

China-Bangladesh Relation: a Quest for Bangladesh's Integrating into Sino-Myanmar Connectivity

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to investigate the necessity of improved China-Bangladesh relation to integrating into Sino-Myanmar connectivity following qualitative research methodology and secondary literature. To realise Bangladesh's economic dream and attain its geostrategic priority, she needs to extend her connectivity with the Southeast and East Asian countries. Though Bangladesh maintains excellent relationships with her giant neighbour India, it is conjectured that sole reliance of Bangladesh over India is perhaps not enough to fulfil her vision. However, to reach out to the east, she needs to fortify her relationship with her other neighbour Myanmar as the gateway. A sustained and stable relation with Myanmar opens the scope for Bangladesh to tread into Sino-Myanmar connectivity, which will eventually assist Bangladesh to attain her dream. Here comes the role of China, which traditionally has a time-tested bond with Myanmar. Bangladesh has a deep-rooted historical tie with China which leaves room for Bangladesh to exploit in the fields of economy, foreign policy, energy security and geostrategic issues. Bangladesh has much to gain from China by integrating herself into a good number of China-led regional initiatives. Good relation with China is essential for Bangladesh to integrate into Sino-Myanmar connectivity, which is vital to realise her dream. However, while Bangladesh needs to make India believe that whatever relations she is fostering with China is only for her economic progress, not for challenging India's hegemony.

Keywords: Economic dream, gateway, geostrategic priority, regional initiatives, Sino-Myanmar connectivity

INTRODUCTION

"As I have a country, as I have soil, as I have 'Golden People of Bangla'...one day my dream of 'Golden Bangla' will come true" -the dream of the Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is gradually becoming true as Bangladesh is on the verge of attaining the status of a middle-income country by 2021 and envisioned to be a developed country by 2041. Bangladesh has been included in the list of five fastest-growing economies in the world by a US-based money transfer company, MoneyGram. Bangladesh's economy is recognised as the 34th in the world in terms of size by Brookings Institution, which is a US-based research group. By the next 25 years or so, Bangladesh will surpass Australia, Malaysia and many European countries, and it will become the 23rd largest economy of the world.

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India surrounds Bangladesh from almost three sides with an opening in the south to the Bay of Bengal. To become a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041, complete dependence on India for connectivity will not suffice for Bangladesh. Instead, Bangladesh needs to connect with Southeast and East Asian countries to attract more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and increase economic activities. Myanmar is the gateway for Bangladesh to connect with the Southeast and East Asian countries, including China. On the other hand, China and Myanmar are staunch allies, and their relation in the local language is termed as 'Pauk-phaw' means brother. China, as a regional superpower, ever remained instrumental in declaring their vibrant presence into the international affairs of South and Southeast Asia. Hence, it is imperative for Bangladesh to get more intricately involved with China, which will eventually facilitate Bangladesh's integration into Sino-Myanmar connectivity to realize her economic and geostrategic priorities.

China's rapid and sustained economic growth has crowned it as the largest exporter and the second largest importer of merchandises in the world. Chinese products have reached every nook and corner of the world. It has snatched away business opportunities from the companies in Asia, factories in Africa, and even villages in Italy and streets in France (Xinran 2011). It has registered a dramatic expansion of external trade of more than 15% a year. China became the world's largest trading nation in 2017 by exceeding US\$ 4.104 trillion (HKTDC Research 2018). Though China and Bangladesh enjoy significant trade relation yet trade ratio between China-Bangladesh is 1:13.8 (DCCI 2016). China is expected to become one of the most prominent overseas investors by 2020. Since Bangladesh is growing faster to emerge in the global economic scenario, strong support from big economic powers is required to build and organize the economic structure. However, regional and extra-regional powers may remain sceptical on Bangladesh's proactive diplomacy to improve relations with China. Considering this milieu, the main objective of this write up is to explore the present trend of China-Bangladesh relations to identify the upcoming challenges and guide the future dimensions of their relationships with historically evidenced notes. In doing so, this paper shall initially provide a brief account of Sino-Bangladesh relations and Sino-Myanmar connectivity.

CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Geographically, the People's Republic of China is a very close neighbour of Bangladesh with only 93 km of Indian Territory between their borders. The friendly and cultural links between the two countries go far back in history. A great Bangladeshi monk and scholar, Atisha Dipankar Srigyan along with his Bengali Buddhist disciples, was invited by the King of the then Tibet (Rahman 2016). In the 7th century, renowned Chinese scholar Hieun Tsang studied at the University of Nalanda, and his teachers included Shil Bhadra who hailed from Comilla in Bangladesh (Huq 1993). Chinese traveller Fa Xian visited 30 monasteries in Bangladesh (Rahman 2016). Subsequently, during the reign of Sultan Giasuddin Azam Shah (1389-1409), Bangladesh and China exchanged their ambassadors (Huq 1993).

In 1954 in the National Peoples' Congress, Premier Chou en-Lai announced the five principles of peaceful co-existence, as the basis of Chinese foreign policy which is still being followed by Third World nations as the vital cornerstone of their foreign policy

such as mutual non-aggression and mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs. That was why the immediate Chinese reaction to the Bangladesh crisis expressed on 06 April 6, 1971, with China accusing India of interfering in the internal affairs of Pakistan when China itself was seeking the unification of Taiwan with the mainland. In 1974, China refrained from vetoing Bangladesh's entry into the world body, which enabled Bangladesh to become a member of the United Nations (UN) in September 1974. Welcoming Bangladesh's admission into the UN, the Chinese representative to the UN Chuang Yen expressed China's desire to establish good neighbourly relations with Bangladesh. A Chinese expert has termed the China-Bangladesh relationship as a "trusted friendship" or "all-weather friendship" (Uddin & Bhuiyan 2011). During the quest of Bangladesh for sustainable and consistent economic improvisation and heavy-industrialization, China approached as a blessing.

Economic Relation

Total merchandised export of Bangladesh to China in 2016-17 was US\$ 949.41 million which was only US\$ 458 million in the year 2012-13 which indicates that export increased at an average of 21 per cent in the last five years (Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh 2018). However, the imports did not grow as exports. Bangladesh's import from China was approximately US\$ 10.19 billion in 2016-17, which was US\$ 6.32 billion in 2012-13. The average growth of import was 12.24 per cent per annum (Bangladesh Bank 2018). Considering these growth rates, Bangladesh-China bilateral trade will become approximately US\$ 18 billion in the year 2021 when Bangladesh is going to celebrate 50 years of independence. But the trade deficit between the two countries will be an important challenge for Bangladesh.

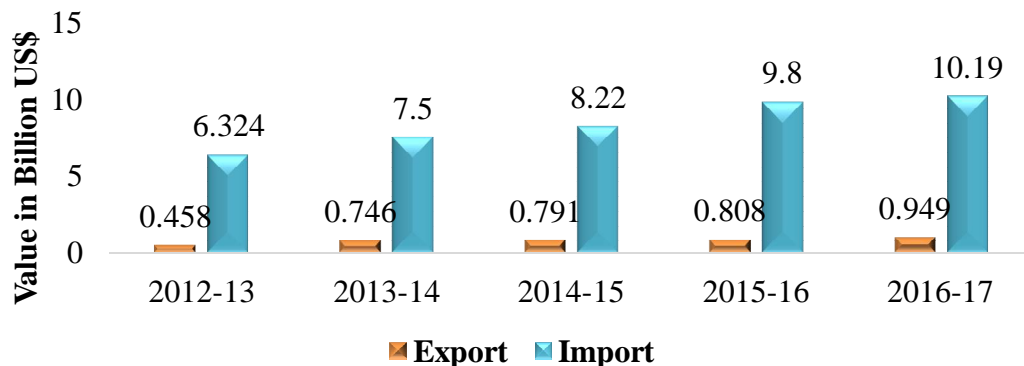


Figure 1: Bangladesh's Trade with China (Adapted from Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh (Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh 2018))

Diplomatic Relations

After the independence of Bangladesh, China officially launched diplomatic affairs with Bangladesh on 04 October 1975. Sreeradha Datta opined that China's strict adherence to its policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of Bangladesh resulted in bipartisan support for a closer relationship (Datta 2008). Bangladesh agreed with the

proposal of China for connecting with Southeast and East Asia through the China-led Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC).

Defence Cooperation

The military cooperation between Bangladesh and China is sound and robust since the mid-1970s. China is the largest provider of military hardware, weaponry and training to the Bangladesh Armed Forces. China helped Bangladesh in building its only arms factory in Joydebpur, Gazipur (Uddin 2015). Chinese naval fleet took part in a joint maritime drill with Bangladesh Navy in 2016 in Chittagong, which was the first visit of the Chinese naval fleet in the past three decades (Jianing 2016).

Infrastructural Development

China has provided considerable monetary assistance on easy conditions for building infrastructure in Bangladesh. It has helped to construct six “China-Bangladesh Friendship” bridges, Boropukuria power plant, Bangabandhu International Convention Centre built at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka and so on. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited China in March 2010, the talks with China included assistance in developing the Chittagong-Kunming railroad and road connections through Myanmar, the Second Padma Bridge, the 8th Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge, assistance in agricultural sector and also for Exhibition Centre with car parking facilities, water purification project in Pagla, enhancing organizational cooperation between Bangladesh Rice Research Institute and China National Hybrid Rice Research Centre, and waiving Chinese loan. China Harbour Engineering Company is helping the up gradation of Chittagong port. China, as one of the major stakeholder, has already started constructing a significant part of the deep seaport at Payra, which is scheduled to be completed by 2023 (Mamun 2016).

Visit of President Xi Jinping

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Bangladesh is a landmark event for both countries due to a number of reasons. After three decades, a Chinese President visited Bangladesh, which implies significant emerging importance of Bangladesh in South Asian geopolitics and economics. Bangladesh and China have elevated their relations to a "strategic partnership for cooperation" from the closer comprehensive partnership during the official talks between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and President Xi Jinping in Dhaka. Strategic partnerships linked with defence issues also covers a wide range of bilateral issues from education to health and economic relations, including trade and investment (Hasib 2016). Bangladesh signed MoU with China expressing her interest to join the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). After signing the BRI MoU, Dhaka and Beijing have signed eight projects worth over US\$ 9.45 billion funded by China. Padma Bridge rail link worth US\$ 3.3 billion, the power plant in Payra port worth US\$ 1.9 billion, establishment of digital connectivity worth US\$ 1 billion, power grid strengthening project worth US\$ 1.32 billion are the major projects that are being processed with Chinese investments. All these financial assistance through investment have superseded the previous investment records of China in Bangladesh. China's assurance for US\$ 38 billion investment which includes US\$ 24.45 billion in bilateral

assistance for infrastructure projects and US\$ 13.6 billion in joint ventures can be seen as the most significant investment by any single country in Bangladesh so far. In addition to these investments, China also agreed to provide US\$ 20 billion as loan. It is worth mentioning that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and President Xi Jinping agreed to elevate the bilateral relations to the ‘Strategic Partnership of Cooperation’ (Khan 2019). Besides, both the countries have agreed on strengthening partnership for counterterrorism activities as well (Kabir 2016).

Deep Sea Port Experience

Bangladesh is a pivotal contributor to realising China's plan for enforcing its trade routes through BRI. China has already established a network of seaports, called the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), connecting Chinese coasts with the Mediterranean countries through the Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and East coast of Africa. The initiative is considered as an ambitious project of China to dominate South Asian waters and being criticised as “String of Pearls”. Sonadia, an island near Cox’s Bazar was considered as a different location which China was enthusiastic about financing. The plan would certainly offer China a bypass to Southeast Asia. However, Sonadia port did not progress as planned and subsequently focus shifted to Payra deep seaport on the north-western coast of Bay of Bengal. The port was initially contracted to Chinese company until India, Japan and the USA expressed their interest. Payra deep seaport was then reconfigured as a cooperative port where China is the primary stakeholder.



Figure 2: Participation of Bangladesh in China’s Strategic

OVERVIEW OF SINO-MYANMAR CONNECTIVITY

Geographically, China and Myanmar have 2192 km border, and they enjoy a very healthy relationship since long. Sino-Myanmar relations were apparent since AD 849 when the kingdom of Bagan (Pagan, ancient Myanmar) had friendly relations with China’s cosmopolitan Tang Dynasty (AD 618 – 907). Since then, China stood beside Myanmar in all ups and downs. Myanmar was isolated for the last three decades due to

Western-imposed sanctions. China exploited this opportunity and continued her support to Myanmar in all sectors. For this reason, their relationship is termed as "Pauk-phaw" (brother) relationship, the term never used for any other country. The relationship has been elevated to 'comprehensive strategic partnership' recently due to the unaltered support of China to Myanmar. China is the biggest investor in Myanmar which has significant contribution in all sectors, i.e. economy, trade and commerce, energy, mining, communication, defence, tourism, agriculture, health, and so on. If Bangladesh can be integrated into the Sino-Myanmar connectivity, it will not only improve relations with China and Myanmar but also will facilitate Bangladesh's access to the South East and East Asia. This access is a need of the time for Bangladesh to materialise her economic aspiration to become a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041. Salient features of Sino-Myanmar connectivity are highlighted in subsequent paragraphs.

Implementation of China's Bridgehead Strategy

Turning Yunnan into a strategic corridor to reach the Indian Ocean is a part of the "Twelfth Five Year Plan" of China which is known as the national "bridgehead strategy" (Sun, 2012). The bridgehead strategy is going to relieve China from the "strategic passivity" of the "One Ocean Strategy" allowing her to pursue "Two Ocean Strategy". The strategy will accomplish China's strategic aspirations to reach the Indian Ocean. Many in China think that the strategy is a passive way to reach the Indian Ocean and call for a more active Indian Ocean strategy. This entails turning Pakistan and Myanmar (two of China's most strategic allies) into outposts of China to reach the Indian Ocean (Sun, 2012). The aim is to protect the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and serve China's geostrategic interests. By contrast, the bridgehead strategy offers a less aggressive way to establish China's strategic outreach into the Indian Ocean (Alam 2013). Sino-Myanmar connectivity offers China much-needed access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar.

Economic Aspects of Sino-Myanmar Connectivity

China and Myanmar have a strong economic bond. The value of Myanmar's trade with China, as of October 2017 has reached US\$ 6.3 billion, consisting of US\$ 2.83 billion in exports and US\$ 3.5 billion in imports (Mizzima 2018). Since 1988, China has invested US\$ 18.53 billion in Myanmar until January 2017 (Xinhua 2017). Chinese investments in Myanmar are mainly dedicated to the sectors of hydropower, oil, gas and mining. Up to 2011, 63% of China's investments in Myanmar were in power sector, and 36% was in oil and gas and mining sectors. Chinese companies those invested in the major projects in Myanmar are mainly state-owned companies (SOEs) (Dunn & Peng 2016).

Connectivity Initiatives

As part of the bridgehead strategy, China has already established a deep seaport in Kyaukpyu of Myanmar and constructed 771 km long oil and gas pipelines connecting Kyaukpyu Seaport with Kunming. China has expressed keen interest in developing an economic and technology zone in Kyaukpyu also (Dunn & Peng 2016).

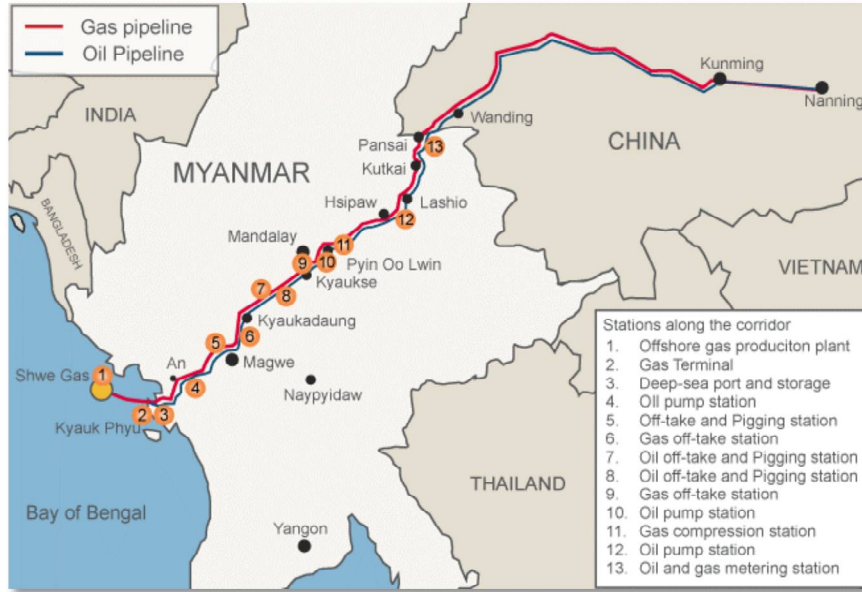


Figure 3: China-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipeline (Adapted from China in Myanmar: Implications for the Future (Hilton 2013))

Road Connectivity

China is involved in renovating Kunming-Ruili-Yangon and Kunming-Tengchong-Myanmar-India roads as a part of "Kunming International Passage". The roads are the updated forms of the Burma Road and the Stilwell Road (World War II) (Hongwei, 2011). The "Irrawaddy Corridor" project will establish road links between China's Yunnan Province with Myanmar and a railway connection between Kunming (China) and Lashio (Northern Myanmar) (Kuppuswamy 2011).

Rail Connectivity

China is assisting Myanmar to enhance its rail infrastructure needs by supplying rails and rolling stocks and upgrading its rail network. China is strengthening the rail connectivity under "Trans Asia Railway" (TAR) project. The Western Route of TAR, i.e. Singapore – Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) – Bangkok (Thailand) – Yangon (Myanmar) – Lashio (Myanmar) – Ruili (Myanmar) – Dali (China) – Kunming (China) will connect Myanmar with China (Hongwei, 2011). The route is 2600 km long, out of which construction is required for 840 km. China already constructed 690 km rail route inside China and at present assisting Myanmar to establish new railway lines from Ruili to Lashio (Yunnan 2017).

Connectivity through Inland Water

"China-Kunming-Myanmar-Yangon-Irrawaddy River Portage Passage" is an integrative land and water transportation system to connect China and Myanmar which includes the land route from Kunming to Bhamo via Baoshan and Ruili, water route from Bhamo port to Yangon and other ports, portage transfers and seaports. In the core issue of

this project is to construct Ruili - Bhamo road and Bhamo port worth of RMB 0.37 billion and RMB 0.16 billion. Both countries initially gave their consent on “joint construction and operation, joint share venture and profit”. Later on, China decided to build the project only in the form of “Build-Operate-Transfer” (BOT) in a thirty-year operating period (Hongwei 2011).

Strategic Perspectives of Sino-Myanmar Connectivity

China-led connectivity initiative has more strategic perspective than economic consideration. Both China and Myanmar critically need each other in matters of political, geo-economic and geostrategic issues and support in international forums. The value of Myanmar lies in its strategic location as well as in its resources, while China is an undeniable rising superpower currently flashed with an abundance of liquid currency ready for investment and influence building (Kabir 2019). China has a long term strategic aspiration to exert influence over the Indian Ocean. Myanmar is the only gateway for China towards the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal to counterbalance the USA's and Indian Naval influence. The entire north-western part of China is deprived of any coastline, and it is a major handicap for China. Utilization of Myanmar's ports and overland routes for the transportation of supplies can be viewed as a strategic security asset of China. India, with naval air wing facilities at Port Blair in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, poses a great concern for China. By establishing base facilities around the Bay of Bengal and Coco Islands, China can avoid India's naval threat and exactly China is focusing on that. China's access to the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal through Myanmar is very significant and crucial for China as it would allow China to avoid the Strait of Malacca and shorten the distance by 3000 km. Sino-Myanmar gas and oil pipeline have changed the energy security dynamics of China. China also wants to see a stable Myanmar to ensure the flow of enormous investment and the secured bordering area where a sizeable ethnic Chinese population subsists. At the same time, Beijing's future energy security requirement can be greatly addressed by Myanmar's natural resource, and as such, China invested heavily in the energy sector of Myanmar. Thus China's strategic alignment with Myanmar is going to have a severe long-term implication for vital interests of India, Japan and the USA.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STRONG TIES BETWEEN CHINA AND BANGLADESH

A strong tie is essential for the people of both countries to restore the spirits of new diplomatic relations. Besides, the achievement of geostrategic priority for Bangladesh depends on few factors: FDI in the fields of energy and infrastructure development, boosting trade and commerce, opening blue economy utilizing the Bay of Bengal, and connectivity through physical means and regional organizations. Bangladesh should cautiously follow economic diplomacy and use China's strategic partnership in the fields above. Besides, a sustained strategic relationship with China is also expected to go a long way for Bangladesh to solving complex issues with Myanmar.

Free Flow of FDI from China

Bangladesh is going to enjoy a boost in the FDI of China since it has sanctioned economic zones for the Chinese investors. Two special economic zones (SEZs), one in Chittagong and another in Mongla, and a dedicated export processing zone (EPZ) for China are under process. The SEZs are on the fast track list of the government. However,

the proposed sites far from ready (Ramizo 2014). Chinese increased investment is undoubtedly going to benefit Bangladesh. Bangladesh has more to achieve in dealing with regional geopolitics as now as deep seaport development is concerned.

Development of Infrastructure

China has shown its keen interest to develop ports and its ancillary infrastructures, including energy generation. It has also offered to build railway, highway and other key infrastructure in the past few years. China assured aid and loan of US\$ 21 billion to Bangladesh for various infrastructure and development projects during the last visit of President Xi Jinping. Bangladesh should implement the agreed support and investment. Good relation with China is essential not only to get the promised loan in the scheduled time but also to receive continued assistance in the future to materialize Bangladesh's dream.

Ensuring Energy Security

Bangladesh's economy is vulnerable due to the warning out of natural gas reserves. Natural gas serves a major portion of commercial energy consumption, which is around 66%, followed by oil, hydropower and coal. Electricity is the primary source of power for most of the economic activities. Countries economic growth can become stunned since gas reserves are depleting fast and no coal extraction in sight. Therefore, Bangladesh needs external support in this sector, where China's role is critical.

Bangladesh hopes to generate 20,000 MW electricity by the year 2021 from its present generation capacity of 12,780 MW (Siddique, 2016). In this regard, China has already invested in two coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. These are the 1,320 MW thermal power plants in Payra (Patuakhali) and the 1,320 MW thermal power plants in Banskhali (Chittagong). These two power plants will significantly assist Bangladesh in reaching its desired capacity.

Increasing Trade and Commerce

Though China is the largest trading partner of Bangladesh, still Bangladesh's trade with China did not cross 26.5% of the total trade of Bangladesh. Exports of Bangladesh are very meagre about the imports. Though many products of Bangladesh enjoy duty-free access to China, yet the total export value is less than US\$ 1 billion. To access trillion dollars' worth the Chinese consumer market, Dhaka should request more soft provisions for exports (Kabir 2016). Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) exports to China offers vast potential in this regard.

Proper Utilization of Blue Economy

The historic victory of Bangladesh against Myanmar and India on maritime boundary settlement has opened new opportunities in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh's sovereign rights to a full 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Bay of Bengal, and to a substantial share of the "outer continental shelf" beyond 200 nautical miles is established by the judgment by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) (Ghani 2012). Given the economic and security importance of the Bay of

Bengal, Bangladesh can develop a blue economy around the world's largest Bay. China could be a great choice as a partner of blue economy considering her ability of investment and technology. The involvement of naval power is also important in dealing with the issues such as piracy, illicit drug trafficking, and trade and climate security, where China as a strategic partner is the right choice (Haiquan 2017).

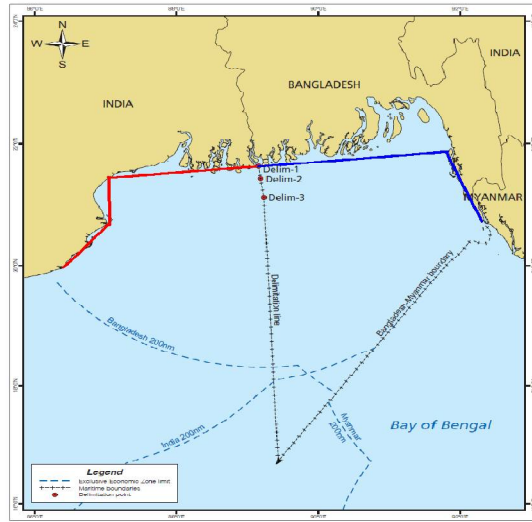


Figure 4: Maritime boundary of Bangladesh (Adapted from the American Society of International Law (Burke 2014))

Solving Critical Issues with Myanmar

In November 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Bangladesh and expressed that Beijing was prepared to enable dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar, acknowledging that the Rohingya crisis was a 'big challenge for Bangladesh'. It is quite evident that China does not want the Rohingya issue to overshadow or slow down the progress of the BCIM-EC initiative. Besides, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina restated her appeal to the international community to exert pressure on Myanmar to take back its nationals. Thus, the relation between China and Dhaka is not only significant from an economic perspective but also vital in diminishing geopolitical vulnerabilities, especially issues concerning Myanmar.

FOSTERING CHINA-BANGLADESH INITIATIVES: A QUEST TO TREAD INTO SINO-MYANMAR CONNECTIVITY

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China's revived Silk Road plan aims to connect countries in Asia, Europe and Africa in which Bangladesh lies in a strategic location. China expects to re-establish this historical connectivity by constructing a vast network of highways, railway, energy pipelines, and modernizing border checkpoints. Bangladesh's role in BRI and 21st Century MSR is significant for higher relation with China.

Connecting BRI can boost economic activities in Bangladesh and increase its geostrategic importance in the region.

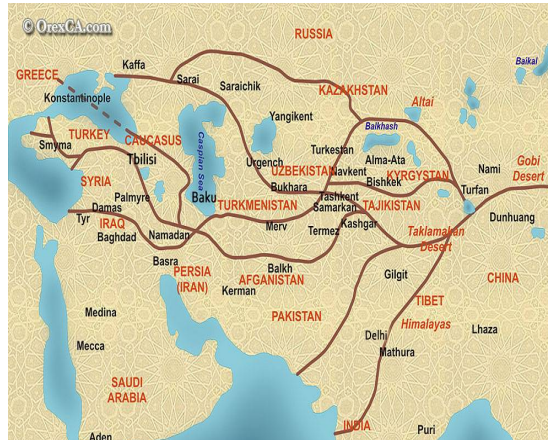


Figure 1: Ancient Silk Route (Adapted from Oriental Express Central Asia website) (Orex CA 2012)

Integrating into Asian Highway (AH)

The AH initiative was conceived in 1959 to promote regional connectivity and cooperation within Asian countries. It is an international network of 1, 41,000 km of standard highways intersecting Asian countries with links to Europe. The role of Bangladesh is very significant in this globalized network where she will connect with the countries located both to the east and the west. This connectivity will ultimately serve the purpose of China-led BRI initiative or BCIM economic corridor. It will offer huge financial opportunities due to shorter routes for transportation of men and material leading to considerable savings in transport costs.

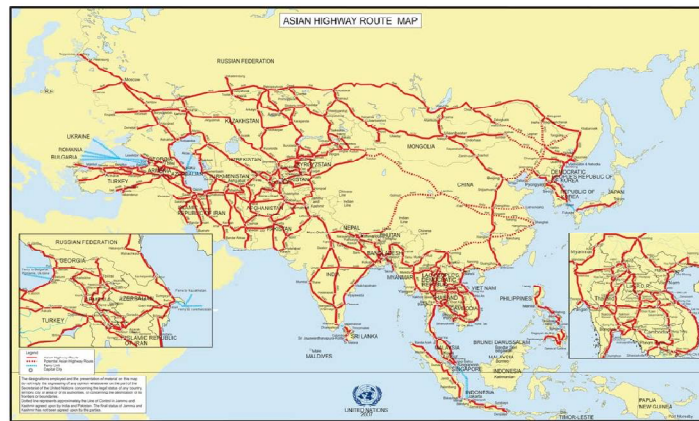


Figure 6: Asian Highway Route Map (Adapted from Indian Ocean Community website (IOC 2007))

Strengthening BCIM-EC

BCIM-EC offers a massive opportunity for Bangladesh to become a key player from a geopolitical point of view. A recent ADB report says that exports of Bangladesh will grow by 86% if she can be connected with Southeast Asia through BCIM-EC (Bhattacharjee, 2016). BCIM has both geostrategic and geo-economic dimensions. It connects China with South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. However, for India, BCIM remains as a purely Chinese strategic project which will expedite China's trade with regions beyond Myanmar, including India, Bangladesh, and even the Middle Eastern nations via land access to the Bay of Bengal. On 28 April 2019, China dropped BCIM from the list of projects covered under its trillion-dollar BRI due to India's non-cooperation and dwindling position of Bangladesh regarding BCIM. Now China will shift towards greater cooperation with Myanmar (Khan 2019). Bangladesh is now in a critical place in regards to BCIM. Effective diplomacy and proactive policy are required to promote BCIM-EC for the greater interest of Bangladesh.

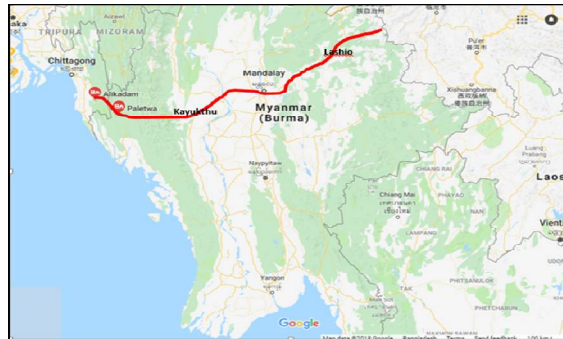


Figure 7: Connecting Bangladesh with Yunnan through Myanmar
(Rahman 2018)

Bangladesh-Myanmar-China Link Road

Connectivity of China's landlocked South-western provinces, particularly Yunnan, is a concern for China. Moreover, China wants to reach South Asian waters for securing its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and to ensure energy security. Since the Indian Ocean region is going to be the hub of all economic activities in the 21st Century as visualised by the USA, China wants to exert her influence in this region. Bangladesh is a position to grasp this opportunity for her national interest. It can be achieved by constructing road links between Bangladesh and China via Myanmar. Bangladesh already proposed and had been pursuing a route in the south following Chittagong - Cox's Bazar - Gundum - Magway (Myanmar) – Meiktila –Mandalay – Lashio - Ruili (Yunnan border city with Myanmar) - Kunming. However, Myanmar has been opposing this route since long as because the route goes through the Rakhine State of Myanmar, which has security issues. Negotiations from Bangladesh side have failed so far. This route will connect the Chittagong port, which will be beneficial for Bangladesh since the member states can utilise the port facilities. Bangladesh can offer a new route which connects Chittagong

port and will not go through Rakhine State. The route will follow Chittagong – Alikadam - Paletwa (Myanmar) - Kyaukhtu - Mandalay - Lashio - Ruili (Yunnan border city with Myanmar) - Kunming. This route will enable China to utilise the port facilities of Chittagong (Rahman 2018).

CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS: CHALLENGES FOR BANGLADESH

India Factor

It is imperative that Bangladesh needs to maintain good relation with China to extend her connectivity with Southeast and East Asia through Myanmar for achieving her economic and geostrategic priorities. Since long, India is trying to keep Chinese influence out of the waters of the Indian Ocean for her national interest. India might be sceptical about the diplomatic relation between Bangladesh and China. She may ignore the contentious bilateral issues, e.g. Teesta water sharing, border killing, drug and human trafficking are likely to have a tremendous negative impact on Bangladesh. Therefore, while improving connectivity with China, relation with India cannot be overlooked. Bangladesh needs to pursue independent and balanced strategic and foreign policy without being tilted toward any specific country in practical terms (Khan, 2019). Hence, it is essential for Bangladesh to formulate a well-crafted and balanced policy strategy which facilitates the implementation of China-led initiatives without alienating India.

Extra-Regional Factors

Few extra-regional factors also Influence the developments in the South Asian region, including Bangladesh. Competition to dominate the Indian has led to never-ending military build ups in and around the region, which has its repercussions on the South Asian region. Besides, before the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, the subcontinental balance was locked between India and Pakistan. While the former opted for developing close relations with the Soviet Union, the latter constructed friendly ties with the USA and China. The emergence of Bangladesh as a separate independent state shifted the balance in favour of India, making her almost the arbiter of South Asian affairs. But Bangladesh has become an independent actor in the scene promoting her own set of relations with regional and extra-regional powers.

WAYS FORWARD FOR BANGLADESH TO IMPROVE CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Bangladesh believes in the principle of “close cooperation and the economic development” among the developing countries. While the country’s strategic interest also demands close ties with China for better connectivity and development.

Participation in China-led Regional Initiatives

Ad per the narrative of China, BRI, BCIM, AH and MSR are the initiatives for more excellent trade connectivity between the continents. Bangladesh should focus on her economic interest, which can be derived from these initiatives. Bangladesh is a part of Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal initiative which has been put on halt by the Bhutanese government on the ground of environmental security. SAARC remains as a weak regional organization with somewhat limited credibility and effectiveness (Khan, 2019).

To promote national interest and to improve relations with China, Bangladesh needs to play an effective role in materialising higher connectivity initiatives. Already BCIM has been dropped from the priority list of China due to less interest of India and dwindling attitude of Bangladesh. Now, Bangladesh must endeavour to bring India on board to promote regional interest and create a win-win situation for both India and China. Bangladesh should develop and pursue implementation of China-led to facilitate her access to Sino-Myanmar connectivity.

Improving Relation with Myanmar

Bangladesh promotes a healthy relationship with her neighbours. Bangladesh enjoys a cordial relationship with India since long. But, due to the Rohingya refugee crisis, border unrest, illegal drug trafficking etcetera, relationship with Myanmar was never easy. Both the countries are a member of BIMSTEC, BCIM-EC and other regional connectivity initiatives. Myanmar can provide strategic advantages to Bangladesh, particularly as an alternative land route opening towards China and South East Asia other than the sea. Bangladesh needs to pursue effective and proactive diplomacy beyond the Rohingya issue. As Myanmar has a strong bonding with China, improved relations with Myanmar will act as a catalyst for better China-Bangladesh Relationship.

Maintaining Warm Relations with India

Good relation with India is a sine qua non for the security and development of Bangladesh. Therefore, while developing a relationship with China to pursue her economic objectives and geo-strategic priorities, Bangladesh needs to make India believe that whatever relation she is fostering with China and Myanmar, it is only for the economic development, not for challenging India's hegemony. If the infrastructures of Bangladesh are developed with Chinese assistance for integrating into Sino-Myanmar connectivity, these facilities can also be used by India for accessing her north-eastern states. At present, a good number of Indian citizen work in different multinational companies of Bangladesh and the opportunities will increase with the economic development of Bangladesh. On the contrary, India is likely to be affected by the spill-over effects of an underdeveloped Bangladesh.

Acting as a Key Player of BRI

Although a small country, Bangladesh is of clutch geopolitical importance, is located in the armpit of India and right on the Indian Ocean. The BRI recently addressed by Chinese president Xi Jinping is the formalization of China's strategy for securing and bolstering their commercial trade routes. Bangladesh needs to exploit her geographic location and harness the benefits from the BRI. Besides, minimizing cargo transport time across BRI-aligned countries, it will integrate Bangladesh in Sino-Myanmar connectivity and ultimately subscribe to pursuing her economic aspirations.



Figure 8: Map of BRI of China (Adapted from Daily Outlook Danish 2017)

Consolidating Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean

Strait of Malacca is vital for the Chinese economy since 80% of China's energy supplies originating from the Middle East and Africa pass through this strait. To ensure the security of the energy supplies, China maintains good relations with the littorals in the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, according to some US-based analysts, the Indian Ocean region is going to be the hub of all economic activities in the 21st century. Therefore, both China and India want to dominate this region. To exert the sphere of influence in this region, China has been pledging investment to the littoral states. Bangladesh also received much of Chinese attention due to its geographic location. China expressed its interest to develop Chittagong port in aspiration of building a parallel pipeline connecting Chittagong-Kyaukpyu-Kunming. Since Bangladesh remains as an essential factor in the much touted 'string of pearls' theory, therefore Bangladesh should consolidate on Chinese sphere of influence in the Indian ocean to invite more FDI from China by integrating into China-led infrastructural development which in the long run will benefit Bangladesh economically.

Becoming Conduit to South Asia

South Asia, which is the home of one-fourth of the world's population and housing the third largest economy by Purchasing Power Parity, has attracted Chinese attention. This part of the continent is a lucrative market for Chinese products. To reach mainland India, China needs to pass through Bangladesh as connectivity at the moment is not feasible via the contentious Arunachal Pradesh or through Pakistan. As part of China's cheque book diplomacy, China intends to draw in Bangladesh through enormous infrastructural investment (Nahreen 2017). However, despite becoming a conduit in South Asia, Bangladesh should carefully strike a balance between India and China so as not to alienate the Indian counterpart.

CONCLUSION

China-Bangladesh relation is not a new phenomenon in the history of Asian international relations. The friendly and cultural links between the two countries go far back in history. Unlike some other major powers, China never intervened into the internal affairs of Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bangladesh always stood firmly by the “One China Policy” on the China-Taiwan issue. Visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh has elevated the China-Bangladesh relation to strategic cooperation. Bangladesh and China have signed 27 deals and MoUs, totalling US\$13.6 billion. China promised exactly US\$ 21 billion as aid and loan for Bangladesh for various infrastructure and development projects. As a part of the overall plan, China is an essential stakeholder in the construction of deep seaport at Payra. Moreover, Bangladesh has agreed to become a part of BRI which will open a new horizon in the economic sector of Bangladesh and extend her connectivity to a great extent. Other regional connectivity initiatives like BIMSTEC, BCIM-EC and AH will also provide an opportunity for Bangladesh to connect with China and South East Asia through Myanmar and India. China has a pivotal role in the implementation of such initiatives as well. Therefore, to access Sino-Myanmar connectivity, Bangladesh must have good relations with both China and Myanmar.

Sino-Myanmar connectivity is going to be a game changer in the geo-economic realities of South Asia as well as of the whole world since Indian Ocean region is going to be the future hub of trade and power as envisaged by the USA. Sino-Myanmar connectivity will enhance connectivity between China and Myanmar. It will also connect South Asia with South East and East Asia. Bangladesh being a developing country, needs to increase connectivity to bolster her trade and commerce. Moreover, Sino-Myanmar connectivity offers the only opening to Bangladesh to connect with China and other South East and East Asian countries without being dependent on India. Besides economic development, the connectivity will significantly increase the geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh to the region as well as to the world.

Though Bangladesh enjoys friendly relations with China, integration with Sino-Myanmar connectivity calls for further closeness where India factor emerges as the most critical challenge for Bangladesh. Therefore, Bangladesh needs to be very careful while promoting a relationship with both China and India. However, to realize the geo-strategic and economic priorities, relationship with China will become a vital factor for Bangladesh. Through a stable and balanced relationship, Bangladesh can tread into Sino-Myanmar connectivity. Once successful, such affiliation will open the gateway to the East, which will complement Bangladesh in fulfilling her aspirations. A strategic China-Bangladesh relationship will also assist Bangladesh in establishing good relations with Myanmar that will, in turn, facilitate integration into Sino-Myanmar connectivity.

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