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SPECIAL ESSAY

Regional transport connectivity: Unlocking opportunities

DR. M. RAHMATULLAH

THE North Eastern sub-region of South Asia, comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and NE Indian States inherited an integrated transport infrastructure from the British, but this was fractured not only by the partition of India but by its political aftermath and now needs to be integrated again to promote

consequences

So far, the regional connectivity between Bangladesh and the neighbouring countries namely Nepal, Bhutan and NE-India has not been very satisfactory. As a result, all the countries have been losing a great deal in many fronts. For example,

- A container takes 35 days to move from New Delhi to Dhaka, as the

partly through Kaladan River and partly by road. This would be quite an expensive alternative for India to have access to NE-India via Kolkata Port, Sittwe port, Kaladan River and road, as an alternative to the existing route through the chicken neck. If there was transport cooperation with Bangladesh, India could have used a much shorter route across Bangladesh.

linkages already exist.

The European Union and, to a lesser degree, ASEAN were both successful in moving their own respective regional processes forward essentially because the peoples of those countries were convinced that such cooperation was in their larger interest, and this translated to the leadership level through the domestic and regional political dynamics that gradually strengthened a sense of regional identity.

Bangladesh and its neighbouring countries could benefit considerably, if transport connectivity is conceived in the subregional context, to link effectively the countries, namely Nepal, Bhutan and NE-India (See Map-1). Bangladesh is fortunate to have two sea ports and potential for developing another deep-sea port. But the development of such a deep-sea port can be justified only if there is a sub-regional patronage. If connectivity is provided to all the hinterland countries and territories, Bangladesh could benefit greatly by trading with those countries in "transport services".

Currently, it has large trade deficit with India. Trading in "transport services" with India could reduce this deficit. In this context, it is crucial to understand clearly that these "transport services" will have no market elsewhere outside this sub-region. At the same time it is also important to recognize that these opportunities of trading in transport services may not continue for long. The matter, therefore, deserves urgent attention of the policy makers and the Governments concerned. If all relevant issues could be negotiated properly with the neighbouring countries, Bangladesh could emerge as a "transport hub" of the sub-

region which could have provided Nepal direct access to Mongla port. Since the present road link between Kathmandu and Mongla is very long, it is proposed to promote the following shorter rail route which could be more cost-effective for regional traffic.

Rail Route 1: Birgunj-Raxaul-Katihar-Singhabad/Rohanpur-Ishwardi-Khulna, with a road link of 38 km to Mongla Port (Approx. 980 km)

This rail route (See Map-1) would provide Nepal traffic an alternative direct BG access to Bangladesh port of Mongla. Compared to road link through Banglabandha which is 1314 km to Mongla, this rail route will be less than 1000 km, and could provide a cost-effective service, vis-à-vis trucking. A "Multilateral rail transport agreement" would however, be needed, besides addressing the problems of incompatibility of standards to facilitate smooth movement across the border.

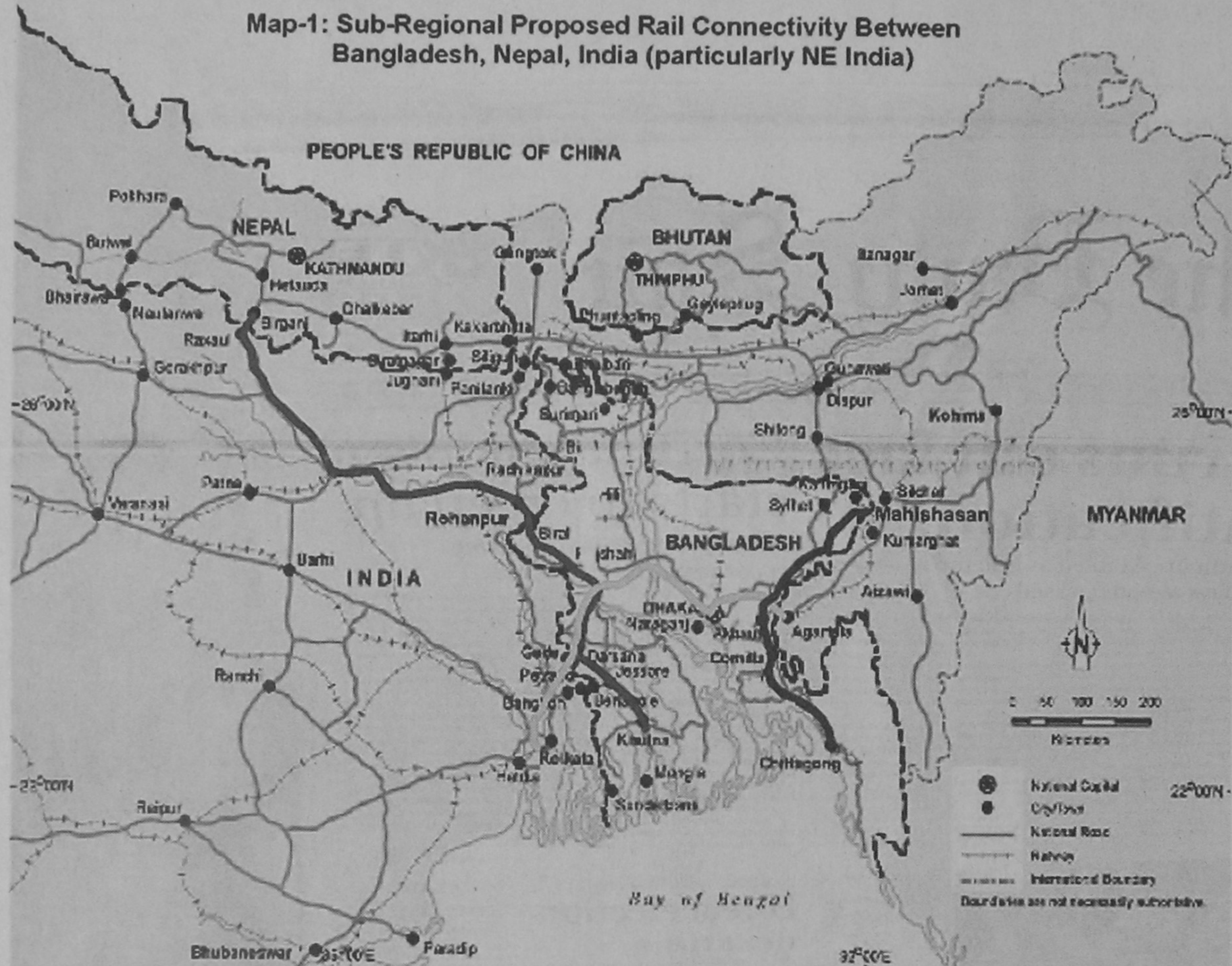
Connectivity between NE India-Bangladesh

At present, there is no direct connectivity between NE-India and Bangladesh. Since distance involved would be substantial and type of commodities likely to move would be heavy, it is proposed to re-commission the following rail connectivity through Shahbazzpur/Mahishasan which has not been in use for several years.

Rail Route 2: Badarpur (Karimganj)-Mahishasan/Shahbazzpur-Kulaura-Akhaura-Chittagong (with an 8 km rail link to Agartala)

This rail route (See Map-1) would provide the NE Indian states, a direct access of around 600-700 km to Bangladesh port of Chittagong. This route would provide more than 60% savings in travel distance compared to the route to Kolkata through "Chicken neck". The Kulaura-Mahishasan rail link needs to be re-commissioned before train operation could start. Until such time that Badarpur Mahishasan section is converted to Broad Gauge (BG) and Shahbazzpur-Kulaura-Akhaura-Chittagong section is converted from MG to Dual gauge (DG), transshipment facilities shall have to be installed at Badarpur to transfer contain-

Map-1: Sub-Regional Proposed Rail Connectivity Between Bangladesh, Nepal, India (particularly NE India)



regional cooperation. This integration is crucial to countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and to North East India (NE-India), as the integrated system could serve to end their landlocked or semi-isolated status and provide shorter transport links to their desired destinations including access to sea ports.

The intra-regional trade in South Asia is still around 5% of the total trade, compared to 45% in East Asia and 26% in ASEAN sub-region, despite the fact that South Asia has been having around 6% growth per year. This is happening despite the fact that tremendous potential exists to enhance such trade, for which the political environment needs to be supportive and transport network integrated with access to sea ports for landlocked countries and territories.

Considering the unique geographic location of Bangladesh, having the above named land-locked countries and territories, at its hinterland, a strategy which could greatly benefit all the countries involved, would be to conceive connectivity in a sub-regional context. Bangladesh could then negotiate for Nepal and Bhutan's third country traffic to have access to Bangladesh ports of Mongla and Chittagong. This strategy could create a win-win situation for all countries involved, and provide a "unique opportunity" to Bangladesh to establish itself as the "Transport hub" for the sub-region.

Poor regional connectivity and its

maritime route is via Bombay and Singapore/ Colombo to Chittagong Port and then by rail to Dhaka. But the same container could have reached Dhaka within 3-4 days, if New Delhi and Dhaka had direct rail services.

- India allowed a transit between Nepal and Bangladesh across the "Chicken neck" and Banglabandha, but for bilateral trade only, and not for the third country trade of Nepal, which now has to pass through already congested Kolkata port. If transport cooperation was there, Nepal could have used Mongla port in Bangladesh, which has spare capacity.
- The shipment of Assam tea to Europe is required to travel 1400 km to reach Kolkata port through the "Chicken neck", since no agreement exists for India to use the traditional route through Chittagong port which could have been shorter by 60%.
- The Southern border of Tripura State is only 75 km from Chittagong port, but goods from Agartala are required to travel 1645 km to reach Kolkata port through the "Chicken neck". If there were transport cooperation between Bangladesh and India, goods would have traveled only around 400 km across Bangladesh to reach Kolkata.
- India and Myanmar are jointly implementing "Kaladan project" to link Sittwe port of Myanmar with Mizoram,

Bangladesh and its close door neighbours should try to address these expensive consequences of non-cooperation in transport. Appropriate transport connectivity could perhaps resolve many of the problems indicated above, and bring in a win-win situation for all.

Improved regional connectivity could make Bangladesh a "transport hub"

The surface transport networks in the North Eastern sub-region of South Asia still continue to remain fragmented due to various historical, political and economic reasons. As a result the potential of the transport system as the engine of economic growth at the sub-regional level remains largely unrealised. This is happening despite the fact that the basic infrastructure and facilities to establish mutually beneficial intra- and inter-regional transport

region comprising Nepal, Bhutan and NE-India. The end result could create a win-win situation for all countries involved.

Need to focus on a few strategic routes for connectivity, and improve facilitation measures

Although many of the infrastructures are in place in the sub-region around Bangladesh, considering resource constraints, it is crucial that attention is focused on a limited number of strategic routes to provide efficient connectivities to Nepal, Bhutan and NE-India.

Connectivity between Nepal-Bangladesh

The present connection is by road through Kakarvita in Nepal, Phulbari in India, and Banglabandha in Bangladesh. Currently very little bilateral traffic moves along this route. Third country traffic of Nepal is not allowed to use this

ers/freights between BG and MG. To facilitate smooth train operation along the route, bilateral/multilateral rail transport agreement shall have to be developed and adopted, besides introduction of simplified customs procedures and IT data transfer facilities.

Connectivity between India-Bangladesh-NE India by Rail

At present there is no direct connectivity by road or rail between India-Bangladesh-NE India for goods or passengers except the limited rail operation for passenger traffic between Kolkata-Dhaka which started on April 14, 2008. For movement of goods by road, goods are transshipped at the border between Bangladesh and Indian trucks. In case of railway, Indian goods train carrying Bangladeshi imports come up to the border station, and Bangladesh Railway (BR) locomotives pull Indian wagons inside up to designated locations on the West side

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