

## **China-Bangladesh Relations: Analysis in Light of Geo-Political and Geo-Economic Perspective**

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**Abstract:** Bangladesh is a small country by its origin but its geo-strategic location makes sure vast geo-political and geo-economic potentialities. Now Bangladesh has become a state of hopes and aspirations. The smart geographical location increases the geo-strategic importance, potentialities and bargaining power of Bangladesh to the emerging superpower China. Bangladesh has massive geo-strategic potentialities in terms of Trans-Asian high way, the BCIM economic corridor, transit, transshipments and etc. The fact is that China wants to make good relation with Bangladesh to make sure a sustainable communication with the land locked provinces near to the border of Nepal, Bhutan and ‘Seven Sisters’ of India using the sea ports, roads and highways of Bangladesh. China wants to curtail Indian hegemony over Bangladesh. Actually the ‘Bay of Bengal’ is a blessing for Bangladesh because of its geo-strategic surplus. The Bay of Bengal is crucial route for China to carry massive Chinese oil tanks and energy to fuel and refuel its gigantic economic development. Here the research tries to find out the geo-political and geo-economic relations between Bangladesh and China. It also focuses on the geo-strategic and geo-economic implications of the Chinese foreign policy in Bangladesh making sense with geo-political and geo-economic cost benefit analysis.

**Key Words:** Geo-Politics, Geo-Economics, Trans-Asian High Way, BRI, BCIMEC, Bay of Bengal, Sea Ports, Bangladesh and China.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Geopolitics is a kind of foreign policy directed mainly by geographic issues for example they notify, compel or affect political, diplomatic and strategic planning. The Bay of Bengal is very significant for China, aimed at the importations of oil from the Middle Eastern countries and African countries. The geopolitical relations of the gradually unstable South China Sea might probably influence on India’s geopolitical interests and affairs with the Southeast Asian nations. The Bay of Bengal is a vital hub of financial activities linking the South, Southeast and East Asian countries (Kaplan, 2009; Islam, 2013). China has become crucial in international politics because of its economic development. Many scholars think China as future super power and only China has the prospect to beat the United States. China is building infrastructural institutions such as local connectivity projects for economic and planned benefits. Therefore, it is very important to carry out research on China-Bangladesh relations for interests of the countries in terms of economic development and regional connectivity (Brewster, 2014; Islam, 2013).

The focusing matter is about the China-Bangladesh relations in the context of the Bay of Bengal, deep seaports and Bangladesh economic potentials based on Chinese deep seaports and regional connectivity plans. Das (2011) elaborately has analyzed the importance of the expansion of military establishment on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and how these may provide India with protected

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position in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. It will try to find out the characteristics of the geopolitical and geostrategic competition between China and India in the region of the Bay of Bengal and will definitely try to make some potential recommendations for promoting regional connectivity and development cooperation (Das, 2011 & Islam, 2013).

Bangladesh is an integral part of China for long term goal of regional connectivity, trade and investment in the region. Also the study will examine the China's geo-economic interests in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. It has further stressed on the safe navigation of exports and imports and exploration of oil and gas in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. China is a rapidly growing economy with the GDP of 30 trillion by purchasing power parity which is the largest in the world. It is also emerging as a military power and geopolitically it is gaining its influence in Asian, African and European countries. South Asian countries can be largely benefitted with the Chinese economic capacity. Therefore, we as part of South Asia need to realize the Chinese politico-economic objective in South Asia including Bangladesh and Pakistan.

This study concentrates on the geo-political and geo-economic significance of the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean where China has huge interest in the context of Bangladesh. It also tries to find out the politico-economic strategies of China in South Asia and the geo-strategic and economic implications of the Chinese foreign policy in Bangladesh. The fact is that both China and Bangladesh can benefit from the Chinese geo-strategic and economic vision and with the plan of BRI, CPEC, MSR and BCIM. Finally this study will try to investigate into the geo-strategic and economic impacts of the relationship between China and Bangladesh and China and South Asia assuming the geo-strategic and economic relationships of these two countries which are very helpful in promoting economic development and regional stability in the region.

## **II. CHINA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS: A STUDY OF GEO-POLITICAL AND GEO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE**

Geo-Politics is the study that deals with the interaction between geography and politics. It focuses on the political use of geography to make sure national interests. The geographical mode of reasoning and the geographical mode of representations are very crucial in geo-political analysis. Actually, geo-politics deals with the sustainable manage of geographical resources including the land, river, natural resources, sea and sea ports, blue economy and etc. The surplus and deficiency of a country depends on the geo-political factors. It makes a connection between political power, economic power and geography making sense with power including both soft and hard. The reality of fact is that the 21st century has become the age of geo-strategy including both geo-politics and geo-economics. From geo-strategic point of view in South Asia, Bangladesh can be a best example. The geo-political and geo-economic surplus of Bangladesh makes it very potential to India, China and the United States of America. In recent times, China gives much importance to Bangladesh because of the geographical location including the land border, sea ports and specially the 'Bay of Bengal'.

From China's economic and strategic point of view, Bangladesh may be of less importance. But it cannot ignore the Bangladesh's Bay of Bengal as its economic and commercial passage (Noor, 2020). Considering the geo-strategic importance of Bangladesh, China has proposed to construct a deep sea port on the Sonadia Island in the Bay of Bengal. The project has not yet been come into effect due to India's objection. Now Japan has come ahead with a new proposal of construction of a deep sea port in Matarbari, Mohesh Khali sub-district of Cox's Bazar (Noor, 2020). At this moment, China is concentrating on bombarding seabed oil and gas from the 22 deep-sea blocks.

China's aim is to conquer the region considering these two distinct points: One is the "string of pearls" concept that stresses on the military and economic advantages through some marine passages such as Strait of Malacca, Lombok Strait, Strait of Hormuz and countries such as Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan (Noor, 2020). Another is that the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route that connects the Silk Road Economic Belt of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a common objective of connecting China's landlocked southern provinces to the Indian Ocean. The Maritime

Silk Route could offer momentous opportunities for economic and trading activities under the Belt and Road Initiative of China (Noor, 2020).

In the context of multi-modal transport development, the China-Bangladesh-Myanmar tri-national highway stretches from Cox's Bazar's Balukhali-Gundhum border road to Kunming, capital city of Yunnan in China. The Asian Highway and Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) can promote economic activities within these countries (Noor, 2020). Unintentionally, China's existence paved incitement for US military presence in the region. To combat against this non-regional armed presences, NSA, India has indicated of founding a marine security alliance in the Bay, Bangladesh as one of the two considered partners (Noor, 2020). But, many scholars think that Bangladesh should not agree with the offer of India's military alliance against China.

Bangladesh is the second biggest importer of Chinese arms after Pakistan. China has given financial assistance and loans to Bangladesh on less interest than the loans provided by India. And China has offered to construct nuclear power plants in Bangladesh which is very important for Bangladesh to meet energy demand. From July 1, 2020, China has relinquished charges of 97 percent goods made in Bangladesh (Katoch, 2020). The Awami League government has handed over many alleged extremists when requested by India. The earlier Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government under the leadership of Khaleda Zia was conducting anti-India extremist camps in Bangladesh's territory whereas the then Bangladesh Armed forces were practicing their own type of 'cold start' into Indian terrain to be continued for the first few days by insurgent-cum radical organizations in the slight land strip connecting India's Northeast India. These terrorist camps had trainers from Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence-ISI (Katoch, 2020). However, in terms of Bangladesh's strategic and military relationship with both India and China, many scholars think that building a strategic and military relationship with China is far better than India. Therefore, Bangladesh's military relationship with China is safer compared to India.

The Bay of Bengal is now considered as one of the geo-political epicenters in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean regions. It is now used as important trading routes and military and strategic points. Being the host of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh is in the most advantageous position to harness the jostling and maneuver to its economic and strategic gain. If Dhaka is interested to take advantage of this, it can easily enjoy (Noor, 2020). The China's access in the Bay of Bengal will be the best blessing option for Bangladesh to make sure its economic sustainability since many countries of the World are trying to sustain foreign relations with China. Many scholars think that the future World will be controlled by China and the hegemonic power of the United States will be terminated soon.

China's naval force for military and strategic purposes in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean is undoubtedly against Indian presence in the region. Considering the India's pressure, Bangladesh is now trying to attract foreign investors to build a deep sea port in Cox's Bazar instead of China (Brewster, 2014). Colombo is very interested in attracting the Chinese investment for socio-economic and infrastructural development in the country. Sri Lanka is also one of the important partners of China's Maritime Silk Road (MRS) initiative (Brewster, 2014). Sri Lanka is also providing China with military access to the region. In October 2014, it was declared that Chinese government has been requested to take over controlling of a new and enlarged Phase II development of Hambantota port and the port can be absolutely used by the Chinese government. At the initial stage, the Sri Lankan government was reluctant to expose the Chinese military presence in the Indian Ocean but now it intends to maintain strategic relations with China through the military presence of China in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2014).

It is also true that India's hegemonic foreign policy towards the South Asia and Bay of Bengal countries is mostly liable for the China's military presence in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. Surely, China's increasing security relations with Sri Lanka creates some doubts on China's announcement that the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is simply an economic project (Brewster, 2014). Therefore, it may be said that China has two strategies in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean:

military and economic. Also the countries of the Bay of Bengal might have a chance to promote their economies on the assistance and support of China's gigantic economy of US \$ 30 trillion by purchasing power parity (PPP) which is the largest economy in the world by purchasing power parity. India is lagging behind far way compared to China in the context economic capacity and foreign currency reservation.

In terms of geo-strategic perspective, the Indian Ocean is definitely pivotal for China's development cooperation, trade and investment and energy supply. China has a plan to build an Indian Ocean navy and it desires to share geo-strategic and military power quietly with the United States of America and India to protect its tangible rights and politico-economic interests in the whole region (Kaplan, 2009; Jiacheng, 2017). Afterwards the downfall of the Soviet Union, the United States of America has employed a vast hegemonic political and military power all over the world. The economic and military escalation of China and the dwindling of U.S. impression are composed to mark a radical change in the existing power configuration in the Pacific and Indian Ocean areas along with the Bay of Bengal and its member countries. The Indian Ocean is connected with the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea which plays a leading role in global trade and industrial supplies in context of safe navigation. Undoubtedly, the route has now become as an important channel for Asia, Africa, Europe and Oceania (Kaplan, 2009; Jiacheng, 2017).

The empirical knowledge of history suggests that any military power controlled the advantage of the Eurasian area together with the northern portion of the Indian Ocean possibly will govern the entire Indian Ocean region and can definitely come into the 'pivot' of Eurasia (Dexing, 2009; Jiacheng, 2017). The completion of the World War II made the world seventh intercontinental channel which is identified as 'the Gibraltar of the East'. Presently, over 50,000 containers pass through this Strait every year and of those nearly 60 percent are the Chinese vessels (Qi-min, 2009, Jiacheng, 2017). China has turned into the world's third largest oil retailer in 2009.

In the same year, China has become the world's major oil customer accounting for 9.3 percent of international consumption (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2015; Jiacheng, 2017). For safety of the Maritime Silk Road, the Chinese government is keenly interested to increase commercial and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, China should come ahead to ensure the implementation of its plan of MSR and IT should take necessary steps to make connectivity between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Island and try to avoid the Malacca Dilemma. China has to take necessary steps to ensure safety and stability in the Indian Ocean including the Bay of Bengal (Jiacheng, 2017).

To expand trade and economic relations between China and Bangladesh, both countries have signed some agreements such as trade, uses of seaports of Bangladesh by China and construction of power plants in Bangladesh (Kashem, 2016 & Islam, 2013). Likewise China, both India and Bangladesh have signed an agreement regarding the sharing information to combat terrorism and religious fanaticism in both India and Bangladesh. (The New Age, April 10, 2017). Moreover, during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's official tour in India on 7-10 April, 2017, both countries signed six agreements and 16 memoranda of understanding regarding the cooperation in the projects of nuclear power plantation, border trade, digital cooperation in the context of information technology and electronics, strong bilateral cooperation in outer space research and strategic studies, computer-generated security and etc. (The Daily Star, April 09, 2017).

During the visit, both leaders have concentrated on the dealing of defense cooperation and memorandum of understanding was signed on a defense framework; and India has agreed to pay \$500 million line of credit to Bangladesh for military equipment's purchase for the Bangladesh's military forces (Islam, 2013). According to the media of Bangladesh, the government was under serious political pressure from the government of regarding the agreement on military equipment purchase, particularly when Bangladesh received four submarines from China. As a result, Bangladesh has signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation in order to balance its diplomatic and

strategic relations with both China and India. It is important to mention here that India is keenly interested in the internal affairs of Bangladesh and it tries to exclude the China's political influence from Bangladesh (Islam, 2013). However, many scholars think that Bangladesh should come ahead to maintain friendly relations with China for the greater economic interests and territorial security and sovereignty of the country.

It should be noted here that Bangladesh has potentiality which is very famous for the origin of the Bay of Bengal where both USA and China are very interested for navigation, regional connectivity, mineral resources and geo-strategic reasons. As for shared collaboration and joint economic development, the Maritime Silk Road and the economic corridors may allow the formation of a growth triangle of some of these states and will enable China's Western Growth Policy (Fan, 2011). The matter of fact is that Bangladesh is very potential for China because of many different factors. Among these the 'Bay of Bengal' is most prominent. The Chinese oil tankers carrying oil from Middle East and African countries sail over the 'Bay of Bengal'. The gigantic Chinese economy largely depends on this route and the sea ports of Bangladesh are crucial to carry products in China's land locked provinces near to the border of Nepal, Bhutan and Seven Sisters of India.

Furthermore, Beijing has been very successful in building oil and gas pipe line between the new deep seaport of Kyaukpyu in the Rakhine state of Myanmar and its southern Yunnan province (Liu, 2013). The Kyaukpyu project has been also included in the 1200 kilometers railway and highway at the cost of \$20 billion (Kostecka, D. J., 2010). The new Sino-Myanmar gas pipelines, railways and highways and Kyaukpyu projects will of course decrease China's navigation dependence on the Straits of Malacca, it will play a significant role in the expansion of China's oil and gas supply (Uberoi, 2016). At the conference among the delegates of India, Myanmar and Thailand in Naypyidaw in April 2012, the three countries officially decided on the building of an India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway (The Economic Times, October 22, 2013).

The project is prepared for linking three countries thus it they took a pan to construct a highway from Moreh in Manipur state via Mandalay and Yangon in Myanmar to Mae Sot in Thailand (The Hindu, May 30, 2013). India's different products have been carried to the North East India's seven sisters through the different rivers' routes of Bangladesh. India has too established the Kaladan multimodal transport project with Myanmar. This project would connect the ports of Kolkata and Sittwe (Myanmar) by shipment route and would be able to link Sittwe with Lashio (The Indian Express, June 17, 2006). Then a highway will connect Lashio with the Mizoram province of North East India (The Hindustan Times, 2011 & Islam, 2013).

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) incorporating Bangladesh, India, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, is an important issue for India in terms of development cooperation, trade and investment, diplomatic relations and expansion of its economic cooperation in the region. Its main purpose is to ensure rapid economic growth, enhance social advancement and strengthen fruitful cooperation with the leading regional and global organizations (Sharma & Rathore, 2015 & Islam, 2013). Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told with utmost importance at the BIMSTEC conference held in Myanmar in March 2014 that: "Connectivity: physical and digital is the main key to BIMSTEC's vision and it might be a driver of regional and economic cooperation and integration in our region" (Brewster, 2014 & Islam, 2013).

BIMSTEC may play an important role in ensuring India's geostrategic position in the region and it can reduce China's geopolitical and economic influence in the region. Moreover, India is very interested in the region for its socio-economic and geo-political reasons. The vision of India in the context of geo-political and geo-strategic interests in the region is supported by the geo-strategic thinkers and the political leaders in the United States, Japan, India, and Australia (Nautiyal, 2017 & Islam, 2013). The United States is keenly interested in encouraging India so that it can expand its security presence in the Southeast Asian countries and Pacific region to counter balance China's presence and role in the region (Nautiyal, 2017). India is now has taken a plan to organize an Indo-

Pacific collaboration which aims in order to form an anti-China strategic alliance of naval power which is going to comprise countries such as Japan, the U.S, India and Australia; though at this moment it does not require any essential organization. China has in divergence, endorsed sub-regional collaboration to create shared effort in the expansion of infrastructure, economic growth and minimized its physical susceptibility.

Meaningfully, Beijing introduced the BCIM forum for sub-regional collaboration as the Kunming Initiative in August 1999, comprising Bangladesh, South-Western China, North-Eastern India and Myanmar. Likewise, the Greater Mekong sub-region which was started in 1992 has integrated the six littoral countries of the Bay of Bengal including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Yunnan and Guangxi provinces of China. Most of the countries of the Greater Mekong region have emphasized on the interregional connectivity and regional integration (Das, 2013). The region is full of huge natural resources, skilled workforce and it has also international marine routes. This geo-strategic opportunity will of course enable China to come closer to these countries and make a friendly economic and diplomatic relations between them. Furthermore, building strong ties with these neighboring countries, China will be able to curtain India's geopolitical and economic influence in the region.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Most notably, China is increasing its political relations with the South East Asian and South Asian countries including the Bay of Bengal countries to open up the area as it is interested in developing its Western and Southern parts. China and India are now very serious in developing strategic and diplomatic relations with Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Also China is building many land roads, railways, oil and gas pipelines, deep seaports and airports in Myanmar so that it can have a direct access to the Bay of Bengal. In line with the step of China, India has also strengthened its mutual economic, security and political relations with some of the littoral countries and India is rejuvenating very close relations with Myanmar in trade and investment, infra-structure, energy, security and counter terrorism. Chinese planned BCIM project and India-China economic passages are going to give the southern provinces of China an entrance to the Bay of Bengal and it could stimulate sub regional economic progress in the whole region.

In addition, the Maritime Silk Road would connect the main seaports of the coastal countries in the Bay of Bengal (Islam, 2013). There is no objection from the littoral countries that China does not interfere in the internal affairs of the small countries. China is inspiring the small states of the Bay of Bengal region to formulate independent foreign policy and is suggesting these countries to come out of the Indian influence (Islam, 2013). Moreover, China's economic and diplomatic relations with these countries are more planned and strong compared to India. In a nutshell, it can be said that China's huge contribution in the Indian Ocean is definitely rejuvenating the power relationship in the region. With the fresh start of the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road,' China is very much hopeful in ensuring its security, political, economic, military and geo-strategic interests in the region.

However, China, the United States, India and other marine political powers should come ahead to reach an agreement similar to the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits in 1936 which lets all party to protect the lawful rights and interests of their own without spoiling those of other parties to achieve a long term peace, stability, development and political harmonization in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal (Jiacheng, 2017). In a nutshell, it can be said that Bangladesh's geopolitical position is very important for China. Bay of Bengal linked with the Indian Ocean has originated from Bangladesh. Cox's Bazar is very close to China geologically. Therefore, pleasant relationship between the two nations in terms of trade and investment, local connectivity, Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean and investigation and production of oil and gas are very important. So China and Bangladesh should come forward to strengthening the current relationship for the better interests of two nations.

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