

## **Integration of Bangladesh into Sino-Myanmar Connectivity: Implication of Bangladesh-Myanmar Relation**

Md Saiful Alam<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Bangladesh's geographic location between South Asia and South-East Asia provides a unique opportunity for the country to benefit from greater cross-border relations. This study attempts to introspect into critical issues of Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral relations following qualitative research methodology and using secondary literature. It suggested plausible ways forward for a successful integration into Sino-Myanmar connectivity through a revamped foreign relation with Myanmar. To realize its economic dream and attain its geo-strategic priority, Bangladesh needs to extend her connectivity particularly with the southeast and East Asian countries by fortifying her relationship with other neighbours utilizing Myanmar as the gateway. As a matter of fact, 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 its dream. However, Bangladesh-Myanmar relations went through substantial metamorphosis in the annals of time due to Rohingya issue and still stands as a major impediment in their bilateral relations. On the contrary, Sino-Myanmar connectivity got strengthened with the passage of time and both the countries are deriving mutual benefits out of their strong ties. To strengthen the bond between Bangladesh and Myanmar, there are rooms to work in the field of inter-state and trans-national levels. Both the states can bridge south and South East Asia and thus can derive huge benefit from each other.*

**Keywords:** Sino-Myanmar connectivity, Bilateral Relation, Geo-strategic Priority, Economic Dream, Gateway

### **1. Introduction**

Myanmar is the next-door neighbour of Bangladesh sharing approximately 270 km long border with a close cultural, historical and socio-political linkage with Bangladesh from the ancient time. Both countries share a common legacy of British colonial experience. Relation between these two countries linked more by demography than proximity (Rahman, 2017). Myanmar was a province of British India and became an independent territory under British Monarch in 1937 till it got independence on 04 January 1948. Myanmar was one of the first countries to recognize Bangladesh after independence in 1971. Bangladesh endeavours to maintain good relationship with her immediate neighbours, but unfortunately the relationship with Myanmar did not flourish like the relation between Bangladesh and India because of some irritants, particularly the Rohingya issue (Khan, 2014). Other issues dominating Bangladesh-Myanmar relation

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<sup>1</sup>Major General, Bangladesh Army and PhD Researcher, Bangladesh University of Professionals, e-mail: sf\_alam@yahoo.com

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are demarcation of land and maritime boundary, illegal drug trafficking and alleged cross border movement of insurgents (Chowdhury, 2016).

Bangladesh aspires to become a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041. However, it is surrounded by India from almost three sides with an opening in the south to the Bay of Bengal. It is conjectured that sole reliance of Bangladesh over its giant neighbour India is not enough to attain her economic and geo-strategic priorities. It is essential for Bangladesh to be connected with the East to attract more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and increase economic activities including volume of trade. Only Myanmar provides a gateway towards Southeast through land. Therefore, it is essential for Bangladesh to boost diplomatic relationship with Myanmar to facilitate her linkage with the East. Bangladesh needs to exploit the strong ties between China and Myanmar to extend her connectivity in realizing her dream. Moreover, geo-strategic location of Myanmar makes it the only option for Bangladesh other than India to get integrated into Sino-Myanmar connectivity and increase her trade with East and South East Asian countries.

At this backdrop, the objective of this study is to analyze Bangladesh-Myanmar relationship. This study discusses certain guiding principles for Bangladesh-Myanmar relation including the challenges affecting the relationship. Finally, few recommendations have been made to preserve a balanced relation with Myanmar for integrating Bangladesh into Sino-Myanmar connectivity for attaining economic and geo-strategic priorities.

### **2. Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are:

- a. To analyze the bilateral relation of Bangladesh with Myanmar and ascertain the challenges for sustainable relation.
- b. To understand the essence of connectivity between China and Myanmar.
- c. To assess the feasibility of Bangladesh's integration in Sino-Myanmar connectivity through improved bilateral relation with Myanmar.

### **3. Literature Review**

Analysis of the contemporary literature on "Integration of Bangladesh into Sino-Myanmar Connectivity: Implication of Bangladesh-Myanmar Relation" reveals that recent economic growth in South-East Asia has generated a major shift in the geopolitics of the region. China being a major actor in the region has significant influence on trade and dominance. South Asian and South-East Asian states are more inclined to accommodate China's rise rather than balance to achieve a sustainable economic growth (Kang, 2007). The booming economy of the region has also attracted other regional and extra regional actors, notably USA, India, ASEAN countries and Japan (Khan, 2014; Quader, 2014; Yi, 2013; Lall, 2016).

China is looking for a major shift in foreign policy focusing on cultivating international partnership. In addition to the development of extra regional alliances, China aims to

bolster regional trade with the neighboring ASEAN and South Asian countries (Goldstein, 2005). China attempts to avoid total dependence on transit through the Straits of Malacca and achieve its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean by promoting infrastructural projects and land-based connectivity with Myanmar. China also aims at persistent mutual trust with Bangladesh and Myanmar to counter balance India's influence in the region (Aung, 2007). However, Myanmar endeavours to keep the links open with other major regional and extra regional actors particularly, USA and India (Steinberg, 2012).

Myanmar's strategic location on a tri-junction between South Asia, Southeast Asia and China has opened up a vast opportunity in the arena of regional and trans-national connectivity (Chowdhury, 2016; Rahman, 2012). Recent democratization of Myanmar would lead to a more balanced development, lay foundation of a more democratic government and significantly enhance the connectivity of South Asia and South-East Asia (Lohani, 2015; Lall, 2016).

Bangladesh's geographic location between South Asia and South-East Asia provides a unique opportunity for the country to benefit from greater cross-border business. Bangladesh will also be immensely benefited from the connectivity between the sub-regions and integration with the regional economy (Aung, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2012; Chowdhury, 2016). A strong alliance between Bangladesh, China and Myanmar would also ensure regional peace, security and stability. The tri-nation ties may even create a condition for Beijing to influence settling of protracted disputes between Bangladesh and Myanmar on Rohingya issues and border demarcations, leading towards a near perfect regional harmony (Yubin, 2010).

However, none of the literature discussed on the essence and modalities of Bangladesh's integration in the Sino-Myanmar connectivity. Besides, the literatures have also not focused on Bangladesh's linkage with the East exploiting the strong ties between China and Myanmar though it is crucial and a need of the time to materialize her vision.

#### **4. Methodology**

In carrying out the present study, qualitative method is being followed. Content analysis of secondary literature and desk research are carried out to gather relevant information and statistics from available sources. Documents containing official information, official statement, websites and policy papers are being rigorously and systematically analyzed. Since data from primary source is limited, data of secondary source like books, scholarly written journals, research papers, newspapers and other publications are studied and analyzed.

Interview of policy makers, diplomats and academicians are being conducted to further fill the gaps and short falls. As it is difficult to interview Chinese and Myanmar officials, experts on China and Myanmar are interviewed to extract relevant information. After collecting data, those are systematically and scientifically analyzed and validated to understand the complex issue of the study.

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Bangladesh's integration into Sino-Myanmar connectivity through improved bilateral relation with Myanmar being a comparatively new awareness in Bangladesh; not much of research or study have been conducted to ascertain the impact of this phenomenon on the economic development of Bangladesh. Strategy to get connected to Sino-Myanmar connectivity has not yet been streamlined by Bangladesh. There is no concrete government source of data on related strategies and there was limited scope for collecting data from the primary source. The researcher mainly depended, as stated earlier, on data published in secondary sources and interviews of scholars and experts on this subject.

### **5. Bangladesh-Myanmar Relation**

Historical relations between Burma (later on Myanmar) and Bangladesh presents centuries of trade, cultural interactions and migration between the kingdoms and empires of Bengal and the kingdoms of Burma, particularly Arakan. Before preaching of Islam in the 13th century, Bengal was Buddhist kingdom. The Indic Buddhist culture of Burma developed through Bengal resulting in the imprint of Indian (inclusive of Bengali) culture and civilization currently found in Burma. A lot of culture and religion based organizational activities were conducted by the Bengalis in Burma (Shodhganga, 2009).

During British colonial period, the last Emperor of the great Mughals laid in peace in Rangoon. Thibaw, the last King of Burma, was exiled from Burma to India suffering defeat in the Third Anglo-Burmese War (Lorin, 2014). Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose toured Burma to mobilize public opinion for recruitment of soldiers against British Colonial rule (Mohanty, 2008). These all implies to a significant religious, cultural and political connection between Burma and Bengal since ancient times.

Since independence, Myanmar declared her intent to maintain close ties and develop bilateral relations on the basis of peaceful co-existence, non-alignment and mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and national dignity. Diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar improved significantly in 1973 and 1974. By the end of 1973, K.M. Kaiser, first ambassador to Myanmar, was able to make a breakthrough in negotiating the maritime boundary between the two countries. First state visit of Burmese Prime Minister in 1974 and other exchanges of high level visits between Bangladesh and Myanmar was significant in promoting mutual understanding. However, it was disturbed in 1976 when the Burmese intelligence openly implicated the military attaché in the Bangladesh embassy in Rangoon in the plot together with Muslim malcontents in the Arakan. By 1978, the first trickle of Muslim refugees from Arakan entered Bangladesh (Morshed, 1997).

#### **5.1. Political Relation**

The beginning of political relation between Bangladesh and Myanmar was positive with the visit of the then Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad to Myanmar in 1972. The first major crisis between two countries erupted in 1978 with the influx of Rohingya refugee to Bangladesh. Later, the dispute over maritime boundary issue

further strained the relationship between the countries. Though the demarcation of land border was signed in 1979, countries could not best utilize their proximity and historical ties for building a pragmatic relation due to Rohingya refugee issue, tensions in border and trans-national crimes. The recent political and economic reforms in Myanmar brought new hopes and opportunities to develop a better relationship. The developed world has already withdrawn their longtime political and economic sanctions against Myanmar, creating new opportunities for other countries including Bangladesh to explore their potential areas of co-operation with this country (Uddin, 2014).

### 5.2. Economic Relation

Official bilateral trade relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh begun following the Myanmar government’s recognition of Bangladesh. In the general trade agreement signed in 1973, Bangladesh desired to import rice from Myanmar and export jute, newsprint and paper to Myanmar in any convertible currencies. Subsequently in the course, ‘Border Trade Agreement’ was signed in May 1994 and a ‘Joint Trade Commission’ was established through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (Khan, 2014). At present official trades, border trades and informal trades exist between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The border trade is hampered because of the absence of road link whereas sea-borne trade is non-existent because there is no shipping agreement between the neighbours. However, during the last bilateral talks between two Foreign Secretaries held in Dhaka in 2014, Myanmar Deputy Foreign Minister reasserts to begin the process for road connectivity soon.

**Table 1 Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral trade statistics**

Serial	Year	Export (In Crore BDT)	Import (In Crore BDT)	Trade Ratio
1.	2017-18	163	143	1:0.87
2.	2016-17	154	385	1: 2.5
3.	2015-16	204	304	1: 1.49
4.	2014-15	132	245	1: 1.85
5.	2013-14	92	716	1: 7.78
6.	2012-13	90	671	1: 7.72
7.	2011-12	94	516	1: 7.45
8.	2010-11	33	1284	1: 38.91
<b>Total</b>		<b>962</b>	<b>4264</b>	<b>1: 4.43</b>

Source: Data compiled from Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh-Statistics Data Base (<http://www.epb.gov.bd/site/files/9efa4995-2501-4c9e-8ca6-8b8f7208c3a0/Statistic-Data;2010-2018>), Trade Economic- Myanmar Balance of Trade Database (<https://tradingeconomics.com/myanmar/balance-of-trade>) and Bangladesh Bank Annual report – (from FY 2010-11 to FY 2016-17)

### **5.3. Diplomatic Relation**

Bangladesh's foreign minister visited Myanmar in 1972 after Myanmar had recognized Bangladesh as a sovereign state. Many top-level visits took place between the two countries until the period of President Thein Sein's government which transformed Myanmar's military government into a quasi-civilian government (Tun, 2016). Myanmar President visited Bangladesh back in 1974. From then on, visits by delegates/state premieres started taking place between both countries. As per the latest information Myanmar Social Welfare Minister Win Myat Aye visited Bangladesh in April 2018 in connection with rehabilitation efforts in Rakhine State. On the contrary, first ever visit to Myanmar from Bangladesh was conducted back in 1977. Present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made her vibrant visit to Myanmar in December 2011. Lastly, Home Minister of Bangladesh Mr Asaduzzaman Khan visited Myanmar on October 2017 in connection with preparing a roadmap for peaceful repatriation of the Rohingyas.

### **5.4. Defence Co-operation**

There is no defence agreement prevailing at present between the countries, but there are good will visits amongst both the armed forces. This started with the visit of the Chief of General Staff of Bangladesh Army to Myanmar in 1997 (Burma Library, 1997). In turn, a five-member military delegation of Myanmar visited Bangladesh in 2003. In 2005, both the Chiefs of Army Staff made reciprocal visit.

To foster friendly relationship between the two countries Armed Forces, Bangladesh Navy made continuous effort to send ships to pay good will visit to Myanmar. Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) has found very friendly administrative and logistic support from Myanmar Air Force (MAF) in Mandalay Airport and Santé Airport in 2013 while ferrying the fighter aircrafts to Bangladesh from China. Bangladesh and Myanmar Armed Forces both offer different training courses for each other (Khan, 2014).

## **6. Overview of Sino-Myanmar Connectivity**

Geographically, China and Myanmar have 2192 km border, and they enjoy a very healthy relationship since long. Their relationship was evident since the founding of the Kingdom of Bagan (Pagan, ancient Myanmar) in AD 849, which occurred during China's cosmopolitan Tang Dynasty (AD 618 – 907). Since then, China stood beside Myanmar in all ups and downs. Myanmar was isolated for 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 and so forth. 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 materialize 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.

### **6.1. Implementation of China's Bridgehead Strategy**

As part of the "Twelfth Five Year Plan" launched in 2011, China formally introduced the national "bridgehead strategy" which proposes to turn Yunnan into a strategic corridor and a bridgehead for China's strategic engagement in the Indian Ocean (Sun, 2012). The bridgehead strategy will free China from the "strategic passivity" of the "One Ocean Strategy", allow pursuit of the "Two Ocean Strategy", and represents China's strategic aspirations in the Indian Ocean. Many in China calls for turning Myanmar and Pakistan into outposts of China's strategic outreach into the Indian Ocean, and establish Chinese military base in the Indian Ocean (Sun, 2012). The aim is to protect Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), as well as to maximize China's geo-political interests. By comparison, the bridgehead strategy provides a less threatening way to establish and enhance China's strategic outreach into the Indian Ocean (Alam, 2013). Sino-Myanmar connectivity offers China a much-needed access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar.

### **6.2. Economic Aspects of Sino-Myanmar Connectivity**

China and Myanmar have a very strong economic tie. 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 till January 2017 (Xinhua, 2017). Chinese investments in Myanmar are mainly focused on the sectors of hydropower, oil and gas, and mining. 63% of China's investments in Myanmar are in power sector, while investment in oil and gas and mining sectors occupied 36%. Chinese companies those invested in the major projects in Myanmar are mainly state-owned companies (SOEs) (Dunn et al., 2016).

### **6.3. 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 strong interest in developing an economic and technology zone in Kyaukpyu also (Dunn et al., 2016).

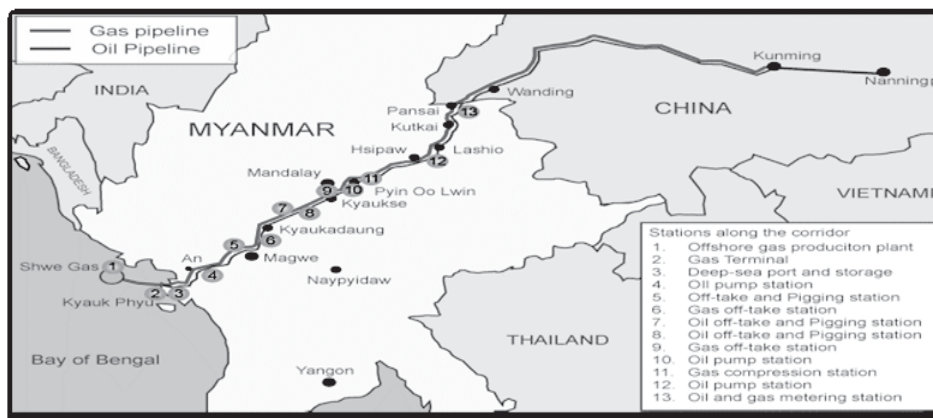


Figure-1 : China-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipeline

Adapted from China in Myanmar: Implications for the Future (Hilton, 2013)

Source: www.maps.google.com

**6.3.1. 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 actually the updated versions 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).

**6.3.2. Rail Connectivity:** China is assisting Myanmar to augment its rail infrastructure needs, 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 construct new railway from Ruili to Lashio (Yunnan, 2017).

**6.3.3. Connectivity through Inland Water:** China-Myanmar land-water passage’s full name is “China Kunming Myanmar Yangon Irrawaddy River Portage Passage” which is an integrative land and water carriage system including the land transport from Kunming to Bhamo via Baoshan and Ruili, the water course from Bhamo port to Yangon as well as other ports, portage transfers and seaports. The construction of Ruili - Bhamo road and Bhamo port with estimated investment of RMB 0.37 billion and RMB 0.16 billion, are at the core of Sino-Myanmar land and water passage. Both countries originally agreed on “joint construction and operation, joint share venture and profit”. Later on, China agreed to build the passage only in the form of “Build-Operate-Transfer” (BOT) in a thirty-year operating period (Hongwei, 2011).



**6.3.4. Strategic Perspectives of Sino-Myanmar Connectivity:** China-led connectivity initiative has more strategic perspective than economic consideration. China has a long-term strategic interest in Myanmar because of latter's convenient geographic location. Myanmar is the only gateway for China towards Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal to counter balance the USA's and Indian Naval influence. Entire north-western part of China is deprived of any coastline and it is a major handicap for China. Access to Myanmar's ports and overland transportation routes through Myanmar seaport is seen as a vital and strategic security asset for 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 Bay of Bengal and Coco Islands, China can avoid India's naval threat which is her ultimate interest.

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 has changed the energy security dynamics of China. China also wants to see a stable Myanmar to ensure flow of huge investment and 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 energy sector of Myanmar. Thus, China's strategic alignment with Myanmar is going to have a long-term serious implication for strategic interests of India, Japan and the USA.

## **7. Significance of Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations**

Bangladesh-Myanmar relation definitely bears some geo-strategic and geo-economic significance for both the neighbouring countries. It is said that 'You can change friends, not neighbours (The Economic Times, 2003). Indeed, this relation bears geo-strategic and geo-economic significance for both the neighboring countries. When the 'states and their fortunes' are inextricably tied together by connecting the societies through opening the multiple channels of interactions therefore, 'Complex Interdependence' prevailing in between them, the interactions include informal ties between government to governments as well as formal foreign office arrangements; informal ties among non-governmental elites; and transnational (Koehane & Nye, 2011). These channels can be summarized as interstate, trans-governmental, and trans-national relations. Physical and institutional connectivity approaches will strengthen the Bangladesh-Myanmar relations.

### **7.1. Factors for Consideration**

Despite a "go-it-alone" diplomatic stance of Myanmar leaders since the 1960s, major international and regional events in international politics, such as the end of the Cold War and the rise of China since the 1990s, had a crucial impact on the country. Authorities acknowledged that their approach to foreign policy had to reckon with Myanmar's exceptional geo-strategic position.

In the last seven decades, the country had to cope with the management of its border areas. The separatist tendencies by the ethnic nationalities along the borders have also

generated a great deal of concern in neighbouring capitals, compelling Myanmar to acquire pragmatic policy towards neighbours.

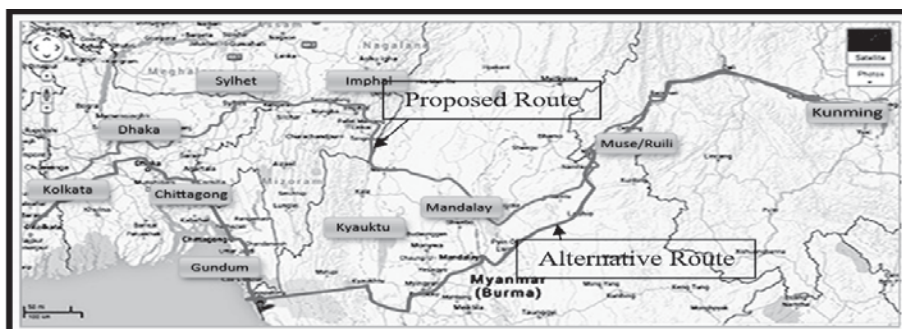
Moreover, Since the 1950s, military leadership has been the key foreign policy actor. The 2008 constitution maintains the importance of the armed forces in matters of foreign affairs. For Bangladesh the foreign policy principles, objectives, domestic and international pressures are also observed in every approach of formulating the foreign policy with the geo-political reality of South and South-East Asia.

### 7.2. Essence of Myanmar to Regional/External Powers

Major Powers comprising of China, Russia and the United States have direct impact on peace, stability and economic development of Myanmar. India has undertaken many ambassadorial strategies to strengthen its ties with Myanmar, picturing the development of a trilateral highway project between India, Myanmar and Thailand, with a vision of inter-linking the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea. In 2015, US exports to Myanmar were at US\$227 million while imports were at \$144 million, according to figures from Myanmar's Directorate of Investment and Companies Administration. The total approved US investment in Myanmar stands at US\$ 248 million. At this juncture, Russia is diversifying its cooperation with Myanmar to include economic, cultural and scientific fields. Russia has future interest in oil and gas exploration to increase its investment portfolio. These factors have turned Myanmar highly ambitious to pay any heed to the plea of her small neighbour Bangladesh.

### 7.3. Geo-Strategic Location of Myanmar

Myanmar is the major competitor of Bangladesh in utilizing the advantage of geo-strategic location as it is offering transit facilities to India, China and other South-East Asian countries. In the Asian Highway, Myanmar will become the point of convergence and linking route between India, China and the South-East Asia. Myanmar has consistently opposed the southern route (AH 41 through Myanmar) proposed by Bangladesh as part of Asian Highway for reasons of national security (Banik, 2015). To remain in the race of economic expansion Bangladesh needs to maintain soft strategy with her counterpart which will ultimately connect her to further East.



Source: [www.maps.google.com](http://www.maps.google.com)

Figure-2: Alternative Route which is a Part of Asian Highway- 41 within Bangladesh

#### **7.4. Significance for Bangladesh**

After the current political and economic reforms, Myanmar has now become an attraction for foreign investment and experienced tremendous economic growth. In the recent past Myanmar proved her adeptness in 'resource diplomacy' and managed to get political support from neighbours and powerful world players by auctioning off the country's natural resources. Some important projects are:

**7.4.1. Shwe Gas Project:** The Shwe Natural Gas project consisting of the Shwe, Shwe Phyu and Mya offshore gas fields, located in the Myanmar territory of the Bay of Bengal, is supported by Myanmar, China, and India. The gas will either be sold to China National United Oil Corporation (CNUOC) or used within Myanmar (Offshore Technology, 2018).

**7.4.2. Trans Myanmar Oil Corridor:** Trans Myanmar oil pipeline connected Kawkphyu of Myanmar with Kunming of China. Trial operations began in 2015 on the 771km pipeline designed to carry 22 million tons of crude yearly. This link allows China to import crude from the Middle East and Africa without having to ship through the Strait of Malacca and into the South China Sea. This is part of President Xi Jin Ping's "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure and trade development plan stretching across Asia to Africa and Europe (South China Morning Post, 2017).

**7.4.3. Kaladan Multi- Modal Transit Transport (KMTT) Project:** In 2008 India signed this KMTT project deal with Myanmar. This project is planned to connect India's North-Eastern Mizoram State with the Sittwe Sea port of Myanmar. On completion, KMTT project will ensure India's access route to the land-locked North-Eastern states and also offer alternative route to the transit through Bangladesh (DoNER, 2016).

#### **7.5. Significance of the Projects**

Bangladesh should venture the opportunities with Myanmar following India and China for the sake of national interest. China's warm economic links with Myanmar allowed the Burmese government in power to avoid western economic sanctions and have a free reign in combating internal insurgencies. China has benefited from lucrative mining and manufacturing contracts and continues to have close trade relations. Keeping the geo-political realities in mind, India reversed its time-honoured policy of supporting democratic governments and have close political and intelligence links with the Burmese government to provide maritime outlets to its land locked North-Eastern states. Bangladesh should therefore, devise a strategy that allows Myanmar to cooperate economically with her. (Rahman, 2012).

#### **7.6. Significance of Bangladesh to Myanmar**

Bangladesh also bears significance to Myanmar from geo-economic point of view. Remarkable achievement of Bangladesh in agro-economic sector may attract Myanmar to grow the expertise from Bangladeshi agriculturists to flourish in agro-economic sectors. Myanmar may utilize the existing Chattogram port and upcoming deep-sea port

to reduce cargo cost of the imported products. Bangladesh has become an important player in the South Asian region, India and China is making special alliance with Bangladesh. Myanmar should extend cooperation with Bangladesh for the expansion of their economic corridor; especially, towards India.

## **8. Challenges for Sustainable Bangladesh-Myanmar Relation**

### **8.1. Myanmar's Apathy to Bangladesh**

Bangladesh could have been a gateway for Myanmar to connect to eastern India and other parts of South Asia if they would agree to implement the proposed AH 41 (Map 3), which would eventually increase Myanmar's importance to China and ASEAN countries for bolstering the connectivity. The Asian Highway proposed route by Bangladesh runs through Teknaf in Chattogram to Arakan province in Myanmar. The route was consistently objected by Myanmar from late 70s, as the Arakan province has been troublesome for Myanmar for some years and a threat to national security. The net result – Myanmar does not agree on trans-national route through Arakan province to Bangladesh and has been comfortable to re-route the Highway through India's north-eastern states. Such apathy of Myanmar to the interests of Bangladesh has been felt in other sectors of foreign policy; especially, during mitigation of Rohingya issue which is critical for sustainable Bangladesh-Myanmar relationship.

### **8.2. India Factor**

According to many analysts, India is apparently reluctant to see Bangladesh strengthening economic ties with ASEAN and China in particular. Perhaps, India worries about the proximity to the 'Siliguri Corridor' of a China-friendly Bangladesh, and the Chinese maritime Silk Road proposal integrating Bangladesh. For a better access to the Bay of Bengal, Beijing has also shown keen interest to provide financial assistance to infrastructure development projects designed to link Chattogram with Yunnan province. India remains skeptical on these China led connectivity in the region. Besides, India being a big neighbour does not want to be deeply involved in resolving issues between Bangladesh and Myanmar. India perhaps contemplates that her 'Act East Policy' might get hindered if she exerts pressure on Myanmar. As such, India has already initiated endeavours to connect with Myanmar bypassing Bangladesh. Therefore, it is not easy for Bangladesh to connect to the east and attain her economic and geo-strategic priorities as contemplated due to India factor.

### **8.3. Rohingya Issues**

Rohingya refugee crisis is the most critical issue that has strained Myanmar-Bangladesh relations since the late 1970s. The serious plight of Rohingya ethnic group's extreme victimization in Myanmar has finally emerged on the international stage in 2017. Due to Myanmar Army's operation in Rakhine state, within a 3-month period since August 2017, around 850,000 displaced Rohingyas have taken refuge in Bangladesh with thousands more waiting in peril in the isolated space along the Naf River. UN has called this the 'world's fastest growing refugee crisis' (Dussich, 2018).

Bangladesh is frustrated by Myanmar’s refusal to take back the Rohingya refugees and by its continued harsh policies towards the Rohingya which cause yet more Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. Rohingya issue remains one of the main challenges for cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Rohingya are also involved in transnational organized crimes like human and drugs trafficking and arms smuggling. The following table provides a brief overview of the security concerns generated by Rohingya in Bangladesh.

Table-2 : Security Concerns for Bangladesh due to Rohingya Refugee Crisis

Security Concerns	Facts
Demographic Change	The high growth rate of Rohingya (4.3 per cent) causing demographic change particularly in Teknaf. To get more rations from the UNHCR and other international organizations in the camps, they are least interested in adopting family planning measures.
Environmental Threats	Rohingya are destroying forests near the camps and other areas wherever they inhabit. They also destroy mountains causing landslides in nearby areas.
Human Trafficking	Rohingya are involved in human trafficking, smuggling, and abduction etcetera (Chandan and Rubel, 2018). There is a trafficking network sending Rohingya to Malaysia. Their network extends from Dhaka to Chattogram.
Drug Trafficking	Rohingyas are involved in drug trafficking (Chandan and Rubel, 2018). 80 per cent undocumented Rohingya are carriers of drugs (yaba). Recently, a Rohingya was caught with 150000 pieces yaba. Strong nexus between unregistered Rohingyas and some Myanmar people exists. They use mobile networks on both sides of the border to conduct the crimes.
Unemployment	Rohingyas are occupying local job market. Local women are also vulnerable as they are losing house hold jobs. About 90 per cent rickshaw pullers of Cox’s Bazaar district are Rohingyas. Even day laborers are losing their jobs as Rohingya provide cheap labour.
Threat to Tourism Industry	Cox’s Bazar is the hub of tourism industry in Bangladesh. And security is precondition for promotion of tourism. However, the activities of Rohingya are threatening the industry.
Deteriorating Law and Order Situation	Rohingya commit various crimes including professional killing, theft, robbery, etcetera. At least 22 Rohingya has been killed in last one year in 30 Refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar (Chandan and Rubel, 2018).
Hampering the Labour Market	By using fake Bangladeshi passport, Rohingya are going to Middle East, Malaysia and other countries, and for their unlawful activities, Bangladesh is losing its image.

Adapted from BISS Journal January 2014 (Uddin, 2014)

#### **8.4. Border Tension**

As stated earlier, Bangladesh and Myanmar share about 271 kilometers of land border. Both countries signed a boundary agreement in 1998: ‘Demarcation of the Land Section of the Boundary North of the Naf River’. Compared to Bangladesh-India border, Bangladesh-Myanmar border has been peaceful. Nevertheless, tensions erupted in different times, e.g., in 1991 Myanmar attacked and ransacked Rejupara border outpost (BOP), killing three members of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). In 2008, four Korean ships guarded by Myanmar’s navy started exploration for oil and gas reserves within 50 nautical miles south-west of St. Martin Island, in Bangladesh water (Uddin, 2014). Such incidents always pose challenge to a sustainable relationship between two neighbours.

#### **9. Ways Forward in Enhancing Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations**

It is an essence for Bangladesh to establish connectivity with south-east and East Asian countries to materialize her economic dream and pursue geo-strategic priorities. To access eastward, integration with Sino-Myanmar connectivity is a sine qua non for Bangladesh. Thus, there is no alternative other than having sustainable good relation with Myanmar as the gateway towards east. Few of the measures which might be considered for developing and maintaining good relation with Myanmar are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

##### **9.1. Building Mutual Trust and Confidence**

The objective of Bangladesh should be to build mutual trust, confidence and a sense of security. Confidence building measures will lessen the anxiety and suspicion by making the behaviour of each other more predictable. Bangladesh should enhance diplomacy by exchanging visit of high officials (Chowdhury, 2016). Bangladesh should take more initiative to engage in regular table talks.

##### **9.2. Trade and Investment**

Bangladesh-Myanmar Joint Trade Commission should explore the new avenues. Both the countries offer huge potentials for investment. Focus should be given on reducing the procedural requirements and solving the problems of businessmen investing in either country (Shamim-uz-Zaman, 2011). Direct banking system with Myanmar should be more user-friendly. At present, Sonali Bank of Bangladesh and Myanmar Economic Bank are providing direct banking facilities. Some other dynamic banks should be encouraged to take a venture for operating in both the countries (Kabir, 2011).

##### **9.3. Exploring Cooperation through Trans-national Initiatives**

Bangladesh and Myanmar are part of number of trans-national initiatives, namely: The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Cooperation (BCIM-EC), AH and China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR), success of which largely depends on the relationship among Bangladesh, Myanmar and India. Therefore, India-Bangladesh and Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral relations and their changing dynamics are crucial to

understand the dynamics of sub-regional cooperation in South Asia. If Bangladesh/ Myanmar were to remove their border restrictions for movement of cargoes and vehicles and allow China/ India to connect with their landlocked states, perhaps the latter would be also willing to allow Bangladesh/ Myanmar to export more to its market (Khan, 2014). Such initiatives also open up doors for Bangladesh to include diversification of the export items targeting the domestic market of Myanmar. Besides, it will also usher in the possibilities for establishment of a smooth channel of financial transactions as well as building direct road and air links between the two countries and signing of an inland water transport protocol including selecting sectors for joint investments.

#### **9.4. Exploring Myanmar's Economic Interests and Potentials**

Bangladesh need to identify the areas where both the countries can be mutually benefitted. Bangladesh Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock should identify and explore the possible field of cooperation between Myanmar and Bangladesh like setting up exclusive fishing zone in the Bay of Bengal. In addition, both the countries need to promote tourism to increase money flow and people to people contact. Visa formalities need to be made easy in this regard (Chowdhury, 2016).

#### **9.5. Amicable Solution to Rohingya Issue**

Management of Rohingya refugee by Bangladesh since 2017 has been appreciated by the world community. Bangladesh could successfully project this humanitarian crisis and create pressure on Myanmar. International community condemned Myanmar for deliberate ethnic cleansing. Bangladesh should not lose focus from her national interest while negotiating the crisis (Chowdhury, 2016).

Bangladesh needs to project that a peaceful solution to the refugee problem is vital for the growth of Rakhine state in particular and Myanmar in general. Hence, it will be a complementary interest if the refugee crisis is solved peacefully. Bangladesh should endeavour so that, all refugees are taken back by Myanmar for her economic progress. Bangladesh must create bilateral negotiation and diplomatic pressure on Myanmar through UN, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other multinational organizations. Friendly relation with China needs to be exploited in resolving Rohingya issue as China and Myanmar are close allies. Most importantly, Bangladesh always have to remember that any audacious venture by Bangladesh will not only deteriorate the diplomatic relations with Myanmar, but also there are strong chances of getting devoid of support from regional actors as they have more interest in Myanmar than Bangladesh.

#### **9.6. Integration of Bangladesh in India's Act East Policy**

India's 'Act East' policy focuses on the pacific countries in addition to the south East Asian countries. The policy recognizes the importance of north-east India as the gateway to the east. The policy also gives India a legitimate reason to be an active player in South China sea and create a regional balance by boosting trade and commerce. As India engages Myanmar as part of her 'Act East' policy, Bangladesh

being a trusted ally to India can always expect to integrate well into India's 'Act East' policy which will in turn improve relations with Myanmar and facilitate her integration in Sino-Myanmar connectivity.

### **9.7. Cooperation in multi-dimensional sectors**

Bangladesh can influence Myanmar on issues like microcredit, education, women empowerment and vocational training etc. through Grameen Bank, BRAC and other Non-Government Organization which can play significant role in promoting human resources in remote areas of Myanmar (Uddin, 2014). Both the countries can cooperate for further exploration of mutual resources and amicable sharing of maritime areas as the solution of demarcation of maritime boundary opened new opportunities. Bangladesh may negotiate to import electricity/gas from Myanmar directly or may undertake any project under public-private partnership to establish hydro-power plant in Myanmar which may further open new horizon for foreign investment. Bangladesh and Myanmar Armed Forces can co-operate each other in terms of exchange of views, visits, training, passage of real time information which will reduce mistrust and enhance the confidence and understanding.

### **9.8. Multi-track Diplomacy**

Visit of the mainstream political parties from Bangladesh indicate priority for building a stronger relationship with Myanmar. Although Track II diplomacy is informal, but it has more scope and play a significant role for dialogue and confidence building between and among the parties. According to Dr. Lewis Rasmussen, an eminent US scholar on international relations, "Unofficial actors, in what is known as Track-II diplomacy, perform a range of supplemental of parallel functions to help improve relationship at various levels and among different individuals." Due to the starting of democratization in Myanmar, it is now expected to be easier to conduct discussion or negotiation utilizing unofficial Track-II diplomacy which has long been proven to play a substantial complementary role in creating conducive environment for governments to engage more effectively and constructively. Track-II initiative should be taken more to reduce suspicion and build confidence between the two countries. Student exchange, on the other hand, can be another way to boost up the idea of people to people contact. The Bangladesh-Myanmar longstanding historical ties provide ample prospect for promoting cultural cooperation. MoU on Cultural cooperation between these two countries already expired in 2012 which needs to be renewed immediately (Uddin, 2014).

### **10. Conclusion**

Bangladesh and Myanmar share both land and maritime borders, and have age-old commercial and cultural ties. They have unlimited potentials in trade, connectivity and people-to-people contact. Both geo-strategic and geo-economic viewpoints justify the necessity of strong Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. The main strategic objective of Bangladesh is to connect itself with China and other South-East Asian countries using the territory of 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. Beside economic development, the connectivity will significantly increase geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh to the region as well as to the world.

Bangladesh needs strong diplomatic understanding with Myanmar to integrate herself into Sino-Myanmar connectivity. All the trans-national initiatives like OBOR, BCIM-EC, BIMSTEC, AH will enable Bangladesh to connect up to China and beyond to attain economic goals and geo-strategic priorities. Integration of Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) will enable Bangladesh expand her economy towards far east, while the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road will further boost the economic prosperity and reduce shipping cost and space. As a whole, Bangladesh's dream to achieve the status of middle-income country by 2021 and developed country by 2041 shall get further boost. Due to the Rohingya crisis and lack of enthusiasm of Myanmar to resolve the existing disputes, proper utilization of the proximity and exploration of potential areas for mutual economic and strategic gains are yet to be explored. Few external factors like interest of the super powers towards Myanmar and seemingly less significance of Bangladesh to Myanmar have always pulled back these two countries from attaining geo-strategic synergy. However, there is no alternative to solve the existing disputes through peaceful negotiation without alienating Myanmar and regional actors.

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