



Bangladesh-Growing Regional Presence

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Abstract

Bangladesh at 50 years of its independence is a stronger and rapidly growing nation, a far cry from the time of its birth in 1971. It has made enviable strides in positioning itself as a strong South Asian entity, having recorded remarkable progress in many aspects especially in the economic sector. Dhaka has pursued its external relations with a focus on access to markets, concessions, and to bilateral and multilateral aid. While India and China are likely to continue to be the sheet anchors of Bangladesh foreign policy, a broader vision has been acquired through leveraging its unique geography, showcasing its growth story, and its plans to move into a knowledge-intensive society, beyond apparel manufacturing. A number of factors have lent salience to Bangladesh's growing bilateral partnership and stable ties all across the globe. With the Bay of Bengal assuming greater

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importance and the Indian Ocean becoming a focal point for major powers' jostling, Bangladesh's ability to turn around and effectively use its geographical position to its advantage has been rather fascinating and points to an identity that has grown beyond its regional confines.

The accomplishments of Bangladesh are rather significant and substantial. Bangladesh at 50 years of its independence is a stronger and rapidly growing nation, a far cry from the time of its birth in 1971. It has made enviable strides in positioning itself as a strong South Asian entity, having recorded a remarkable progress in many aspects especially in the economic sector. Bangladesh's growth story is one of the extraordinary economic development successes. A country, which at the time of its independence in 1971 was experiencing grinding poverty, has over the years and through successive governments, managed to achieve considerable progress in development as well as social welfare parameters. Bangladesh has moved through changing identities and different political systems, dynastic politics and as one of the fastest growing economies in recent times, Bangladesh is uniquely poised today as a critical regional player with a growing global outreach.

This article argues that there is an increasing recognition of Bangladesh and its role in contributing to the region and outside. This was possible not only in the context of the growing importance of Bangladesh's geographic location with its unique position straddling South Asia and Southeast Asia but was ably buttressed by the political stability and economic gains. It has achieved that has been further reinforced by Dhaka's balanced foreign policy. Bangladesh's growth story has become a subject of interest far and wide. Around the same time the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean was increasing for a variety of reasons and Bangladesh's geographic location along with its growing trade linkage with the outside world lends it with a strong presence in the region and beyond. However, the scope of this article is narrow, limiting itself to

understanding how Bangladesh's foreign policy supported by its economic growth and political stability has made itself a critical partner for India and China and other South Asian neighbours, bilaterally and regionally too.

The following sections attempts to examine the contours of how Bangladesh has become a coveted partner for these two Asian powers and how Dhaka attempts to leverage its geographic position adroitly balancing them both while engaging not only through the bilateral prism but partnering the sub-regional initiatives that are in various stages of implementation in the region and outside. The article focuses on two distinct aspects—Bangladesh's growing bilateral partnership with India and China and while its growing engagement in the regional initiatives underway in Asia and South Asia.

This first section briefly discusses Bangladesh's political journey and its economic growth and prosperity. Bangladesh's bilateral engagement with India and China and how it plays a vital role in many of the sub-regional projects is highlighted in the second section. The third section discusses Bangladesh's growing influence in the region and beyond. In the changing political strategic scenario with the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean assuming greater attention from regional and extra regional powers, Bangladesh's geographic location has lent it with greater relevance and is being wooed by two Asian powers.

Political Journey

The political trajectory of Bangladesh has taken it through forms of parliamentary democracy interspersed with direct and indirect military rule. When it became independent from Pakistan in December 1971, Bangladesh had a dream, a mission and above all a charismatic leader. Freedom and democracy were its dreams; a reassertion of its Bengali identity was its mission; and an undisputed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was at the helm of politics and governance. Having been subjected to repression, exploitation and authoritarianism, the people of this country genuinely aspired for freedom and liberty both in political as well as cultural terms.¹ The Father of the Nation

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) dream thus held out a promise of a land free from hunger, poverty, corruption, illiteracy, communalism and ignorance.² But in the rapidly changing political landscape of the first two decades, Bangladesh witnessed swings from multiparty democracy to one party experiment under the stewardship of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to military-led regimes to a return to multiparty democracy in 1991. Bangladesh's transition to a parliamentary democracy was a huge political achievement. This period saw flourishing of democracy, building of institutions, growth of free and fair media and an enabling space for political freedom and individual liberty differentiating it from other experiences in the regional neighbourhood.

Notably, there have been some distinct reversals in recent years. Although fraught with allegations of irregularities and mismanagement, national elections were held periodically except for an interregnum during 2007-2008. The Awami League government has won the last three parliamentary elections in 2008, 2014 and 2018, although the lack of participation of oppositions in the last two elections has caused many to suggest that Bangladesh exhibits the characteristic of a hybrid democracy.³ Much of the Awami League led government's recent policies have also led to political commentators highlighting the present government slowly spreading its autocratic wings.⁴ There is discernible erosion in the institution of parliament, with media and civil society groups highlighting several issues plaguing Bangladesh's fledgling democratic political system. While democratic practices face myriad of challenges, the continued stable polity has been widely appreciated. Much of the political cynosure about the lack of democratic norms in present Bangladesh has been offset with the economic development that Bangladesh continues to record.

Economic Gains

Indeed, despite Bangladesh's difficult political journey, economically it has come a long way since its genesis through the War of Liberation. The dual graduation of Bangladesh from a low-income country (LIC) to a lower middle-income country, and then to a middle-income country (according to the World Bank criteria), attained in 2015, and its eligibility for graduation from the group of least developed countries (LDCs) to developing country status, in 2018 (according to the United Nations criteria), is a success story of remarkable economic development.⁵

In the initial phase, the nation building exercise was difficult with the nascent state's institutions in a disarray, governance systems strained and enormous resource crunch. From then to now, Bangladesh's achievements especially in the economic sector have been tremendous and the country has been described as a 'land of impossible attainments.'⁶ This South Asian nation surmounted severe socio-economic constraints brought on by the War of Liberation, environmental degradation, and political upheavals. The average per capita income of the people of Bangladesh stands at \$ 2,554 in 2020-21.⁷ Not only was there a marked growth in economy and trade, Bangladesh was also able to improve its human development index indicators, control its population growth, alleviate poverty, and improve life expectancy. Despite many challenges Bangladesh has been able to deliver to an ever-burgeoning middle-income population, attracting substantial FDI and increasing foreign remittance. Its cautious approach is apparent in its ability to not run large government deficits or take up projects that do not have a high economic and social rate of return. Its external debt as a share of GDP has fallen from a peak of 44% in 1994 to 16-18% over 2016-19.⁸ However, expectedly the recent pandemic has brought about some setback in many of the growth and economic statistics, although discussions for a recovery path have been the focus of many economists.

Bangladesh, which at the time of its independence in 1971 was considered too poor to succeed, has over the years and through successive changes in governments, managed to achieve considerable progress in development as well as social welfare parameters. The country rose to be one of the largest exporters of readymade garments (RMG), second only to China, with its largest markets in the European Union (EU). The policy of export-led growth has not only kept the exchange rate steady but provided employment opportunities to women and has given rise to new generations of entrepreneurship. It has been further noted that the domestic developments led to the growth of 'an elite class with close links to political parties and to international markets who, in fact, determine the course of economic policy today.'⁹ Experiencing substantial economic growth alongside framing an effective foreign policy that protects its market interests while creating employment opportunities for migrant workers, the country has played an important role in ensuring healthy remittance flows that has kept the currency stable. Evidently, a combination of effective economic and foreign policies has enabled Bangladesh to offer a \$200 million currency swap deal for Sri Lanka, to help with Colombo's dwindling foreign exchange reserves. Interestingly, Sri Lanka's per capita income is twice that of Bangladesh which points to the prudent economic policies undertaken by Bangladeshi leaders.¹⁰ While Bangladesh received Covid-19 vaccines from India, it also extended help to India by sending 10,000 vials of Remdesivir injection as well as medicines and protective equipment.¹¹

Not only at the bilateral level but also at the regional level, Bangladesh's role has expanded over the years. It is now an active member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and other sub-regional groupings in the region and Bangladesh's emergence as the world's seventh fastest growing economy in 2019 adds significantly to its growing relevance in the region and beyond.

Changing Scenario

The return to democracy in Bangladesh in 1991 coincided with rapid changes in the international system that was evolving—moving from periods of the Cold War to post-Cold War era, globalisation, rise of Asia. These transformations have undeniably contributed and become factors in Bangladesh's foreign policy making. Bangladesh pursued its external relations with a focus on access to markets, concessions and to bilateral and multilateral aid. Its foreign policy has been driven by self-interest and has focused on gaining advantage from its relationships to enhance its economic development.

Thus, Bangladesh's initial search for recognition and economic aid, its attempts at regionalism and leadership at the South Asian regional forum, becoming the largest contributor to the United Nations peacekeeping force and also its willingness to provide humanitarian support to Rohingya refugees who were forced to leave Myanmar contributed to its present position. In the initial phase, Bangladesh did not seek to influence, but to benefit from relationships. This, however, stands on the verge of change. Bangladesh has taken great strides in reaching out to Asia, America, Europe, and the Muslim world, having established stable bilateral relations with all major powers.

Undoubtedly, the present international recognition of its strategic role is a reflection of its growing capacities and its ability to not only showcase but also leverage its geographical position. With the Bay of Bengal assuming greater salience and the Indian Ocean becoming a focal point for major powers' jostling, Bangladesh's geographical location has assumed new significance.¹²

More importantly, Bangladesh has been able to effectively leverage its geographical position, and now is being coveted by two Asian powers India and China. As argued by academics, 'the means and methods of pursuing the foreign policy aspirations change over time and domestic inputs play crucial role in this regard.'¹³ Arguably, for most of the times, Dhaka seems engaged in foreign ties and relations—not so much for strategising a

foreign policy but for creating a wider outreach.¹⁴ This has given Bangladesh dividends and a number of other factors have contributed to Bangladesh's growing bilateral partnership and stable ties all across the globe.

Bangladesh's partnership with China and India has gathered strength, with each phase beginning from 1975. The significant betterment of the Indo-Bangladesh relations in the last decade was largely possible due to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's initiative and interests and ability to address Indian core security concerns. Similarly, Hasina's ambition for raising Bangladesh's global profile has led her to develop close relations with other important Asian powers such as Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore. This has been further elaborated in the following paragraph:

Bangladesh's growth trajectory, along with its geographic location, makes it an extremely attractive neighbour. As one of the leaders in the global textile industry, it has chartered a distinct path for itself and has become a favoured destination for foreign investment.¹⁵ Many states in the region are vying for its attention and are keen to strengthen their bilateral ties with Dhaka. The cross-border transport systems that Bangladesh is developing with India will enable it to play a significant role in regional trade and commerce. Economic reasons apart, political and strategic considerations have led to India and China forming close partnership with Bangladesh. Nepal and Bhutan, the smaller states in South Asia, are also reaching out to Bangladesh. In recent times, Pakistan has also made some overtures. Indeed, Bangladesh is emerging as a key partner in the Asian neighbourhood.¹⁶

Thus, in the wake of greater political stability in the post-1991 period, and continuity in their foreign policy with Bangladeshi leaders pursuing similar interests and policies, barring towards

India and Pakistan, Bangladesh has consolidated itself as a strong South Asian nation. Its bilateral relations with India and China have been robust covering large grounds and growing with passage of time.

Partnership with India

While India and Bangladesh share over 4000 kilometres of land border, their bilateral ties need to be understood in the larger context of the War of Liberation. India's role during the war closely identified India with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League government. The destruction brought about by the war and political isolation of the newly independent state necessitated closer ties with the Indian leadership and New Delhi played a pivotal role in earning international recognition of Bangladesh and facilitating Dhaka's relations with important countries such as the erstwhile Soviet Union. The cementing of Indo-Bangladeshi ties during the early 1970s was due to the personal rapport that existed between Sheikh Mujib and Indira Gandhi. In the immediate aftermath of the formation of the state, the two prime ministers Sheikh Mujib and Indira Gandhi pledged long lasting friendship, a natural consequence of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in which India extended its support. However, the dream and vision of future soon ran into rough weather given the domestic complications that arose in the aftermath of the birth of Bangladesh. The bilateral relationship though remained friendly and stable as long as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was in power. The Indo-Bangladeshi friendship was disrupted in the wake of Sheikh Mujib's assassination in August 1975.¹⁷

The two neighbours began a new phase with the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Communiqué signed in January 2010, seeking to engage closely over a large number of common issues through a cooperative framework. They decided to break free from the past and charted out a new path. It will be a new beginning not only for the bilateral ties but also hold huge potential for regional cooperation. The 2010 agreements ushered in a new era. The importance of the communiqué has

to be seen within the context of other developments that were taking place between the two neighbours with a new focus on engagement with India's Northeastern (NE) region. India's Northeastern states—the so called 'seven sisters'—are connected to the mainland only through a 12 kilometre corridor between Bangladesh and Bhutan popularly known as 'chicken's neck'. Given the region's geographical proximity with Bangladesh, informal linkages always existed. These were now subsequently formalised through border *haats* (local small markets with indigenous products mainly) and many other cross-border transport projects, including opening the economies to investments from Bangladesh.¹⁸ Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's invitation to the Indian Northeastern Chief Ministers to visit Bangladesh and finalise the modalities to further increase trade and connectivity ushered in a new era of widening scope of engagement.¹⁹ Delhi realises the criticality of Bangladesh's engagement with its Eastern and Northeastern sectors. India and Bangladesh created history in the region with the first land and air trans-shipment trade being initiated recently.²⁰

Thus, Bangladesh has assumed greater relevance as it is viewed not only through the prism of bilateralism but also through the landscape of the growing regional framework. Undoubtedly, Bangladesh is a key partner for India's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies, and is increasing its foothold in the Southeast Asian neighbourhood. The bilateral cross-border transport connectivity and economic corridors India has undertaken with Bangladesh is being woven together into a regional transportation and connectivity network complementing many of its initiative to promote regionalism in the subcontinent, at least on India's eastern flank.

With cooperation in building roads, reviving past railway links, and increasing airport connectivity, India and Bangladesh unfolded a large cobweb of transport network much of which connects the neighbours through the Northeast region. The network in fact extends beyond India, while two neighbours—

Nepal and Bhutan—enjoy the cross border transport linkages as well as access to the Bangladeshi ports. Over the years India has extended three Line of Credits, beginning from 2011, \$ 1 billion followed by \$ 2 billion in 2015 and the third \$ 4.5 billion in 2017. A substantial portion of these funds have been diverted towards developing infrastructure development projects in the field of railways and public transport of power, railways, road transport, ICT, shipping, health and technical education, energy trade, port development, connectivity (rail and road) and civil nuclear energy.²¹ Indian thrust on border and infrastructure development necessary to implement sub-regional cooperation was possible with Bangladesh's support.

For long, the majority of surface trade (about 70 percent) between the two countries takes place through the Benapole-Petrapole border in West Bengal. This is a highly congested Land Customs Station (LCS) with a road not broader than 5.5 meters. The alternate route has been through the Northeastern states. Despite crisscrossing of over 54 rivers between India and Bangladesh waterways have not been optimally utilised to further Indo-Bangladeshi trade. In view of this, the Indo-Bangladesh inland waterways treaty is now viewed as a critical component in Bangladeshi domestic transport.²² Indeed, Bangladesh provides India's Northeast region with transit that could save 14 to 18% of total transportation cost, approximately translate into Rs.300-400 crores.²³ In the pandemic phase they have, however, used the inland water transport effectively due to closure of surface transport.

While a train service was resumed between Kolkata and Dhaka through the *Maitree* express in 2008, the *Bandhan* Express launched in 2018 connecting the busy route of Petrapole and Benapole on two sides. India has also supported building *Bhairab* Bridge (\$75million) and *Titas* Bridge (\$25million) that has been able to start the rail movements between Chattogram and Dhaka. The land routes have seen similar development with Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala and Dhaka- Shillong-Guwahati bus services started in 2015, it now has buses plying on Dhaka-Kolkata, Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati, Dhaka-Khulna-Kolkata

routes and Royal Coach on Dhaka-Agartala route. The usage of waterways and maritime routes has seen a substantial improvement in recent times. In 2018, India and Bangladesh signed three bilateral memoranda of understandings (MoUs) with Bangladesh Government to strengthen inland water transportation from above the India-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water. The maritime network is becoming robust and with Bangladesh's recent approval for India to use the Chattogram and Mongla sea ports for transporting goods to and from its land-locked Northeastern states have vital implications on its bilateral and regional trade.

Clearly, the Indo-Bangladesh transport corridors spanning rail, road and waterways has not only enabled deeper connectivity between India's West Bengal and Northeastern states but will also improve the cross-border movements for the sub-region to join the transport corridors and facilitate greater trade and commerce. Dhaka has also expressed interest in joining the trilateral highway connecting India is undertaking to connect its Northeast state Manipur to Myanmar through to Thailand. Thus, facilitation of transit through Bangladesh has enabled new efficient routes in the subcontinent and Bangladesh is playing a pivotal role to enable sub-regional integration. While several bilateral challenges such as border firing, lack of common river sharing agreements undermine many of the positive measures, India and Bangladesh are undertaking many bilateral projects that will hopefully ensure continued ties. Significantly, India and Bangladesh's decision to open up more border trading points will lead to greater facilitation of trade and commerce and surpass the present bilateral trade deficit of over \$ 10 billion in 2021.

Being Wooed by China

Similarly, for China, Bangladesh plays a key role in translating many of China's projects, including the Bangladesh-China-Myanmar corridor into a reality. Undoubtedly, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) imprint in the South Asian region will need

Bangladesh's cooperation. China and Bangladesh have wide ranging bilateral ties, although Sino-Bangladeshi relations formally took off only after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination. President Ziaur Rahman who took over the helms of Bangladesh after Sheikh Mujib, went to China in 1977, within months after Chinese recognition, putting the bilateral relations firmly on place with both sides quietly burying the uneasy and unfriendly initial phase. The Chinese non-recognition of Bangladesh and its opposition to UN membership was explained away 'within' the Cold War context and both sides began to expand and intensify bilateral ties. Thus, Bangladesh presently enjoys the most comprehensive and robust ties with China, straddling a wide spectrum of areas including political ties, economic cooperation and defence assistance. Within a span of few decades, China has moved from its non-recognition position and became Bangladesh's one of the closest allies.²⁴

The BRI has interested Bangladesh and according to Sheikh Hasina, the BRI could have 'significant impact on Bangladesh from an economic and connectivity perspective and the Chittagong Port can act as a central hub to connect Northeast India, Myanmar, Southeast China, Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh'.²⁵ Bangladesh through its land and water routes sees itself as a natural corridor between South and South-East Asia. China has become Bangladesh's biggest trading partner in recent years. Though, there exists a huge trade gap in favour of China, the two sides have sustained a close relationship since 1975. China has become Bangladesh's biggest trading partner in recent years with a volume worth \$16 billion in 2017, which grew by 17.6 percent in 2018. The trade deficit rose to \$16.27 billion in 2019, which had increased 16-fold in the last two decades.²⁶

For Bangladesh, BRI offers the scope for extending its prospects beyond its neighbourhood. For China, befriending Bangladesh means an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence in the Bay of Bengal region. Bangladeshis have also seen much merit in being associated with the BRI to attract Chinese loans for

critical infrastructure. Bangladeshi experts believe that since 'China is moving higher in the manufacturing chain and away from labour intensive low-tech industries, the BRI initiative is also an opportunity for Bangladesh to advance financial sector and capital market infrastructure development, through establishment of a financial corridor.'²⁷ The development of infrastructure and transport (overland connecting road and railway corridors, dual use ports, thermal and hydro-power projects) are the core aspects of the BRI in Bangladesh, but the financial component and how it will be built comprises a significant aspect in taking decisions on these projects.

Accordingly, BRI offers a 'unique and monumental project with the hope that all the countries connected to it, should openly embrace it.'²⁸ Bangladeshi commentators believe that these projects are a source of employment not only for the Chinese but also for Bangladeshis and they would also provide opportunities for Bangladeshi students graduating from Chinese universities.²⁹ But at the same time, experts have pointed out that 'BRI should be based on our package that represents our dreams and aspirations. We should be careful about vanity projects'.³⁰ While there has been a certain amount of circumspection within the policy makers about the unbridled scope given to China in Bangladesh, it is evident that this partnership stands robust and will only grow with time and they both complement each other in realising many of each other's foreign policy goals. For China, befriending Bangladesh meant an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence in the South Asian region.

It has been argued that BRI offers Bangladesh an opportunity to be connected beyond its region, as it will be easier for Bangladesh to integrate further with the international market through the BRI. The Chinese company, Power China, has already been provided land in Mirershorai Economic Zone in Bangladesh to manufacture power plant components. Many expect BRI to play a multifarious role in increasing bilateral and multilateral trade by promoting regional integration.³¹ While some have warned about the need to 'look at the economics of

it and not just at the physical aspect,' Bangladesh has stayed clear of any debt payment issues.³²The Chinese interest in development of Mongla and Payra port in Bangladesh has been well known. Reportedly, China was seeking to convert \$20 billion of loan into commercial credits. As is evident in other regions, the loan terms and the conditions laid down by China has created debt payment issues but Bangladesh has been able to navigate that and some of collaborative projects have brought dividends to Bangladesh and it will be negotiating from position of strength given its present strong economy and that augurs well for its future.

While China's larger plan in the region to build the Bangladesh China India and Myanmar (BCIM) land corridor appears stalled given India's non-participation in BRI, China continues with its bilateral infrastructural development plans within the boundaries of Bangladesh. China is keen to ensure that Bangladesh's pivotal location becomes part of its Maritime Silk Road. Experts in Bangladesh say the country is happy to accept Chinese money, but they do not want China to interfere in anything seen as threat to its national security. For many, "This is a development opportunity as far as Bangladesh is concerned...We want the benefit of the economic relationship."³³ To recall briefly, China through the years has engaged in developing infrastructure in Bangladesh and has been in the forefront of building several of their bridges, highways, and thermal power plants. The Chinese investment in Bangladesh includes the China-Bangladesh Friendship Centre that was initially built with a \$24 million interest free loan and was subsequently converted into a grant. This apart, the Chinese loans for the 'friendship bridges', have underscored the growth of the bilateral ties. Seven bridges have already been completed and the eighth is under construction in Barisal. China has also shown interest in building the 9th and 10th—in Amtoli in Barguna and Golachipa in Patuakhali. ³⁴

India and China are both important to Dhaka and it is trying to navigate the delicate balancing so that it is not seen as taking sides. Many have also pointed out that the success of BRI in

South Asia and in Bangladesh require a collaborative effort by all states in the region to resolve existing regional problems.³⁵ As pointed out by Touhid Hossain, Former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, “BRI is not going to immediately bring substantial change for Bangladesh as the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the combined effort of the partners in the region.”³⁶ While India will remain out of the BRI project, it is keen to draw Bangladesh into other regional initiatives.

Regionalism

As is well known, the idea of a regional grouping in South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was first mooted by Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman. The newly born status did not hinder Bangladesh from leading the initiative towards the formation of SAARC. Bangladesh did not allow past animosity and present differences from seeking and developing friendlier relations with Pakistan. These milestones, thus, enabled Bangladesh to establish a distinct national identity for itself.

SAARC was the first initiative for South Asian states to come together on a common platform seeking economic interest for mutual benefits. This had received fulsome support from China. For its part, Bangladesh has been keen to have a Chinese presence in South Asia. Together with Nepal and Pakistan it worked towards Chinese admission into the SAARC as an ‘observer’.³⁷ However, SAARC faced periodic challenges due to the dynamic regional political developments from its very inception. With the growing tension between India and Pakistan and the cancellation of the 19th summit in 2016, the future of SAARC has remained rather uncertain. The latest attempt during the heights of Covid-19 pandemic to collaborate together reinforced the existing political schism. Arguably, despite the shared socio-cultural similarities, the political complexities of the region have held back regional cooperation making South Asia as one of Asia’s least economically integrated regions.

While for political reasons SAARC really did not flourish, the idea of sub-regionalism within South Asia has found favour with

Bangladesh. It mooted the idea of a South Asian Task Force to contain terrorism in the region but unfortunately it did not find much appeal amongst the neighbours. But with the unveiling of the Indo-Bangladeshi Joint Communiqué of 2010, a new interest in sub-regionalism grew. The Bangladesh, India, Nepal (BIN) pact will essentially provide seamless movement across the nations through the Motor Vehicle Act for facilitating trade and commerce within the region and beyond. Transit and trade agreements with Bangladesh not only has given a quicker access to India's Northeast region, but also is enabling it to develop economic corridors and creating linkages—bringing South Asia and Southeast Asia closer. Although the BIN (formerly the Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal grouping) has been under discussion for long, hopefully the implementation of this plan will be possible at the earliest.³⁸

Bangladesh's engagement with other regional initiatives has been also extensive. It joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2006, reflecting its growing ties with many Southeast Asian and East Asian countries, which included the presence of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore, Malaysia and others in the region. Urging collective action by the ARF members Bangladesh has used this forum to highlight the cause of 1.1 million Rohingyas that Bangladesh has sheltered for long.³⁹ Evidently, Bangladesh in the last few decades have given this region greater attention and readily agreed to be part of the Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) initiative. It essentially was a 2,800 kilometre-long trade route connecting Kolkata, India, to Kunming, China, via Bangladesh. Although beyond trial car journey, this grouping did not make any headway in the face of Indo-China tension.

Bangladesh having assumed the Chairmanship of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), recently hosted the 21st (17 November 2021) Council of Ministers. Its theme—'Harnessing the opportunities of the Indian Ocean sustainably for inclusive development,' has been a reiteration of its sustained efforts to strengthening regional cooperation

and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean region.⁴⁰

This apart, Bangladesh is a critical partner in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). There is an attempt to lend this sub-regional organization with a new lease of life in its 25th year. As per this project plan, Bangladesh will be partnering with India in many of the cross-border connectivities and transport corridors for ensuring seamless regional transportation and network complementing many of the other BIMSTEC agendas. The cross-border infrastructures that are being developed in the region will be the precursor to the expansion and consolidation of regionalism in the neighbourhood. Bangladesh's pivotal geographical position lends it with a distinct strategic appeal.

Conclusion

Few parallel developments have ushered in a new phase in South Asia and its extended neighbourhood. China's expanding spread of influence and drawing the attention of the other powers to the littorals in the region has led to the Indian Ocean and subsequently the Bay of Bengal assume significance hitherto unknown previously. Whether through growing maritime activity or engagement in the land, the presence of regional and extra regional powers has introduced new salience in the strategic contours of the region. The interest in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean is not only confined to ensuring free Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC), but also the ability of each nation to leverage the benefits accruing from the strategic space.

India's growth story and its outreach to the neighbours took on new contours and Bangladesh was brought in that fold too. The engagement was buttressed with the economic, social and political accomplishments of Bangladesh. Its relative stability

and sustained economic growth made it an attractive neighbour and partner in the region. It's taken on a new role as regional partner engaging more fully with all the other neighbours too. While India and China are likely to continue to be the sheet anchor of Bangladesh foreign policy, a broader vision has been acquired through leveraging its unique geography, showcasing its growth trajectory and its other developmental agendas.

As discussed earlier, a number of factors including Bangladesh's domestic and foreign policies have lent salience to Bangladesh's growing role in the region. The culmination of several factors led to Bangladesh's growing regional importance in the last decade. While Bangladesh's foreign policy constructed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman even before the Liberation War of friendship with all and enmity with none has paid rich dividends in its political journey of five decades, the recent gains have been unprecedented. Bangladesh's steady economic growth and widening political engagements have transformed it from a 'basket case' nation to a significant South Asian power. In the past year alone (2021), Bangladesh has tangibly increased its engagement with its South Asian neighbours. From offering a \$200 billion currency swap facility to Sri Lanka and its penning of wide ranging agreements with Nepal and the Maldives are reflections of its growing outreach in the region. Various investment organizations have been set up to strengthen Dhaka's outreach. Dhaka's aspiration to influence and steer has enabled to position itself as a frontrunner not only as a reliable partner in the region but also for championing regionalism in the South Asian region, having initiated SAARC and now a partner in BIMSTEC. The strength of its location is being buttressed by various development projects being undertaken for its ports, transport systems, and infrastructure, which turned Bangladesh into a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. This would be enhanced with its sectoral dialogue partnership in ASEAN and its plans to build direct physical connectivity with the region too. The simultaneous development of Bangladesh's growth story accompanied with its many achievements alongside the Bay of Bengal has lent

Bangladesh with an enviable identity as an able partner for the regional and extra regional powers. Bangladesh's ability to turnaround and effectively use its geographical position to its advantage has been rather fascinating and foretells its journey to greater engagement in global affairs.

Notes

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² Md. Mizanur Rahman, "Bangabandhu's dream of Sonar Bangla", *The Independent*, 03 March 2020, <https://m.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/239325>, accessed on 22 Dec 2021.

³ Ali Riaz & Saimum Parvez, "Anatomy of a Rigged Election in a Hybrid Regime: The Lessons From Bangladesh", *Democratization*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2021, pp. 801-820,

⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI) Report 2018, Bangladesh Country Report, 2019, <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/BGD>, accessed on 07 May 2019.

⁵ Mustafizzur Rahman, "Bangladesh: A Journey of Dual Graduation and the Attendant Challenges", in *Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges*, 2020, New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, p. 10.

⁶ "The land of impossible attainments", *bdnews24.com*, 14 June 2014, <https://bdnews24.com/economy/2014/06/21/the-land-of-impossible-attainments>, accessed on 21 Dec 2021.

⁷ "Bangladesh Outpaced India on Per Capita Income", *Wion News*, 21 May 2021, <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/bangladesh-outpaced-india-on-per-capita-income-386455>, accessed on 21 May 2021.

⁸ Sanjay Kathuria, "As Bangladesh Rises, Sri Lanka Finds India is Not the Only Neighbour with Deep Pockets", *The Wire*, 10 June 2021, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/bangladesh-sri-lanka-south-asia-india-deep-pockets>

⁹ Rehman Sobhan, Foreword in *Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges*, New Delhi, Orient Black Swan, 2020, p. XXVII.

¹⁰ Kathuria, "As Bangladesh Rises, Sri Lanka Finds India is Not the Only Neighbour with Deep Pockets".

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