

A Critical Review of Connectivity in BIMSTEC

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Abstract

BIMSTEC, which stands for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, is a sub-regional organization that links two important regions from a geopolitical and an economic point of view. However, the degree of connectedness among the member nations is quite low, which presents a significant challenge for the organization's growth. A proposed specific plan and project are implemented to improve connectivity. Out of the fourteen lists that make up the BIMSTEC areas of Cooperation, this paper focuses on the two most important areas of collaboration, which are as follows: Transportation & Communication and People-to-People Contact. The strategy and project to create greater physical connectedness and people-to-people contact are in this study, along with the obstacles that hinder the project's construction. In the future, the importance of building social relationships among the citizens of the member states, the free flow of people residing in the border areas, and the significance of political stability in Myanmar are all topics discussed in this study.

Keywords: BBIN, Connectivity, Kaladan, Regionalism, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Trilateral Highway

1. Introduction

Connectivity has come to the fore as one of the most significant breakthroughs of the 21st century. It has become a substantial part of modern politics and economics and reflects the rising demand for resources to be invested in bringing together communities, economies, and nations. Connectivity can be understood as 'connectedness' concerning the transit, trade, customs, and logistics processes. Creating a system for the link of transportation would make it possible for different modes of transport and different types of infrastructure to be efficiently interconnected. Landlocked nations lack access to the sea or maritime routes, amplified many times for bridging and transit countries and landlocked nations (*United Nations Report, 2012*). The most direct advantages of improved connection include increased accessibility, resulting from reduced travel time and expenditures.

Connecting with other states or individuals dates back to the beginning of human interaction and changes over time. Geopolitics has never attempted connectedness as a geopolitical strategy before, so it is a novelty in the present (Godehardt & Postel-Vinay, 2020). Connectedness and flow security have taken on a greater significance in today's world as a direct result of the significant growth and escalation of global connectivity and interactions that have been appropriated over the past decades. The modern world is more interconnected and more dependent on one another as a direct result of these two causes. This dependency is nearly unavoidable given that enormous quantities of goods, capital, knowledge, people, technical developments, and ideas move through virtually every state in the world in the modern-day (Ries, 2019). However, to properly evaluate the nature of these geopolitical results, it is necessary to consider the background of an environmental change. This situation is one in which the liberal international order, which has predominantly moulded global collaboration for the preceding decades, is being increasingly questioned. This environment is one in which the liberal international order has primarily shaped

global Cooperation. Forming connections randomly or responding to opportunities present is not the same as connecting. The state's investments in the infrastructure that realizes the link between it and other states express its decision to connect itself with other states. It includes investments made in both tangible and intangible forms of infrastructure. An example would be the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China in 2003 and the Act East Policy (AEP) of India.

Intending to create a regional community, South and Southeast Asia, in particular, has been focusing on improving and expanding its transportation infrastructure and better connectivity among the citizens. BIMSTEC, which stands for the Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, is an organization that links South Asia and Southeast Asia to promote economic development and prosperity throughout all of its member states. Since the grouping gets its name from the Bay of Bengal, which divides the two physical areas, all member states depend on the Bay of Bengal for trade, either directly or indirectly. The economy's growth and better connectivity between the member states have been the primary focus area of the BIMSTEC grouping from the beginning of the organization's existence. To this day, BIMSTEC has identified fourteen priority areas of Cooperation, and each member nation is responsible for either taking the lead or chairing one or two of these areas. Transport and Communication, as well as People-to-People Contact, are among the main areas of collaboration in BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC recognizes the importance of people-to-people contact and physical connectivity in constructing a regional organization. This article emphasized the concerns linked with transport and Communication, people-to-people connection in BIMSTEC, and the hurdles that need to be overcome in establishing more excellent physical connectivity and allowing free flow of people from one region to another.

2. Overview of BIMSTEC

Regarding geography, marine ecology, and maritime security, the Bay of Bengal has two adjacent waterways, the Malacca Straits and the Andaman Sea. As a result, leaders in South Asia and Southeast Asia have been discussing the formation of a Bay of Bengal community involving coastal nations. And Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC), later known as BIMSTEC, was established as an inter-regional organization in 1997 in Bangkok Declaration (Kundu, 2014).. The fundamental purpose of this train of thinking was to develop a closer relationship between the Bay countries along the seafront to strengthen collaboration. In later years, Nepal and Bhutan became members of the organization. Its name was subsequently renamed the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation and abbreviated as BIMSTEC to date. As BIMSTEC's primary goals relate to economic development, at the first Summit, held in Bangkok in 2004, members pledged to support the purpose and principles of BIST-EC, assess economic cooperation obstacles in our region and improve BIMSTEC's capability to overcome them. They also agree to concentrate on some areas of cooperative endeavours, such as but not limited to commerce and investments, energy, fisheries, human resource development, science and technology, tourism, and transport & communications (BIMSTEC, 2004). In addition, at the Eighth Ministerial Meeting, which took place in Dhaka on the 18th and 19th of December 2005, they boosted the number of priority areas up from six to thirteen. Agriculture, Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime, Cultural Cooperation, Environment & Disaster Management, People-to-People Contact, Poverty Alleviation, and Public

Health are the Seven New Priority Areas (*BIMSTEC*, n.d).. Furthermore, all the member states endorsed climate change for Inclusion as one of the priority areas at the thirteenth BIMSTEC Senior Ministerial Meeting, which was recommended at the eleventh BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting in November in New Delhi in 2008 (*BIMSTEC*, n.d).

On the other hand, one can realize that BIMSTEC focuses less on geopolitics and more on common regional economic and social growth issues by looking at the main sectors of collaboration. Because of this, the procedure ought to have moved along more quickly. BIMSTEC's 'Lead Country' or 'Chair Country' oversees the implementation of sector-relevant projects in each area in coordination with an Expert Group (Palit et al., 2018). India is the lead country in the transport & communication sector, whereas Thailand took the lead in people-to-people connectivity. Once again, participants at the Second Summit on November 13, 2008, highlighted the importance of transport and communication link in New Delhi, and they agreed to expand (*BIMSTEC*, 2008).. They acknowledged that increasing the connection between the Member States is an essential component of the BIMSTEC initiative, which will benefit the citizens of Member States through improved opportunities for commerce and investment, tourism, and people-to-people interactions. They highlight the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) as an essential first step in identifying obstacles and giving strategies to overcome them in this particular setting. They also decided that India would lead in establishing a BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks that will further increase efforts to improve people-to-people connections among our states (*BIMSTEC*, 2008).

3. Transport & Communication

In the present globalized world, transport & Communication are vital in trade and politics. As a result of BIMSTEC's establishment in 1997, Transportation and Communication have been one of the fourteen areas of Cooperation, and India leads this sector (*BIMSTEC*, 2019). The transport & communication sector is an essential part of the economy and a common means of promoting growth. High levels of development are frequently associated with dense transportation infrastructure and well-connected networks. In addition to providing economic and social benefits, efficient transportation networks improve access to markets and jobs, which leads to more investment and employment opportunities. The member states emphasized the necessity of increasing efforts toward the liberalization of air transportation, establishing highway and rail linkages, developing inland waterways, and expanding short-sea commerce. They took notice of the ADB's research on BTILS, acknowledging that multiple types of transport connections are essential for developing connectivity among the members to facilitate the free flow of products and people. In light of this, they emphasized the ADB to maintain close collaboration with the governments of the BIMSTEC member countries (*BIMSTEC*, 2006). The Asian Development Bank has suggested setting up the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG) to investigate and improve the connectivity between the member states (*SASEC*, 2016).

They first discussed Master Plan for Transport and Communication in Goa, India, at its leaders' retreat in 2016. During the 15th BIMSTEC ministerial meeting, the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG) was asked to draft the Master Plan for Transport and Communication (MPTC). Later, BTCWG handed it over to the Asia Development Bank to create an MPTC as a part of the technical assistance during the second meeting of the BTCWG in Bangkok in

2017 (*Asian Development Bank, 2022*). The Master Plan was completed, in its entirety, on December 8, 2020. During the fifth Summit, which took place on March 30, 2022, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, a participant from different states endorsed the BIMSTEC-MPTC, per the recommendation made by the Ministerial Meeting (*BIMSTEC, 2022*). The purpose of the Master Plan is to act as a guide for arranging a collection of policies, strategies, and initiatives to achieve a consensus on what constitutes sustainable peace, prosperity, and the preservation of natural resources. Among the projects in the MPTC project for BIMSTEC are 19 arterial link projects to improve ports and borders connections, three port access road upgrades, ten rail connectivity projects to improve port connectivity (Dry Ports, Borders, and Hinterlands), and sixteen rail connectivity projects (for landlocked member states) (*Asian Development Bank, 2022*).

Some major on-going connectivity projects are the Kaladan Multimodal Project (which connects India and Myanmar by sea route), the Trilateral Highway (for physical connectivity between South and Southeast Asia), and the Motor Vehicles Agreement of Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal, to name a few.

3.1 Kaladan Multimodal Projects

In 2003, an Indian consulting firm known as M/s Rail India Technical and Economic Services Private Limited (RITES) came up with the idea for the project to connect India and Myanmar by the sea. As a result, in April 2008, India and Myanmar signed an agreement formalizing the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (*Ministry of Development Northeastern Region, 2018*). The Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project is an important sea route project that India and Myanmar jointly implement to facilitate cargo transportation across the border between India and Myanmar via sea. The project's name comes from the Kaladan River, which is located in Myanmar and is a vital interior waterway (Bhagal, 2018). The planned project was supposed to link Kolkata to Sittwe port in Myanmar by shipping – 539 kilometres, Sittwe to Paletwa by inland water transport (IWT) in the Kaladan River – 158 kilometres, Paletwa to the Indo-Myanmar Border by road – 110 kilometres, and from the Indo-Myanmar Border to National Highway 54 in Lawngtlai, Mizoram – 100 kilometres (*Ministry of Development Northeastern Region, 2018*). There is considerable potential in the Kaladan project to develop better connectivity between India and Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, which is essential for a more significant economic relationship and greater people-to-people movement. In addition, it offers an economical, commercial, and strategic link to the Northeast for India, relieving pressure on the Siliguri Corridor. It will also contribute to Myanmar's development and economic integration with India. With Sittwe port, its largest market, consisting of the Irrawaddy basin's most densely populated districts and Yangon, can be reached more quickly (Shekar & Phukan, 2008).

However, there are many challenges to completing the whole plan project, even after an investment of approximately 134 million USD and the reconstruction of the Sittwe Port in Myanmar capable of accommodating large cargo ships and handed the port back to Myanmar in December of 2018 (Bhaumik, 2020). One of the essential issues associated with this project is the proposed deadline to complete the whole project. It keeps changing; 2014 was the initial deadline but changed to 2021, and now it has been altered to 2023 (Dutta, 2021). The problem of ensuring the workers' safety is another aspect to consider. The Arakan insurgent group abducted an RK-RPP joint ventures team in November 2019 while conducting a reconnaissance mission in the

region between Paletwa and Kaletwa, heading toward Zorinpui. While stationed at an Arakan Army base camp, a company engineer suffered a fatal heart arrest and passed away (Dutta, 2021). Following the military takeover in February 2021, the difficulties in maintaining safety and security became more severe. Despite soliciting bids for the construction of this road, it is unclear whether anyone will accept the contract due to safety concerns. In addition, the government of India's decision to terminate its agreement with EPIL and C&C and to choose the Indian Railway Construction Company Limited (IRCON) as the agency to construct the Kaladan Project could further delay the deadline (Seli, 2022). It's also feared that the Kaladan Project might increase the illegal trafficking of narcotics, guns, and other items. From Sittwe Port onward to the Indo-Myanmar border, Myanmar is in charge of cargo security. This route essentially serves the Indian mainland; any unlawful commerce could prompt retaliation from Myanmar (Bhaumik, 2020).

3.2 Asian Trilateral Highway

For a more prosperous trade and Cooperation, improving all connectivity and physical connectivity, in particular, is imperative. The idea of a trilateral highway that would pass through Myanmar and reach Moreh near the border of Myanmar in India to Mae Sot, an important city in the west of Thailand, was discussed for the first time in Yangon, Myanmar, at the Trilateral Ministerial Meeting on Transport Linkages in 2002 (Yhome, 2017). As part of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit of 2012, participants agreed that the Trilateral Highway (TLH) would extend to the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Cambodia to strengthen bilateral relations (*Maritime Gateway*, 2020). This highway will play a vital role in trade and commerce among the members, connecting India and Thailand, the two fastest-growing economies in the BIMSTEC grouping. It is not a secret that Myanmar is anxious to improve its ties with countries in its immediate vicinity to act as a link among South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China, taking advantage of its advantageous location. Myanmar will serve as a land bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia on the Trilateral Highway, making it the first global initiative to connect these regions (*ERIA*, 2022). For India, Trilateral Highway is a part of the New Delhi Act East Policy (AEP) and robust engagement with the BIMSTEC connectivity plan and project. The highway has the potential to be a game changer for small states, particularly Manipur, as well as other north eastern states that lack connectivity with mainland India regarding their economies and connectivity. Thailand views TLH growth and ties with India as a strategy to maximize the benefits to the country because of its Thai-centric orientation. In addition, because of its role as a regional transportation and communication centre and a gateway to ASEAN, Beijing sees excellent potential in the TLH for the country. As a result, Thailand is working on expanding its logistics network by using the Thailand-Myanmar-India -TLH route to transport goods to India (*ERIA*, 2022). As the trilateral highway project aims to improve connectivity between South and Southeast Asia countries, Dhaka expressed interest in joining the project at the virtual India-Bangladesh summit in December 2020 (Rajagopalan, 2021). Trade with BIMSTEC and other South and Southeast Asia nations is likely to rise due to these developments.

The on-going IMT trilateral highway project has many challenges to complete and function as per the planned project. Originally anticipated that the IMT highway would be finished by 2015, but the deadline was pushed back to 2020 (Yhome, 2017). They then extended the deadline to 2021 (*Maritime Gateway*, 2020), but 2021 has already passed, and many areas are still unfinished. The

unfinished road construction from Imphal to Moreh would be an example. So, the Continuing delayed deadlines of the project are one major factor of challenges. In addition, one of the significant issues or challenges is the political instability in Myanmar. Following the military coup, there was a rising conflict between the People's Defence Force (PDF) and the Military Junta, making it unclear if IMT trilateral highway could be completed on time. The project will not be able to go forward without both sides' consent, and even if completed, its function remains uncertain.

3.3 Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN MVA)

On June 15, 2015, in Thimpu, Bhutan, Road & Transport ministers from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, signed an agreement known as the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN-MVA) (*Nepal Foreign Affairs, 2015*). The purposes and objectives of the BBIN-MVA, a sub-regional deal, were to develop a regulation for the passenger, personal and vehicular freight traffic between them (Nayak, 2022). This MVA will further augment economic development and integrate the process among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal. It will also open the door for the uncontrolled flow of people and trade across their boundaries. The agreement identifies 30 priority transport connectivity projects that will rehabilitate and modernize the remaining sections of trade and transport corridors, with an estimated cost of eight billion (*Nepal Foreign Affairs, 2015*). The ADB pledges to offer technical and professional assistance in the latest BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement meeting on 7th -8th March 2022 in New Delhi. As a result, the delegates establish a consensus on specific steps and deadlines to expeditiously conclude the Passenger and Cargo Protocols in advance of the BBIN MVA (*Ministry of External Affairs, 2022*).

Although, the MVA proposed plan is to reduce transportation costs and improve connectivity between the four countries by developing multi-modal transportation facilities. The Upper House of Bhutan voted in opposition to Bhutan's joining the accord and expressed concern about the environmental impacts of allowing many vehicles into the country after ratifying the pact since environmental safeguard is part of Bhutan's four pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Furthermore, they worry that a free flow of people could allow insurgents to scoundrel into Bhutan or infiltrate India through its territory (*Firstpost, 2016*). In the last meeting in New Delhi, Bhutan joined as an observer. Moreover, it is necessary to solve several problems to put the BBIN MVA into effect effectively. These challenges include a lack of infrastructure, particularly at designated border points, and the need to harmonize legislation and customs procedures. Moreover, Small transport operators and truck owners in the four countries are concerned that implementing the BBIN MVA will favour large logistics companies that can take advantage of economies of scale, forcing the smaller companies to go out of business (Chatterjee, 2020).

4. People-to-People Connectivity

The term 'people-to-people contact' refers to interactions between ordinary men of two or more countries at various levels without any prohibition or hindrance to the free flow of people. People-to-people contact helps us to learn about other people's perspectives and can help alleviate negative feelings toward others' opinions and ideas. Building a good relationship between people from different countries can assist leaders from both sides in maintaining a good relationship. The social enmity between the people of India and Pakistan would be an example of how a bad social relationship spoils the bilateral relationship. The BIMSTEC grouping recognized the importance of

people-to-people contact in strengthening the Cooperation between the members and for trade and economic prosperity. The people-to-People connection was a part of fourteen areas of BIMSTEC Cooperation. Initially, Thailand has offered to adopt the role of the leading country to take the initiative in encouraging people-to-people relations and has planned to organize a visit to Royal projects in northern Thailand for member nations (*BIMSTEC, 2006*). However, Nepal is the lead or Chair country in the People-to-People Contact area of Cooperation. Endorsing the importance of people-to-people contact, all members agreed to put more effort into this area and decided that India takes the lead to set up a BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT) (*BIMSTEC, 2008*). 'BNPTT consists of seven leading policy think tanks, one from each Member State nominated by the respective Governments' (*Ministry of External Affairs, 2019*). They will organize regular consultations and programmes to intensify contact between the Member States. Additionally, they agreed on several other actions, including facilitating travels through the BIMSTEC Exemption Scheme and the BIMSTEC Business Visa Scheme to promote people-to-people exchanges and linkages among the BIMSTEC Member States (*BIMSTEC, 2014*).

Despite acknowledging the significance of people-to-people connectivity with continuous effort and agreement among the members in and outside the Summit, the idea of protectionism from an outsider is still in people's minds in South and Southeast Asia. Bhutan abstained from BBIN MVA, and the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is an example of the issues and challenges of fostering people-to-people contact between the BIMSTEC member countries' citizens. An isolated or exclusionary policy towards a particular community isn't ideal for a state because it can hurt its communities living in other states or countries. Building a good relationship or connectivity among citizens from different countries requires an inclusive approach to welcoming them. The conflict involving Rohingya Muslim and Buddhist communities in Rakhine state, Burma, is a prime example of the hatred between ethnic and religious groups in Southeast Asia. Large numbers of Burmese Muslims are leaving the nation, which is detrimental to the relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar. In addition, certain countries, such as Bhutan, are unwilling to admit many people from neighbouring countries. As a result of concerns that unrestricted movement would undermine Bhutan's tourism industry, it withdrew from the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement (MBVA) to protect its tourism sector (*Firstpost, 2016*).

5. Way Forward

Each member state must show a strong political will to enhance connectivity. By formulating a policy or employing a protectionist idea in domestic affairs, a state will not be able to work out connectivity projects with neighbouring states. To improve connectivity and integration, members of BIMSTEC countries should emphasize and ease the VISAs with which people from various backgrounds and professions can travel. For example, transforming the BIMSTEC VISA exemption scheme, which currently only covers BIMSTEC officials and diplomats, into a BIMSTEC Common VISA scheme open to all people, would make people-to-people contacts much more accessible. It is only after people from different sections of society have a good connection that better connectivity and Cooperation can appear, and the inclusive policies of all states matter here. Every plan and project goal is for the welfare and growth of the citizens, so the holistic feeling must instigate first in the people's minds. There are people culturally and linguistically of the same ethnicity but separated by artificial international boundaries. Therefore, to improve people-to-

people contact, the governments on both sides should consider or relax the travel restrictions of some ethnic communities crossing the border. In addition, maintaining strict vigilance in certain areas that can impede mutual trust among member countries, such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling, is critical.

On the other hand, the Inclusion of education as part of priorities areas of Cooperation would be a step forward in collaboration and connectivity among the members, rather than putting more effort in exchange for higher education bilaterally. Every group with an economic viewpoint will tell you that the Free Trade Agreement is the foundational basis for economic progress. Some states that are highly dependent on the Chinese economy face a problem during and against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bhowmik, 2020). As a result, the long-pending BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) since the first Summit in 2004 needs to be implemented or brought into force to enhance trade relations among the members to become economically self-sufficient.

The political unrest in Myanmar represents another obstacle that may prevent the successful completion of the essential physical connectivity project as per the deadline. When General Khin Nyunt was the Prime Minister of Myanmar, he halted Trilateral Highway until 2011 (ERIA, 2022). So, if the political upheaval in Myanmar does not wane, there is a possibility that it will put the Kaladan Project and the IMT-Trilateral Highway Project on hold. As a result, India, Thailand, and the other countries that are members of BIMSTEC ought to investigate potential solutions to the political upheaval in Myanmar. Although it may not be easy, it can be helpful in one way or another. Furthermore, including Bangladesh as part of the Trilateral Highway will significantly improve connectivity among BIMSTEC members and between South and Southeast Asia.

6. Conclusion

Connectivity is the glue that holds any organization and association together and serves as the foundation for increased Cooperation among its member nations. Since its formation, the BIMSTEC organization has primarily emphasized integrating South and Southeast Asian economies. Connectivity can take the form of either physical or non-physical interaction. In the current global context, establishing relationships and the formulation of foreign policy both depend heavily on the degree to which people are connected physically through means such as roads and trains. The degree of physical connectedness between countries is another factor that influences the free flow of products and people. Some of the most critical projects that the BIMSTEC has undertaken to improve the region's physical connectivity are the Kaladan Project, the IMT-Trilateral Highway, and the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement. So, if all of these projects and agreements are entirely executed and operate as intended, members of BIMSTEC will have the opportunity to stimulate economic growth.

However, in terms of transportation, developing nations face a double obstacle: first, they must guarantee that all of their citizens have access to mobility that is effective, safe, and inexpensive; second, they must significantly reduce their impact on the environment (World Bank, 2022). Likewise, although BIMSTEC developed a plan and project to improve connectivity among its members, some members chose not to participate in specific areas plans or projects, either for environmental reasons or out of concern about the influx of foreign citizens. In addition, smaller

states worry that larger states will dominate them, and there aren't enough projects involving all members to create physical connections between them.

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