

FROM PAGE 8

Pankaj Tandon, Member, Confederation of Indian Industry and Vice President, KEC International Limited

Bangladesh and India are not very different. For example, tele-density is almost the same between these two countries. Disparity of size and resources of any country should not be considered as a constraint. Within that geography, the biggest potential should be harnessed.

We need to focus on access to market and its network, which also improves production networks. Market expansion, relative cost efficiency, and perception development are key. We have many successful stories within Bangladesh by Indian investors, so we need to think about why they should not be inspired to attract others.

Dr. Arif Dowla, Managing Director, ACI Limited

We should not look at only two countries but all the interlinkage with respect to the world. Instead of optimising each bilateral relationship, we need to try to optimise global opportunities. This requires a high level of connectivity which we don't have now. India, Bangladesh and this region have to realise that we are far behind in terms of per capita global trade participation. Other regions (ASEAN or the Americas) are going beyond their geographical border to increase competitiveness. By being myopic, we lose out. We have to align our incentives according to that global logic of being more competitive. For example, an important product like fish feed that Northeast India needs come from South India, travelling thousands of miles. Instead of doing that, Bangladesh could easily export it to them, but we aren't being able to do so because of the 30 percent duty imposed on us. By doing so, India and the whole region is losing out on the benefit of the product and overall competitiveness.

The labs that check the quality of products are not situated on the land ports, so all the products and samples have to be taken from there to the respective labs in Khulna and other places. During that time, trucks will be waiting for 7-15 days. The products that are coming through land are bulky products and not high margin businesses. So at the end of the day, you have 4 percent profitability. This delay increases cost of doing business by 2 percent.

Nitya Nanda, Fellow, The Energy and Resources Institute, India

Domestic reforms in the energy sector are important to promote cooperation. Cooperation happens when you have total grid integration. Previously, India did not have any national grids, we had regional grids. If Bangladesh is integrated with more number of regional grids and can develop different types of demand profiles, efficiency will be improved. Also BBIN grid is possible. One more option is to connect to Myanmar and South East Asia, not only in terms of electricity, but also with the ambition of a gas grid in South East Asia.

Prof. M. Tamim, Dept. of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Engineering, BUET

We had to wait for 30 years for India and Bangladesh to exchange electricity. In this region, political unwillingness has been a major barrier, but this has changed over the last ten years. We have seen developments. But the mistrust is to some extent there. The common problem between India and Bangladesh is primary energy requirement. This whole region is a net importer of energy, but regional balance and equilibrium can easily be achieved through regional cooperation.

There is a gasline from Assam to Pragatipur which requires 130 km pipeline of diesel import, but the issue of pipeline handling charge is also there. These are the commercial aspects that need to be resolved. Any deal that is not commercially viable will not work.

Mahfuz Anam

Another example of India Bangladesh cooperation is Rampal Power Plant. However, there has been criticism against that from the civil society because of environmental effects. What are your views on that?

M Tamim

We need to understand that if we put in all the control measures demanded by the environmentalists, including the cost of production of electricity, the cost of production might increase to 10 taka per kwh. Coal has been chosen taken into account the concern for sustainable, affordable power for people. Having said that, it definitely is sad that the site selected for the power plant is Sundarbans.

Mustafizur Rahman

Since the power plant is near the Sundarbans, people are sensitive to that being a UNESCO heritage site. There undoubtedly are concerns about the effects it will have on the Sundarbans. People are concerned not because India is investing in this project, but because it will be situated in the Sundarbans. The second thing that we have been hearing from the policy makers is that there will be some control system there. The middle way should be that there will be an independent committee who will monitor the implementation, to determine whether it is harmful or not and to ensure quality.

OPEN DISCUSSION

Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury, Strategic Analyst

Just 15 days back Rajdhani Express



Finance Minister AMA Muhith speaking at the second session. Other Panelists of the session, from left to right, Syed Munir Khasru, Shahedul Anam Khan, Smruti S Pattanaik, Imtiaz Ahmed, Suhasini Haidar, Ainun Nishat, Ashok Malik.

Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, Minister, Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh

The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India is enjoying its best time ever in history. It has been translated into practical action, and various joint initiatives are going on that will benefit both the neighbours.

Border trade, whether legally permitted or not, goes on in its own way. We took the initiative of establishing border haats to boost trade through formal channels. But it has not expanded in a big way. We need to emphasise on this initiative and establish more and more border haats.

Bangladesh needs to bring China and India into a dialogue because both the countries have immense importance in the development of Bangladesh as well as that of the South Asian region. We have a plan to invite both these countries to take part in the development of the Paira Port, which has the potential of being one of the best ports in the region. Currently, construction of connecting roads between Dhaka and Paira Port is going on.

The issue of access of Bangladeshi channels to India remains unresolved. The high tax rate imposed by the Indian authority indirectly discourages Bangladeshi channels to enter the Indian market. This barrier needs to be removed.

Bangladesh does not enjoy the same weight in Indian foreign policy as China and Pakistan do. We need to showcase our progress and potential to India so that they can feel the importance of Bangladesh as an important neighbour. Recently, the Dutch government has taken an initiative to hold the Bangladesh Exhibition in their country to boost trade between these two countries. We can expect similar initiatives from our Indian counterparts.

started a new express train from Silchar to Calcutta to Delhi. If we have Silchar connected to Dhaka and Khulna, and if we can build the Padma Bridge, it will further reduce the distance and will offer a new dimension.

Dr Ainun Nishat

My worry is not if the coal comes from Poland or India. My worry is the quality of the coal. If it is high sulphur coal, then we have a lot to worry. The second issue is the technology that is used in the Rampal project is dirty technology. Many of the issues have not been clarified by the government, for example the transportation of coal. Exactly what is happening should be monitored by a neutral commission who will certify the government's claims and inspect the mechanism and technology used by the government.

Rehman Sobhan

I am referring to the comment made by Mr. Dowla. If India is bringing fish feed from 1500 miles to the North East, then presumably the company could supply across the border. Surely this is opening up a new logic for location and investment. But at the end of the day, the issue of transit through Bangladesh to Northeast India is itself very bad economics. If you have good connectivity and open trading regime between India and Bangladesh, Bangladeshi and Indian investors who are interested in serving the Northeastern market should be locating their plants in areas like Comilla and Chittagong, instead of bringing their products from all the way from the remote regions of India. Considering the business proposition where you are interested in maximising your profit, would it not make sense to Indian businessmen to rethink the location and supply strategy? So that the real integration of markets should be between Northeast India and the eastern region of Bangladesh. There is a need for both sides to have a complete change on perspective on the whole debate of transit into one optimising location and economic cooperation.

I would like to endorse the comment about Silchar because this is one access that has not been looked at very carefully. Silchar has been emerging as a major road and rail hub for India. The east-west highway which stretches from East to Gujrat starts at Silchar. Linking of Sylhet and Silchar, and the infrastructure on both sides of the borders should be prioritised. That should be a future focus area as this would help the northern valley of Bangladesh and will help address many other problems.

M Tamim

Regarding the coal issue, the Indian regulator recently put on a new regula-

tory restriction which says that only imported coal produced electricity could be sent to Bangladesh. That is why the additional 500 megawatt that we have waiting for is being deferred. Because Indian coal is relatively cheaper and imported coal is much more expensive. But there is a wholesale trading going on in India and eventually, we have to have an energy trading company in Bangladesh so that we can purchase our long term and short term power from there.

SESSION II
Strategic Affairs : Border & Security, Water & Environment, Regional & Multilateral Issues

MODERATOR:
Syed Munir Khasru

Brig. Gen. (Retd.) Shahedul Anam, Associate Editor, The Daily Star

We need to manage the border rather than control it. Fencing of the Bangladesh-India border started in 1987. More than 85% of the fencing has been completed and the remaining 15% involves riverine territory. However, illegal movement is still there. The movement across borders is not unidirectional. If people are moving from Bangladesh to India then there are people who are moving from India to Bangladesh as well. We need to facilitate movement across border legally. Let people behave in the manner that they are used to before the line was drawn, before the border fence was erected. Let normal lives go on, otherwise more problems are going to be created. There is also the issue of smuggling of small arms and drugs from India to Bangladesh. A large number of small arms and phesedyl factories have cropped up in the border areas of India.

Smruti S Pattanaik, Research Fellow, Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA)

There are some vulnerable areas at the border that are prone to illegal migration and smuggling. These areas need to be patrolled more. There are also hilly areas where during the rainy season, landslides hamper roads and fences in such a way that it becomes really difficult to patrol. The border forces should identify these vulnerable areas through regular meetings and take patrolling measures accordingly.

Unfortunately, the people who are killed at the border are usually carriers, not actual businessmen involved with cattle smuggling. But I am not justifying the type of killing that is happening. Therefore, if we want to avoid this kind of situation, joint

patrolling should be increased.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed, Dept. of International Relations, University of Dhaka

When it comes to regional understanding in South Asia, we need to understand why SAARC failed and EU succeeded, although they had France and Germany fighting three great wars. Immediately after the Second World War, EU leadership looked into something that was in abundance. They found out that they had coal and steel in abundance in Europe which contributed to the war machinery. So they brought France and Germany under a kind of framework and started coal and steel organisation. When we started SAARC, we did not look into this philosophy of abundance which Europeans followed during the formation of the EU. What do we have in abundance in South Asia? What we have in abundance is human beings - 1.5 billion of them. That should have been where we should have invested. I believe you need to invest on each and every person in South Asia.

In the eighteenth century, China was the largest economy in the world. Undivided India was the second largest economy in the world. We lost out in the nineteenth and the twentieth century. China could come up too fast because it is a continental country. On the other hand, we are a continental region; we got divided into nation states. If you want to go back to 18th century and become number two you need to go back to this kind of a formation, where you will not have a conflict zone. In the 21st Century, how do we do that? In the age of globalisation, you cannot territorialise yourself by thinking that problem is yours alone. We are very good when it comes to being a Bangladeshi, Indian or Sri-Lankan. But it is very difficult to be a South Asian. How can you pull SAARC unless you realise your South Asian identity? In order to make regionalism work, we need to get out of that narrow nationalism.

Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic & Strategic Affairs Editor, The Hindu

The Hindu and The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) conducted a survey in India in 2003 where we asked, which is the country that you as an Indian trust the least in the region. We all expected them to say Pakistan, actually the result was Bangladesh. Ten years later in 2013, we did another survey. At this time, when asked which country India should trust, 48 percent chose Bangladesh. This was the highest figure, higher than the US or Russia. This is a result of a change in the governments' attitude on terrorism and rhetoric at a political level. Today the India-Bangladesh relationship is seen as a template for other countries in the region.

India is a constantly growing market that needs more labour; jobs are not being stolen from Indian citizens by Bangladeshi migrants. It is more important to cooperate for human rights of South Asians in the Gulf than competing against each other.

I also believe that the media in all SAARC countries, including India and Bangladesh in particular, need to have a lot more joint papers, joint writing in order to take this relationship forward.

Dr. Ainun Nishat, Professor Emeritus, Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research, BRAC University

I will push for basin wide management of our joint rivers which is also the political instruction of the day. The river should be regarded as a party in the negotiation where we have to ensure minimum environmental flow of the river.

Navigation is the cheapest mode of transport for non-perishable bulk good. Railway offers the next cheapest option but road transport is the most expensive mode of transport for any nation. It takes Tk. 6-7 to carry one tonne of goods over 1km by road, Tk. 2.75-3 by rail and Tk. 0.95 by water.

India is developing a navigation route between central India to Calcutta and Haldia in the Ganges system. My proposition is why not consider this extension to bring Bangladesh in the network? Navigational facilities will also be the answer to many environmental concerns if properly maintained and designed.

Ashok Malik, Distinguished Fellow & Head of Neighbourhood Regional Studies Initiative, Observer Research Foundation (ORF)

Every water related project in Northeast India has a clear buy in from Bangladesh; these projects can-

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve and standardise the customs at land ports.
- Set up an independent committee to monitor and disseminate key findings on bilateral initiatives like transit facilities, Rampal power plant, etc.
- Consider Sylhet-Silchar as a future priority for rail connectivity.
- Export goods from Bangladesh rather than transporting goods to North-East India from other far off regions of India.
- Facilitate regional cooperation beyond economics to increase competitiveness as both India and Bangladesh fall behind in terms of per capita global trade participation.
- Make the trading system more efficient through greater integration in the global value chain.
- Set up an energy trading company in Bangladesh and also a regional power trading market.
- Manage the border rather than control it.
- Arrange transit pass for movement of migrant workers.
- Take basin wide management and planning for common rivers.
- Separate political and technical bodies for solving river issues. Water needs to be used judiciously and priced well in both India and Bangladesh.
- Establish more hospitals and facilities around the border. Borders should be seen as a hub of economic activities.
- Organise a conference to bring China, India and Bangladesh together to address some of the future challenges.

not be facilitated without cooperation with Bangladesh. The evacuation of hydro potential in North East India is only possible through Bangladesh. That's why there is little scope for India to neglect Bangladesh on the trans-boundary water sharing issue. On the Teesta River, Bangladesh should work closely with the West Bengal government. Since the election is over, Mamata Banerjee will be more conducive to a mutual solution of the problem.

Rather than focusing on the quantity of water being allocated, our focus should be on efficient use of water and value of the water. Efficiency of our water use is only 40%. That

means more than half the water is wasted. Lack of data on hydrology has caused this wastage. Sector wise allocation of water is necessary for use of water to be efficient.

Syed Munir Khasru

There is a general feeling in the public domain that given our size and resources and the extent we have gone out to reach our Indian friends on a reciprocal level, we receive a little less than what we deserve to get, whether it is water sharing or it is stopping killing at the border. How would you see this in terms of reciprocation from the Indian side?

Smruti S Pattanaik

I would say that cooperation between India and Bangladesh has improved over time, especially after 2011. I think frequent meetings and information sharing between the District Collectors of India and District Commissioners of Bangladesh have improved the situation at the border areas. Then you have an intelligence sharing. At the home secretary level, the human trafficking issue is also being taken care of. I think these are definitely significant developments. I really can't imagine this kind of situation ten years back.

Suhasini Haidar

The problem comes from the fact that perhaps it is a one sided view of things. And it is a government driven view of things. Our government speaks of what has happened at the border of India, we accept their version without even questioning it. With our boundaries with Bangladesh, the access is poor for a journalist. The communication channels like roads have not been developed, so it is quite difficult to get news from the border.

Syed Munir Khasru

We have a close relationship with India. Also China continues to be an important partner in our development. So how do we manage our relations with these two competing giants?

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed

The Bangladesh government can organise a conference and bring China and India into a common platform to discuss various issues related to the development of the Northeast region of the subcontinent.

Dr. Smruti Pattanaik

Robust academic exchange between India and China can be a good starting point.

Dr. Ainun Nishat

The Joint River Commission was set up to discuss technical issues but now it has become a body where negotiations take place. Negotiations and decision making should be made at the political level, and technical people can be included there as advisers.

Ashok Malik

We need to establish an institutional mechanism to discuss the water issues. It should include relevant members of the region. Greater Mekong sub-region mechanism can be a good example in this regard.

OPEN DISCUSSION

Nurul Huda, Former Inspector General of Police

If we can rear cattle inside Bangladesh in large numbers, cattle smuggling will go down automatically. It will also reduce the number of border killings.

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed

Humans are not only political beings, but they are also cultural and psychological beings. In South Asia, we are already connected culturally, gastronomically and in so many other ways. We just need to stop emphasising too much on political divides.

Ashok Malik

There are people on both sides of the Bangladesh-India border who live on smuggling. If you put restrictions on cattle smuggling, they will find alternative products. The fact is that there are some gaps in the border through which smuggling happens. We need to address those gaps.

Shaheen Anam, Manusher Jonno Foundation

In Indian media, Bangladeshi migrants are often portrayed in a negative light. But there are thousands of Indians who work in Bangladesh in white collar jobs. We do not know whether they have work permit or not. In Indian newspapers, we have read that now Bangladesh is the third largest remittance earner for India. I think Indian media have a responsibility not to participate in the hype against poor Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Ashok Malik

The problem lies in the fact that there are many Bangladeshi migrant workers in India who remain unrecorded. Yes, I agree that Indian politicians and media exaggerate the numbers but the Bangladesh government also deny any undocumented migration. I think we need to sensitise people to stay legally in India and send their remittance in legal channels such as banks. It will help both the countries.

Suhasini Haidar

Our politicians need to stop using their neighbours as political tools inside their countries. In regards to migration, we need to come out of the security lens and find ways of cooperation where people can migrate from India to Bangladesh or vice versa and work legally. We need to exchange students, cultural groups and younger people among the regional countries so that a sense of belonging grows among our future generations.