

Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC)

Options for Participating Countries

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Abstract

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This study deals with Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), one of six economic corridors of Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) designed by China in 2013 to establish regional connectivity with South Asian countries and Indian Ocean. The countries of BCIM-EC had a traditional interaction in the socio-economic and cultural fields under Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) forum that existed long before BRI since 1999. After the launch of BRI, the BCIM forum was brought under the umbrella of BRI which was objected by India due to its reservations towards BRI. The project got set back since the establishment of Modi's government in India which ultimately halted the opportunity of development and integration of the region. This study argues that BCIM-EC provides the best opportunity for its participating countries to address their socio-economic problems through launching various infrastructural projects with the financial help of China. To explore the potentials of this corridor, qualitative research methods have been used and data collected from various articles, research papers, statements of leaders of participating countries and opinion of scholars of relevant fields. This research is conducted mainly under two theories i.e. the Complex Interdependence and Prospect Theory which helped in studying the potentials of this corridor for the participating countries on one hand and exploring the possible options to execute it successfully on the other hand. The findings of the study state that the BCIM-EC has great potentials for the participating countries but their geostrategic gains and losses must not be counted the same. It also gives certain options to put the BCIM-EC on track through misusing India for the time being by launching Bangladesh China Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCM-EC).

Keywords:

Belt and Road Initiative, Silk Road Economic Belt, 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Sea Lines of Communications, China Myanmar Economic Corridor, Greater Mekong Sub-region, North Eastern Region of India, Kolkata to Kunming Car Rally

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Introduction:

BRI (Belt & Road Initiative) is one of the greatest projects of 21st century, which was launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. BRI is a connectivity plan among the Afro-Asian and European countries through building economic corridors and developing Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). China is developing two main components under BRI. The first one is called Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) giving six economic corridors and the second component is 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Among the six economic corridors, two of the corridors i.e. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) are specifically designed for South Asia which may bring connectivity among the countries of this region. CPEC is a flagship project of BRI, undertaken bilaterally between China and Pakistan whereas BCIM-EC is among the four countries of Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar.

The seed of BCIM-EC was planted in 2012 by the then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao during his meet with the then Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh. The Joint Study Group (JSG) was established by the participating countries with the objective to establish regional connectivity. The JSG held its meetings thrice in all the three countries i.e. Kunming (China), Cox's Bazar (Bangladesh) and Kolkata (India) in 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively. This corridor is 2800 km long traversing from Kolkata to Kunming via Bangladesh and Myanmar. Besides the physical connectivity, it also provided digital connectivity and facilitation of trade among its member countries through removing trade barrier for smooth flow of trade and investment among its member countries (Sajjanhar, 2016).

Anti-BRI group holds the opinion that BRI projects are designed to benefit China only. They further argue that these projects are not purely economic rather having their geostrategic and geopolitical objectives. India is opposing BCIM-EC with the same apprehensions. For example, the building of chain of ports in the Indian Ocean (Gwadar Port in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka) by China is being considered with encircling of India. China has clarified repeatedly about the economic motives behind these projects nevertheless the anti-BRI group is adamant towards BRI to make it flopped. This is ultimately creating hindrance in the smooth execution of BCIM-EC which would miss the opportunity of development for participating countries of this corridor i.e. Bangladesh, India and Myanmar which require the financial support to address their core issues especially poverty and socio-economic development.

As per report of Asian Development Bank (ADB), Asia-Pacific requires an estimated \$1.5 trillion per year to sustain the current development process till 2030 (Meeting Asia's Infrastructure Needs, 2017). The findings of this report clearly show that Asia is far behind in its development and within Asia; South Asia is the least developed region due to inter-state rivalries among its major players. The development of BCIM-EC can help this region to establish economic integration which would facilitate its participating states to achieve sustainable development. No ground progress has been made so far regarding the development of BCIM-EC that led the researchers to probe hurdles and challenges behind smooth execution of this corridor. This study is not repeating the existing research rather it will try to restore and reinvigorate BCIM-EC through focusing on their potentials and suggesting certain options for its future execution.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In this paper, two main research questions have been explored. The first one is about the potentials of this corridor for its participating countries whereas the second one deals with the options with the participating countries to make this corridor a successful project. The objective of this study is to analyze potentials of this corridor for South Asia and suggest options for its future implementation. This study has explored the potentials of this corridor in the light of data collected through various official reports, research papers, articles, newspapers and statements of the leaders of the participating countries. The study also gives certain options for smooth execution of this corridors based on the past 10 years of its snail pace progress and possible empirical solutions.

The theory of complex interdependence and prospect theory have been applied to interpret this study (Robert Owen Keohane and Joseph Samuel Nye, 1987). Both these theories support the peaceful co-existence through mutual interdependence and achieving their gains and avoiding losses. There is a dire need to promote peaceful coexistence and theory of complex interdependence particularly among the countries of South Asia which have been suffering from socio-economic problems for the last many years due to their mutual geopolitical issues.

Literature Review

BCIM-EC has been worked upon by number of scholars with reference to its significance for connectivity within the region. Before the launch of BRI, this corridor was known as BCIM forum among its participating countries, which was earlier known as track-II diplomacy among its four countries (Ambuj, 2012). Ambuj upholds that China is one of the strong movers of this corridor to connect its South-western landlocked province of Yunnan with the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. The other aspects that author covered in this paper include the role of this corridor in bringing connectivity within the participating countries and challenges confronted in its execution. In one of the working papers, the BCIM-EC was discussed under the economic theory that may bring economic cooperation between the regions of Southwest China and India termed as (Kolkata to Kunming) via Myanmar, Bangladesh and North Eastern Region (NER) of India (Uberio, 2014). The author called both China and India as two of the strong pillars of this corridor and recommended to follow the precedence of Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). Some scholars termed BCIM-EC as a game changer for the region through bringing economic revolution for the less developed regions of the participating countries i.e. Yunnan province of China, North Eastern Region (NER) of India, border regions between Myanmar and Bangladesh occupied by Rohingya people near Rakhine State of Myanmar (Sajjanhar, 2016).

Some scholars studied BCIM-EC under the politics of corridor in South Asia and focused upon CPEC and BCIM-EC as two of crucial corridors in establishing connectivity among the countries of South and Southeast Asia (Arif, 2020). Some of Bangladeshi scholars have termed BCIM-EC as one of the great strategies to improve its trading system and achieving sustainable development (Ahmed, 2021). Few of the scholars consider BCIM-EC as promoting Chinese soft power through which China aims at achieving influence in the region via its language, culture, investment and economic development in its neighboring countries (Tanzimuddin, 2018).

Most of the existing literature on the subject has either discussed the importance of BCIM-EC for the regional connectivity through highlighting its challenges or studied it in the light of China's ambitious plan for promoting its soft power. Very few studies have given the alternate options to make this corridor successful. As already mentioned, only paper progress on this corridor has been made so far and lot of work and determination requires in executing this project. Due to intransigent behavior of India towards BRI in general and CPEC and BCIM-EC in particular, there requires a study to develop alternate options to make this corridor successful for the majority of

its participating countries. This gap is tried to be filled in this study through studying the potentials of this corridor for the participating countries with alternate options.

Existing Successful Regional Groupings in the Region

BCIM-EC has great potentials in the region due to increasing trends of regionalism in the shape of various regional and sub-regional groupings. The Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) is one of such sub-regional groupings which success led other countries to follow its footsteps. It was established by Asian Development Bank in 1992 as a regional development program among the Chinese southwestern province of Yunnan and regional states of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. It helped the regional states in enhancing their per capita income after its creation (ADB, 2021). In the post COVID-19 period, the GMS-2030 Vision is launched with three basic pillars which are to build sense of 'Community,' to attain increased 'Connectivity,' and to enhance 'Competitiveness,' (ADB, 2021). These three pillars are required to be promoted within South Asian countries through encouraging the corridors like BCIM-EC which has great potentials for the participating countries.

Another success story of regional economic growth is found in the Southern Growth Triangle comprising the three states of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. It is famously known as (SIJORI) i.e., Singapore, Johar State of Malaysia and Riau islands of Indonesia. (Siddique, 2014). It is stated that SIJOR proved one of the best examples of regional integration as it attracted more than \$10 billion business after its beginning among its member states (Siddique, 2014). Currently, it is facing dilemma after ten years of its establishment. The major factors of this slowdown are the uneven regional economic performance, rising social problems, divergent individual interests and uncertain external environment (Xiadong, 2019). To put SIJORI back on track, the analysts recommend internal and external dynamics to achieve. The internal dynamics include the coordination between public and private sectors, more liberal policies, unified administrative institutions, the role of Overseas Chinese and historical legacies. While in the external dynamics, Chinese Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and its proper utilization by the regional countries can make a difference. The data clearly shows that this regional grouping also requires the support of BRI projects for strengthening the regional integration either they fall in the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) or Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI).

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is another regional grouping among the six countries of South Asia excluding Pakistan, which is created for economic cooperation in 14 x major areas. (Brief on BIMSTEC, 2014). The regional organization of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could not deliver in bringing economic integration due to geopolitical disputes between India and Pakistan. The same geopolitical irritants are also restricting India to cooperate in executing the China's BRI in general and BCIM-EC in particular. It is pertinent to mention here that the economic integration of the region through development of infrastructure was one of the priority areas of both India and the US under the Look East Policy, which could not be materialized due to financial restraints. The development of BCIM-EC can help India and the US in establishing the regional economic integration, which may be win-win situation for all (Sajjanhar, 2016).

India is also very active in establishing regional grouping to promote its geopolitical influence in the region. It has established a Trilateral grouping with Thailand and Myanmar on various economic and non-economic issues including the subjects of transnational crimes and terrorism. It has also launched Ganga-Mekong Initiative to get connectivity with Mekong Basin comprising the countries of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam). These all sub-groupings are in addition to the major regional organizations of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and SAARC. Such grouping is well explained by Michael T. Rock under the Asian Paradox, which interprets that the countries of this region are looking to Japan and China for economic security whereas they depend on the US for their political security. (Michael T. Rock and Heidi Bonnett, 2004). Such groupings also confirm that India is one of main competitors in the region which is being supported by western powers under the umbrella of the US to counter Chinese BRI projects and its influence in the region. This geopolitical race is a big hurdle in the socio-economic development of the region which needs to be considered by major players especially India, Pakistan and China.

Potentials of BCIM-EC for Regional Countries

BCIM-EC evolved not in a single year but over the years since 1999. It was initially known as BCIM forum for economic cooperation among its four countries. The objective of this forum was to establish and promote economic and trade relations. The concept of BCIM forum is first conceived by a Bangladesh scholar in his two of the books written on the subject which are

Transforming Eastern South Asia: Building Growth Zones for Economic Cooperation and Discovering the Southern Silk Route: Integrating Asia's Transport Infrastructure published in 1999 and 2000 respectively. BCIM region has been defined by scholars both in narrow and broader perspective (Rahman, 2014). In narrow sense, it includes only China and India due to their great market potentials whereas in broader sense, it covers Yunnan province of China, North Eastern Region (NER) of India, and West Bengal. (Uberoi, Problems and Prospects of the BCIM Economic Corridor, 2016). The regional context of BCIM-EC is another plus side for establishing this corridor in which all countries are physically contiguous and can be useful for one another in different fields. The Complex interdependence theory can be truly interpreted in the mutual relationship of these states where one can be providing technology while other is sharing its raw material and outlet to seas. In the proceeding paragraphs, the potentials of BCIM-EC corridor for the region are briefly summarized: -

Promotion of Intra-Regional Trade

The development of BCIM-EC can be of great help in promoting intra-regional trade among the countries of SAARC on one hand and ASEAN on the other hand. As per one analysis, the intra-SAARC countries trade stands only 5.6% whereas this figure touches 36.3% with ASEAN countries and 60% with the countries outside Asia respectively (Finnigan, 2019). While, SAARC countries are having 66 %, 48 % and 27 % trade respectively with the countries of EU, NAFTA and ASEAN (Nowshin, 2016). This data clearly indicates that SAARC countries are having huge potential to strengthen intra-regional trade through supporting the BCIM-EC. Moreover, the SAARC countries also require extraordinary efforts to improve their global competitive index ranking which falls in the lower half of the world as per the findings of the Global Competiveness Index (GCI) (Schwab, 2019). As per another analysis, after execution of BCIM-EC, this region may become the biggest free trade area in world by combining China-India-ASEAN Free Trade Area (Jash, 2015). The critics of this corridor however term the China's benefits at large scale whereas the India, Bangladesh and Myanmar have minimal benefits. They are of the opinion that after functioning of this corridor, the cheap trade goods of China will be flooded in the markets of other participating countries which would ultimately harm their local industries.

Development of Border Regions of Participating Countries

Another major potential of BCIM-EC is the development of landlocked border regions of participating countries. Most of the BCIM-EC route is motor able except two under-constructed roads with 200 km each, one in India and the other in Myanmar. BCIM forum commenced with promotion of three Ts proposition i.e. trade, transport and tourism but later it was transformed to TTE i.e. Trade, Transport and Energy (Uberoi, The BCIM Forum: Retrospect and Prospect, 2011). The development of a land and rail corridor gets more significant for establishing connectivity of landlocked border regions of participating countries which possess huge mineral and other resources covering the area of 165,000 square km with the estimated population of 440 million people (Sajjanhar, 2016). China's province of Yunnan not only serves as a gateway to Southeast Asia and South Asia due to its geostrategic location but may also be helpful in restoring the "Old Southern Silk Road (Yhome, 2013). It is rich in mineral resources standing 1st in China in the deposits of tin, lead, indium, crocidolite, thallium and zinc while ranks 9th in the coal reserves (Ambuj, 2012). Similarly, the landlocked less developed North Eastern Region (NER) of India also requires an outlet that can be provided by this corridor. NER of India is bordering China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan which can be used as a gateway to east and west. It is relevant to mention that the development of this NER is in line with India's 'Look East Policy' renamed as Act India Policy that can be supported through developing this corridor. BCIM-EC passes through the remote and underdeveloped regions of NER of India which is primarily important for economic cooperation and integration and would serve as a transit point only due to limited industries, absence of special economic zones, poor infrastructure and political issues in the region (Marchang, 2020). To convince India for BCIM-EC, China needs to address these issues through incorporating development projects under BCIM-EC for the true uplift of NER. Similarly, other border areas falling in Myanmar and Bangladesh also require development projects as per the requirement of those areas.

Geo-economic Value of the Region

All the countries of BCIM-EC have certain specialty in different fields that can contribute the overall development of the region. Myanmar is the exporter of the primary goods like oil, gas, vegetables, fish, clothing, wood, rubber and fruit. India, China, South Korea, Japan, Germany, Indonesia and Hong Kong are the major recipients of Myanmar's exports (Myanmar Exports,

2022). Another potential with Myanmar is its labor force which was recorded about 22.12 million people in 2022 (Myanmar - Labour Force, Total, 2022). India is one of the main service providers in Asia which contributed 40 % in Indian's total exports with \$89 billion surplus trade. The major fields of Indian service sector include entertainment, IT, tourism, management, business services, etc. (India's services exports can hit \$1 trillion, 2021). China is one of the largest exporters of manufactured goods, which has increased its exports to \$544.70 billion in the year 2022 (China's exports, 2022). Bangladesh is also famous for its manufactured goods especially the Ready-made Garments (RMG) industry and exports of services. It has been maintaining a constant growth rate of 6 percent since 2005 with the exception of COVID-19 period. Its service sector is sharing 51.3 percent in GDP (Bangladesh GDP Growth Rate 1961-2022, 2022). This data endorses that BCIM-EC can further enhance the geo-economic potentials of the participating countries but at the same time it may threaten their local industries as well due to dominating position of China especially in the manufactured items. This region is gifted with abundant natural resources for establishing large-scale industries therefore; this corridor must include the development of Special Economic Zone (SEZ) for specialized production of goods and services. China can shift or establish industries in this region so that local people can get benefit in true sense.

Promotion of Renewable Energy

BCIM region is blessed with the potential of renewable energy that can be explored by the participating countries under the umbrella of this corridor. Among the renewable energy, the most prominent include sunlight, biomass (that contains poultry, agriculture relic, water hyacinth, Kitchen waste, animal material, etc.), geothermal energy, hydropower, tidal power and ocean wave energy. As per one estimate, 15 % of total energy in Bangladesh is being produced through investing in this sector (Sharif ul Islam, 2018). South Asia and Southeast Asia also have equal opportunities of investment in this sector. In short, the participating countries of BCIM-EC can get full benefit from China, one of the leading investors of the field followed by the US, the EU and India (World Energy Investment , 2021). As per another analysis, India should explore avenues of energy cooperation with China to maintain a balance of power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (Chauhan, 2019).

Port of Chittagong as a Regional Maritime Load Center

Chittagong port is having great geostrategic value in the Bay of Bengal for the landlocked regions of regional countries, which include Bhutan, Nepal, NER of India, and Yunnan, the Southwestern province of China. The geostrategic importance of this port is further enhanced in the presence of Cox's Bazaar near it, which is being developed as industrial hub under Japan's Big-B plan (Muhammad Aminul Karim and Faria Islam, 2018). This port can become a hinterland and connector for the intermodal freight transportation system in Asia especially for the landlocked countries as mentioned above. (Saha, 2021).

Possession of Natural Resources

BCIM region is also gifted with number of natural resources that include both energy and other resources. Bangladesh is blessed with hydrocarbons (natural gas) that stands 42nd in world in gas reserves and 32nd in gas production and consumption (Bangladesh Natural Gas, 2017). In Bangladesh, 70 % of electricity is produced by natural gas (Muhammad Hassan Shetol, 2019). As per one analysis, the gas reserves in Bangladesh may be depleting in the next 10 to 12 years due to its excessive use therefore, there is a dire need to preserve these by using modern techniques like detailed digital reservoir characterization (Muhammad Hassan Shetol, 2019). This area can be brought under the BCIM-EC as China possesses the latest technology in preserving and increasing gas reserves. Likewise, NER of India carries mineral resources that values millions of rupees as per Geological Survey of India, which can change the fate of complete region if exploited properly (L.C.DE and D.R.Singh, 2017). Similarly, this field can also be brought under BCIM-EC and India can use China's technology in exploration of these minerals. Myanmar is another important state in the production and export of oil and gas. It is exporting two-third of its oil and gas reserves to China and Thailand and is earning \$4 billion annually (Burma-Oil and Gas, 2021).

Full, Partial and Moderate Liberalization

The collaboration under BCIM-EC can bring to its participating countries full, partial and moderate trade liberalization through cutting tariffs and other duties. In the first scenario of full liberalization, 'total trade effect' can be achieved. While in the second scenario of moderate liberalization, 'trade creation and trade diversion' may be secured. In the last scenario of moderate liberalization, 'welfare and revenue effect' can take place among the member countries of BCIM-

EC. These three scenarios can give monetary and welfare benefits to its member countries of the estimated amount of \$411 million, \$281 million and \$193 million respectively (Muhammad. Tariq ur Rahman and Muhammad Al Amin, 2009). As per analysts, the role of China is crucial not only in bridging a gap among the countries of this region but it can also play a role of mediator in case of conflicts. The same mediation role of China was also confirmed in one of surveys conducted on the subject among the Chinese citizens in different cities (Joo-Youn, 2012).

Options for Smooth Execution of BCIM-EC

Soft Power Diplomacy

As discussed in the beginning of the paper, BCIM-EC is facing number of challenges in its execution. The intransigence of the Indian Modi's government and the US opposition to China's BRI are major irritants, which are creating hurdles due to sheer geopolitical race in the region. China on the other hand, is projecting its soft power image to the countries of Afro-Asia without showing any hegemonic designs. It can be endorsed from the scope and vision of BRI, which are open to all countries including the US and western countries. The way of China in doing things is altogether different from the US, which believes and practices the peaceful co-existence. While the US on the other hand, did not include China once it created Trans-Pacific Partnership to promote economic collaboration (Chan, 2017). Similarly, in the military front, the US concluded various alliances with various countries to re-balance power in Asia (Silove, 2016).

The difference between the US and China lies in aggressive vs. soft power approaches while dealing with the countries. Medved has rightly pointed out the consequences of such aggressive American policy in the shape of anti-American feelings in the foreign countries particularly among the Muslim world against American's culture (Medved, 2002). The slow progress on BCIM-EC in the last one decade further backs China's soft and pursuing approach with the foreign countries instead of bullying. It all leads us to ponder and explore how to increase the sluggish pace of BCIM-EC, the initiative of common interest in South Asia in particular and overall region in general.

BCIM-EC was supported initially by all the four governments of participating countries including India. Later after assumption of power by Modi in India, the progress on the corridor was halted. China's perception about this corridor is pure economic, but it is interpreted as geopolitical

especially by anti-BRI supporters. One of the options with China is to abandon this corridor and focus on the other BRI corridors. In 2nd BRI conference, there was no mention of BCIM-EC, which was later clarified by the Chinese foreign spokesman by saying, “BCIM-EC very much exists in the BRI list”.

The question arises what China should do if one of the pillars of this corridor India, is reluctant in joining it. On diplomatic front, China has been convincing the BRI opponents about apolitical approach in relation to this corridor. Moreover, China is in favor of healthy economic competition among the countries and believes in using “soft use of power” to attract others instead of coercive power. Such persuasive strategies however could not work against India and the US so far due to geopolitical differences but China should continue with the same soft power strategies.

Pushing CMEC on fast track

China cannot leave the development of BCIM-EC because of interests of its own as well as other states like Myanmar and Bangladesh. It simply should lead China to develop that portion of corridor that comes under the areas of the aforementioned countries. It is beyond any doubt that China has sound economic and strategic relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh. It is this geostrategic interest that led Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Myanmar after 20 years in January 2020 where he symbolically endorsed the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) initially proposed by Chinese foreign minister in 2017 (Millar, 2023).

Myanmar is important for China to approach the Bay of Bengal and ensure the supply of oil and gas to its southwestern province of Yunnan through oil pipe lines. Moreover, the development of this corridor also may reduce China’s dependence upon the Strait of Malacca where it is facing challenges from other countries of South China Sea. Besides, once this corridor gets functional, China may also shift its manufacturing industries from the coastal areas to southwestern province that may help in improving the income of the people of that area. In short, it provides China a shortest route to the markets of South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, East Africa, and Europe on the one hand and also opens the markets of Myanmar to Chinese goods and services and import of raw material from Myanmar and beyond (Millar, 2023).

The development of CMEC is having equal benefits for Myanmar as well. During the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, China offered 30 x CMEC projects out of which 9 were agreed by Myanmar

government. Aung San supported the CMEC and attended both the BRI forums held in 2017 and 2019. These projects gave upside down Y shape development strategy in the map of Myanmar. The first branch started from the Myanmar's primary border crossing with China at Muse and then it headed south to Mandalay wherefrom it splits into two branches, one going to the commercial capital Yangon at south and the other leads to Kyaukphyu on the Bay of Bengal in the southwest. The other projects include the development of Border Trade Zones, industrial zones, Special Economic Zones (SEZ), deep-sea port, a new city with capacity of 1 million people on floodplain of Yangon and connection of all these projects with highways and railways (Millar, 2023).

In February 2021, the military took over powers in Myanmar by overthrowing the democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi. This military coup has given a setback to China-Myanmar relations on one hand and stalled progress on CMEC on the other hand. After two weeks of this military coup, Chinese ambassador to Myanmar stated that China was not happy with the political situation of Myanmar and dismissed any role in this change. In April 2022, Wang Yi, the former Chinese foreign minister paid visit to Myanmar and announced China's full support to military government in all situation. It was clear sign to get back to real business of restoring work on CMEC. The current political scenario in Myanmar has endorsed that China is indispensable player in Myanmar no matter what political government and set up is there.

Prior to this, China also provided a submarine to Myanmar's navy that could create doubts in the minds of anti-BRI forces about China's strategic intent behind this initiative. Another sign of strategic drive behind China's BRI projects could be seen in choosing projects of its own choice like development of deep sea port, SEZ and power plant at Kyaukphyu and dropping other projects like railway from Muse to Mandalay, related road systems and multiple industrial zones planned for construction. China needs to review its approach towards CMEC if it wants to make BCIM-EC successful in long run. Such selection of projects on part of China has given room to its opponents who are trying to prove China as colonial empire. Similarly, such steps also created suspicion among the public in Myanmar about these projects, which needs to be removed through focusing on public oriented and infrastructure building projects.

As per Yun Sun, a Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the East Asia Program, China's focus on major infrastructure development projects in Myanmar and awarding contracts to only Chinese companies face serious obstacles and resistance in the execution of these projects which need to

be reviewed for gaining public support to these projects. India on the other hand is trying to gain Myanmar's public support not in terms of dollar capacity but through the prism of 'hearts and minds' which lay emphasis on initiating multiple smaller scale investments in Myanmar through identifying those areas and fields where investment is scarce and maximum local people get benefit without uprooting them from their traditional life styles (Chanda, 2021).

Sino- Bangla Geostrategic Bond

China and Bangladesh have been developing sound geostrategic and geo-economic relations over couple of years. China's main focus of relations with Bangladesh is Bay of Bengal (BoB) where it is launching number of projects in the fields of technology, communication, power, energy and infrastructure. In trade, China has emerged as one of the largest trading partners with Bangladesh and surpassed India as well (Das, 2022). The development of China-Bangladesh relationship strengthened after the official visit of Chinese President, Xi Jinping in 2016, Both countries are concluding billions of dollars' agreements that is upgrading their 'comprehensive partnership of cooperation to the level of 'strategic partnership of cooperation'. As per the data of Census and Economic Information Center (CEIC), Bangladesh had an export of \$38.959 million with China as of February 2021. Such data clearly shows growing relations between the two and existence of great potentials to explore.

The development of BCIM-EC will further enhance and strengthen their mutual relations. Under BCIM-EC, China has invested a number of coal-based power projects. In the year 2019, Bangladesh stood among the top receiver of China's FDI that was calculated at \$1.159 billion as per the report of Observer Research Foundation. Several reports confirm the signing of different agreements between the governments of Bangladesh and China especially after the end of COVID-19 period to restore the former's economy and put to it on road to developed nation by 2041 (Das, 2022).

As per another report, Bangladesh is the second largest recipient of China's loan under BRI after Pakistan, which is estimated at \$10 billion. Similarly, Dhaka is interested in cooperation with China in the areas of trade, defense and infrastructure development projects. According to some sources, China is investing about \$40 billion in the infrastructure of Bangladesh under bilateral partnership. The development of Sonadia Deep Sea Port near Cox's Bazaar would be one of the

best options for provision of outlet to the landlocked regions of Indian NER and Chinese Yunnan province as the existing Ports of Kolkata in India and Chittagong in Bangladesh are already working to their full capacity. Such mutual cooperation among China, Bangladesh and Myanmar can well predict the development of BCM-EC excluding India, if BCIM-EC gets delayed due to intransigence of India.

China has also offered Bangladesh a nuclear power plant to fulfill its energy needs. Both countries are also exchanging various items in trade e.g. Bangladesh imports China's petroleum products worth \$861 million, light pure woven cotton worth of \$170 million and light rubberized knitted fabric of estimated \$749 million. While, major exports of Bangladesh to China are ready-made garments, jute, leather goods, jute goods, agricultural products, live and frozen fish, plastic, pharmaceutical products, sports goods, tea, and handicrafts. This strong economic bond between the two countries requires strong infrastructure and communication, which can be established through BCIM-EC or BCM-EC. Li Jiming, the ambassador of China to Bangladesh remarks that Bangladesh-China relations will further enhance after execution of Bangladesh export policy of 2021-24, and duty-free access to China for 98% of Bangladeshi products.

Promotion of Cultural Interaction

BRI is designed to not only promote economic relations among the participating countries but also cultural interaction. The people of BCIM-EC and CPEC have got traditional and historical linkage since centuries. This historical linkage is well explained by Selmier in his thesis while discussing the significance of great Silk Road that has connected the Chinese people with this region. As per Selmier, this region is not only famous for its trade route but is also famous for centuries old traditions both in religion and cultural fields (Selmier, 2018). This cultural and historical link is also supported by Deepak who mentioned in his article about the trading of Chinese silk with this region as far back as 4th century BC (Deepak, 2018). The restoration of the region's historical role as a gateway to East and South East Asia would only be accepted and workable if the benefits of BCIM-EC should be equally shared among the participating countries, their ethnic groups and even between men and women (Uberio, 2014).

Conclusion

BRI is one of gigantic projects of China launched with connectivity objective to promote economic collaboration. Out of its 6 x economic corridors, 2 x corridors i.e. CPEC and BCIM-EC have been designed to promote economic collaboration within South Asian countries. CPEC, a bilateral project between China and Pakistan is going with good speed despite various vicissitudes. While, BCIM-EC, on the other hand is among 4 x countries, which is getting controversial due to geopolitical disputes among the participating countries especially between China and India. The intransigence of Indian Modi's government towards BCIM-EC in particular and BRI in general is halting the pace of development of this corridor. It led to explore the alternatives to develop BCIM-EC, a project which can benefit the entire South Asia and Southeast Asia.

One of the major challenges behind smooth execution of BCIM-EC is the Indian approach towards BRI. India is opposing both CPEC and BCIM-EC due to expected domination of China in the region. About BCIM-EC, India wants to keep it among the four participating countries and outside the umbrella of BRI. Though India can achieve absolute gains in the shape of development of its North Eastern Region (NER) by joining BCIM-EC but it is resisting due to Sino-Indian competition for regional hegemony. China no doubt will have relative more gains through this partnership both in economic and territorial spheres which is the sore point of concern for India. (Kumari, 2022). Another concern of India towards BCIM-EC is the land entry of China into India through a third party i.e. Bangladesh or Nepal instead of creating a direct corridor to India. The development of direct corridor to India would make its disputed border with India undisputed (like Nathula where opening trade border would ultimately lead China to recognize Sikkim as Indian state) which China can never afford to do so.

Indian policy towards BCIM-EC in particular and BRI in general is based on pragmatism endeavoring to minimize its geopolitical costs at its courtyard while maximizing its economic and status benefits. Both India and China have to negotiate on their core issues which have been existed between them for years. India should also consider the growing unrest in its eight states of North Eastern Region (NER) due to less development and poverty in those areas creating a challenge of even separation in that region. Such geostrategic concerns in NER of India can better be countered through bringing economic reforms with pushing BCIM-EC. In one of news commentaries, BRI is termed as a zero-sum game for India where China wins. With such analysis especially from

Indian perspective, it seems very difficult that India may be showing any laxity in its approach towards BCIM-EC especially under the current nationalist government of Modi.

A lot of time has been wasted in building BCIM-EC since its inception in 2013. It is therefore a right time for China and other participating countries of this corridor less India to join hands together under the leadership of China and develop BCM-EC at the shortest possible time. In this respect, China should develop a mechanism to engage a broad range of stakeholders in the BCIM-EC agenda not only including the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar but also officials of district level and below besides people from business interest. The dialogues with business circle of these countries must be concerning with their local demands and required fields instead of dictating the projects. To remove the misconceptions of local people and governments of these countries, the projects like extension in agriculture, environmental conservation, local cross border cooperation in commercial, social, environmental and cultural activities should be made an end in itself to achieve the sustainable development for the impoverished and isolated border regions of the neighboring countries.

China should continue with its soft power policy and keep offering India to join this corridor after above-mentioned alterations in BRI projects. The benefits and potentials of BCIM-EC would also convince India to join the BRI in future for restoring the Old Silk Road through economic and cultural collaboration among the countries of the region.

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