Kolkata direct train service is under consideration. It would use Rohonpur (Chapai Nawabganj)-Singabad (Malda) track.
8. For supplying fuel in the northern part of Bangladesh, Bangladesh would jointly construct with India. The pipeline has a capability of supplying 1,000,000 (one million) tons of diesel from India annually. In Nilphamari district, Bangladesh has a 75 MW power plant. This fuel would use in the plant.¹⁴
9. India wants to use Bangladeshi land for expanding Agartala airport. India is also trying to start direct flight from Dhaka to Agartala, Shilchor, Dimapur, Izawl.

The Geopolitical Game

Geopolitics focuses on political power linked to geographic space. As connectivity is a geopolitical issue, Bangladesh has to consider not only trade but also other issues. Though China is not a south Asian country but it has great interest in Bangladesh and Bay of Bengal. So, gradual Indian connectivity and investments in Bangladesh will be a matter of anxiety for China. For understanding the whole scenario, there are certain points to be discussed like **String of Pearls, BRI, Indo-Pacific strategy, Sino-Bangladesh military relation, Rohingya issue** etc. In these issues, China and India have different understanding.

China's pursuit for maritime power follows Mahanian model of naval strategy.¹⁵ There is a similarity between then USA and present China. China has profound interest to build a deep-sea port in Bangladesh. Its assistance in developing deep ports— such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantona in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar – attracted much attention. This Chinese activity is believed to be a part of the accomplishment of its “string of pearls” strategy in the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh's Chittagong and Cox's Bazar may contemplate by Beijing as two alternative pearls in its strategy of “string of pearls”. Chinese presence in Bay of Bengal is a serious concern for India.

China has a proposal of building the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic corridor (BCIMEC). The inclusion of India in this proposed corridor seems to be just part of Beijing's discourse of “peaceful development” – a discourse seeking to allay the fears that China's rise has caused in the minds of its rivals.¹⁶

The Indo-Pacific strategy is almost to counter China in Indian and Pacific Ocean. USA wants that Bangladesh should perform as an important partner of this strategy. In 2018, USA allotted 40 million USD to Bangladesh. This money would use to develop coastal radar system, modernize patrol boats, training etc. as part of our Bay of Bengal initiative.¹⁷ Bangladesh is going to sign Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with USA and buying two apache attack helicopter. This arm will give superiority of Bangladesh over Myanmar as at present both Bangladesh and Myanmar both use same Chinese arms.

India's role in the Indo-Pacific is also important. Indo Pacific Strategy is a golden opportunity for India to build a true alliance with USA against a common threat China. So, connectivity measures taken by India to its neighbors are highly surveillance of China. China will not let Bangladesh to be a very close ally of India which can be a threat for her. So, connectivity projects with India has deep geopolitical importance.

Bangladesh-China military cooperation – has much importance for the military aspect of Bangladesh's national security. Bangladesh believes in the principle of peaceful settlement of disputes. But to deter any potential infringement of its territorial integrity and political independence by any external aggressor, Bangladesh develops its military gradually. From Bangladeshi perspective, affordable price and favorable funding options are obviously key factors to look for Chinese arms as alternative to Western sources.¹⁸

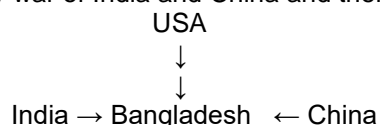
Between 2011 and 2015, Bangladesh accounted for twenty percent of Chinese export, to become the second largest recipient of Chinese arms after Pakistan. Again, the relation is increasing. The intensity has been marked by frequent high-level visits, military training from Chinese, including cooperation in military technologies and defense production.

In recent years, Bangladesh has given particular attention to boosting up its naval capabilities. Bangladesh has won maritime boundary cases with Myanmar and India in 2012 and 2014. Altogether, Bangladesh won more than 118813 square kilometers of maritime area in the Bay of Bengal. The Bangladesh Navy, now equipped with Chinese submarines, has to depend on China's technical assistance, particularly in building submarine facilities in Bangladesh coast. In near future, presence of Chinese submarine in this region may create further debate.

Beside, Rohingya issue is a burning issue of south Asian region. More than 1 million refugee came to Bangladesh from Myanmar because of state sponsored genocide. Bangladesh could not repatriate

them successfully. China is in the side of Myanmar in international platform. China gives veto to any decision against Myanmar in UN. So, at present Bangladesh has to rely on China to solve the problem. If Bangladesh becomes much close to India, China might shift its economic projects from Bangladesh. National Registration of Citizen (NRC) and discriminatory Citizenship Act of India can also create regional instability by cross border flow of illegal Bangladeshi. India can use it as a card to pressure Bangladesh in any future critical situation. Recent Indian govt. behavior about Muslims and Migrants upsets Bangladeshis. If Bangladeshi govt. does not care about public sentiment, Bangladeshi people will not welcome these connectivity projects. Then, the connectivity projects would not fulfil their purpose.

At last, Bangladesh has to balance both India –USA bloc and China and let not anyone to fulfil its military interest using Bangladeshi soil and naval space. Otherwise, Bangladesh would be a potential battlefield of proxy war of India and China and then it would be the next shatterbelt.



Bangladesh's policymakers must develop a comprehensive strategy to leverage and draw synergies between the emerging economic ties with both India and China. And, thus make Bangladesh as a connectivity hub of this region.

Conclusion

As, Bangladesh has lacking in infrastructure and research sector, it needs help of both India and China for development. Bangladesh should not choose any side solely. Though there is a risk of being shatterbelt, Bangladesh should take connectivity projects as a challenge. If Bangladesh can ensure that no arms transshipment will happen using this connectivity and the sole purpose is economic, China would also like to invest in Bangladesh because there is a huge market of 200 million people of Bangladesh and north east India. Such projects with proper monitoring will help Bangladesh to be a develop country and make this region prosperous.

References

- [1] Border Management: Dilemma of Guarding the India-Bangladesh Border | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (2020) *Idsa.in*, Available from: https://idsa.in/stringcanalysis/BorderManagementDilemmaofGuardingtheIndiaBangladeshBorder_nsjamwal_0104 (accessed 7 August 2020).
- [2] Cohen S (2003) *Geopolitics of the world system*. Lanham [etc.]: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc.
- [3] Anwar, A., 2019. How Bangladesh is benefiting from the China–India rivalry. *The Diplomat*.
- [4] Livani, T., Rizwan, N. and Kathuria, S., 2019. Inclusive Regional Trade: Promoting the Economic Empowerment of Women in the BBIN Region. *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change*, 4(1), pp.33-50.
- [5] Islam, C.M.Z., 2019. EVOLVING RIVALRY IN THE BAY OF BENGAL STRATEGY OPTIONS FOR BANGLADESH. *NDC E-JOURNAL*, 18(2), pp.98-120.
- [6] Gurung S (2020) Behind China's Sikkim aggression, a plan to isolate Northeast from rest of India. *The Economic Times*, Available from: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/border-face-off-why-china-tries-to-break-chickens-neck-to-isolate-northeast/articleshow/59420472.cms?from=mdr> (accessed 11 August 2020).
- [7] (2020) Available from: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/seven-sisters.htm> (accessed 12 August 2020).
- [8] News C and News G (2020) militancy in northeast: Northeast militancy on decline, Tripura and Mizoram most peaceful | Guwahati News - Times of India. *The Times of India*, Available from: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/northeast-militancy-on-decline-tripura-and-mizoram-most-peaceful/articleshow/62978909.cms> (accessed 9 August 2020).
- [9] India and Bangladesh to restore snapped railway lines: Mujibul Haque (2020) *The Economic Times*, Available from: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/railways/india-and-bangladesh-to-restore-snapped-railway-lines-mujibul-haque/articleshow/61292620.cms> (accessed 8 August 2020).
- [10] One in every five tourists in India is a Bangladeshi (2020) *Dhaka Tribune*, Available from: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2019/04/21/one-in-every-five-tourists-in-india-is-a-bangladeshi> (accessed 7 July 2020).
- [11] Dutta G (2015) Northeast India–Bangladesh Border Trade Practices. *Foreign Trade Review*, 50(1), 53-68.
- [12] BIMSTEC - INSIGHTSIAS (2020) *INSIGHTSIAS*, Available from: <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2019/05/28/bimstec> (accessed 15 August 2020).
- [13] New rail link to connect Tripura with Bangladesh : Union minister Jitendra Singh (2020) *The Economic Times*, Available from: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/railways/new-rail-link-to-connect-tripura-with-bangladesh-union-minister-jitendra-singh-s/articleshow/65296639.cms> (accessed 3 August 2020).



- [14] Indo-Bangla joint pipeline to bring 1m tonnes fuel oil | banglanews24.com (2020) *banglanews24.com*, Available from: <https://www.banglanews24.com/business/article/78892/Indo-Bangla-joint-pipeline-to-bring-1m-tonnes-fuel-oil> (accessed 15 August 2020).
- [15] (2020) Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331545588_Bangladesh-China_Relations_Mapping_Geopolitical_and_Security_Interests (accessed 23 August 2020).
- [16] Łopacińska K (2017) One Belt One Road as an Expression of a Global Expansion of China. *Marketing i Zarządzanie*, 47, 29-38.
- [17] 'Bangladesh key partner of US's Indo-Pacific strategy' | daily sun (2020) *Daily Sun*, Available from: <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/429615/%E2%80%98Bangladesh-key-partner-of-US%E2%80%99s-IndoPacific-strategy%E2%80%99-> (accessed 8 August 2020).
- [18] Diplomat T (2020) Bangladesh's New Military Deal With China. *TheDiplomat.com*, Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/bangladeshs-new-military-deal-with-china> (accessed 23 March 2020).