

# Making the most of BRI



**NO FRILLS**  
Syed Mansur Hashim

A daylong dialogue organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) on September 8 brought together participants from Bangladesh and some South Asian countries, as well as from China. Among them were high-level policymakers, political leaders, academics and experts, business leaders, civil society members, and international development partners. The seminar was titled "International Conference on Belt and Road Initiative: Positioning Bangladesh within Comparative Perspectives." The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has drawn both criticism and applause since its inception in 2013. As we stand at the close of 2019, some portions of BRI are beginning to materialise in completed projects. While the western media and some governments continue to portray the BRI as an "imperialist" design by an emerging China, Asian economies, particularly some nations in South Asia (that includes Bangladesh) and many more in South-East Asia, have embraced the opportunity to be part of this plan because of the opportunities it presents—to upgrade outdated infrastructure, open up new trade routes, attract foreign direct investments, among others.

For Bangladesh, its bilateral relationship with China has been growing since President Xi Jinping's visit in 2016. As pointed out by Dr Fahmida Khatun in her presentation, "Bangladesh is connected with the BRI initiative through the BCIM economic corridor which was formally endorsed during the first inter-governmental study group meeting held in December 2013 in Kunming." China has undertaken steps to invest billions of dollars in Bangladesh which follow government-to-government and business-to-business models. We have reciprocated with an offer for dedicated Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that will be exclusively for Chinese companies.



Construction work underway at the Karnaphuli tunnel, which is a BRI project.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Over the last decade, China has become the biggest import partner for Bangladesh. Indeed, China overtook India in 2018 as the country's largest trading partner with a share of 18.94 percent of total trade, which is almost double the trade with India and more than the trade with the USA and Germany combined. As pointed out by Professor Mustafizur Rahman in an article titled "Realising the Potential Benefits Originating from the BRI", published in the special issue of *Rising Asia Magazine* in October 2018, "The support of China, through trade, investment and implementation of development projects, is benefitting the economy and people of Bangladesh through access to goods at competitive price, employment creation, enhancement of economic efficiency and

income generation. A further deepening of economic relationship with China will bring benefits to Bangladesh by realising the potential gains originating from the initiatives under the BRI." If we look at foreign direct investment (FDI), the country witnessed a record high net FDI in financial year 2019 with the inflow of USD 3,232.89 million which came primarily from Chinese sources. The trend of growing Chinese FDI is evident in the increasing investments being made every year.

As pointed out by Professor Rehman Sobhan in the seminar, China has huge foreign exchange reserves and sovereign wealth funds which are being deployed in a much-organised way to bring about the restructuring of the global economic order. Those sentiments were reinforced by the

industries minister when he stated that "no nation can progress in an isolated way. BRI is a platform of international cooperation for mutual benefits." That said, Bangladesh has a host of issues that need to be resolved if we want to take advantage of what BRI has to offer.

We have to explore the opportunities of turning some or a portion of those loans into grants, and these possibilities should exist given the fact that Bangladesh is a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and was the recipient of AIIB's very first loan in developing our power sector. The country's policymakers need to closely examine the terms and conditions of the loans it is taking. This means scrutinising the interest rate, repayment period, grace period, etc.

Professor Mustafizur Rahman pointed out in an article titled "Bangladesh-China Emerging Partnership" in November 2016 that "Bangladesh's own preparedness to implement such large-scale investment projects, over a relatively short span of time, is an issue that ought to be given highest priority... institutional capacity building, placement of specialised and skilled cadres capable of implementing these projects on time and in a cost-effective manner—all these will call for urgent attention of policymakers at the highest level. Regular monitoring and reporting will play an important role in this regard. This is crucial to ensure that the projects will deliver the expected outputs and the Bangladesh economy benefits from these investments."

He had hit the nail on the head because we do have major problems in these areas. A number of projects that are supposedly being implemented on a fast-track basis are years behind schedule. Not all of them are on grants. Increasing cost because of delays is simply one side of the coin. Infrastructure projects, when delayed, lose economic sense because they fail to deliver the goods that could have been delivered had they been completed on time. Though some progress has been made, we are yet to see meaningful change in the way we do business. Plans to reform and restructure remain unexecuted and unless things change, we will not be able to attract the FDI we want. We better do something about it because we need to move into high gear with China and reap the benefits of technologies developed in that country. These include technologies and processes for high-productivity agriculture, exploitation of marine resources and other areas. At the end of the day, the ball is now squarely in our court. The barriers to much-needed investments in infrastructure have been overcome through regional and transnational initiatives like the BRI, but the need to overcome internal resistance to change is something Bangladeshi policymakers will have to initiate now, and not tomorrow.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

## A bold commitment

WHO South-East Asia Region's health ministers adopt plan for natural emergency preparedness.



Poonam Khetrapal Singh

ON December 26, 2004, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake struck the ocean floor off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. The earthquake then triggered a tsunami that rumbled out across the Indian Ocean and onto the coastlines of surrounding countries. Almost 200,000 people were killed; at least five million were affected.

Owing to its sheer scale, the Indian Ocean tsunami looms large in the WHO South-East Asia Region's collective memory. It has also loomed large in how the region approaches all-hazard emergency risk management and response: to prevent and manage public health emergencies, we must manage risks, and to manage risks, we must identify and remedy vulnerabilities.

That approach has seen the region become a global leader in the field. The region's twelve benchmarks of emergency preparedness and response, for example, are a one-of-a-kind initiative. So too is the South-East Asia Regional Health Emergency Fund (SEARHEF), which now aims to strengthen preparedness, not just response.

Since 2014, when emergency risk management became one of the region's Flagship Priorities, member-states have made strong gains. All eleven now conduct annual

assessments of core capacities as they relate to the International Health Regulations (IHR). Almost all have successfully completed Joint External Evaluations—a key means of identifying and remedying vulnerabilities. The Asia Tripartite, which is comprised of WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Organization for Human Health (OIE), has formalised operations. It is working with member-states regionwide to address vulnerabilities at the human-animal-ecosystems interface.

We have come a long way. And we have a long way to go. As outlined in several key instruments, from WHO's new General Programme of Work to the Global Health Security Agenda, identifying, mitigating and responding to threats requires ongoing vigilance and the scaling up of capacities to achieve full IHR compliance—the gold standard for securing health in the face of evolving threats.

On that score, the Delhi Declaration—which was just issued at the seventy-second session of the Regional Committee—and its accompanying five-year Strategic Plan will fill a crucial need. Not only will the Declaration and Plan ensure that the region's momentum is sustained, and that it is aligned with the global drive to achieve full IHR compliance and better protect 1 billion more people from health emergencies by 2024, but they will also spur accelerated progress, especially as it relates to the region's own path-breaking innovations. As the



People launch floating paper lanterns into the sky over the Andaman Sea in remembrance of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami victims, in Khao Lak, in Thailand's Phang Nga province, on December 26, 2009.

PHOTO: REUTERS/CHAIWAT SUBPRASOM

Declaration is applied, and the Plan is implemented, member-states must act on each of the "four I's" outlined therein.

That means, first, continuing to IDENTIFY risks. While all member-states have already participated in comprehensive risk mapping—as documented in the Regional Office's *Roots for Resilience* publication—ongoing monitoring is crucial. This is particularly important as climate change proceeds, and as

the hazards that member-states face evolve, including from the density and spread of disease vectors or the frequency of natural disasters such as cyclones and flooding. Complacency is not an option.

Second, member-states should further INVEST in people and systems for risk management. The capacities of national IHR focal points, for example, should be enhanced by leveraging the newly created Regional Knowledge Network of IHR NFP+ (an

online platform designed to facilitate peer-to-peer learning). Likewise, the capacities of Emergency Medical Teams should be augmented and standardised as per WHO's quality assurance and accreditation system. Health systems infrastructure can, meanwhile, be fortified by attending to both structural and non-structural factors.

Third, member-states must develop and IMPLEMENT national action plans for health security

(NAPHS). To their credit, five member-states (Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand) have already devised and costed an NAPHS and are rolling it out. Other member-states are expected to do the same in the coming year. As this happens, it is imperative that reliable funding is secured, including via increased government allocations as well as through public-private partnerships, where appropriate.

And fourth, together we must better INTERLINK sectors and networks to close gaps and maximise buy-in. Intersectoral coordination mechanisms such as the Asia Tripartite are crucial to building bridges across sectors, and to ensuring that human, animal and environmental health is addressed together. As part of this, collaborative partnerships with the non-government, private and academic sectors should be actively pursued, ensuring the whole of society is mobilised and engaged.

As a region, we cannot afford anything less. We know the risks. We are aware of the costs. And we now have the Delhi Declaration and Strategic Plan to build on our progress and scale up emergency preparedness and response capacities regionwide. Though we cannot always anticipate an acute event, we can ensure that we are protected together before it transpires. In doing so, we can continue to preserve health, protect dignity and save lives when emergency strikes.

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh is WHO South-East Asia Regional Director.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**MILAN KUNDERA**  
(b. 1929)  
Czech-French writer and novelist

*The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

29 Flower part  
32 Shade  
33 Suit accessory  
34 Abel's mother  
35 Sturdy wood  
36 Suffering  
37 Immoral act  
38 Baseball's Rusty  
40 Before, in Bordeaux  
42 High-strung  
43 Time being  
44 European viper  
45 Concluded

**DOWN**

1 Ejected  
2 Germany's Merkel  
3 Proverbial sure thing  
4 King beater

5 Fixes shoes  
6 Singer Simon  
7 Poem of praise  
8 Symbol of a challenge  
9 Activist Bloomer  
10 Find appropriate  
17 Spiced holiday drink  
23 Dove call  
24 Belly  
26 Like some bridges  
27 California peak  
28 Gave the boot  
30 Show clearly  
31 Let  
33 Rome's river  
39 Exploit  
41 Part of many German names

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

A	C	H	E	D		B	L	A	Z	E
G	O	A	P	E		L	I	N	E	N
T	Y	P	E	S		A	D	D	E	D
		P	E	C	A	N	S			
L	A	Y		E	E	K		S	R	A
O	F	F	I	N	G		S	T	I	R
F	R	A	N	T	I	C	P	A	C	E
T	O	C	K		S	H	A	K	E	N
S	S	E		T	E	A		E	R	A
				V	A	S	S	A	R	
J	E	W	E	L		S	C	A	M	P
A	L	O	N	E		I	N	C	U	R
M	I	N	T	S		S	E	E	D	Y

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

YOU WATCH THIS MOVIE A LOT, YOU MUST REALLY LIKE IT

YEAH, IT ALWAYS BRINGS A TEAR TO MY EYE

AND A TEAR FROM YOU IS LIKE A SOB-FEST!

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

WHAT BOOK ARE YOU READING, ZOE?

"CHARLOTTE'S WEB."

OH, I LOVED THAT BOOK!

YEAH, IT'S PRETTY GOOD

DON'T GET TOO ATTACHED TO THE S—

MOM! NO SPOILERS!