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Bangladesh Adrift: Reinvigorating and Reimagining Indian Connectivity Propositions through Bangladesh

DS KUSHWAH

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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Bangladesh Adrift: Reinvigorating and Reimagining Indian Connectivity Propositions through Bangladesh

Abstract

Consequent to Hasina's exit, Bangladesh is constantly adrift towards a strategic reorientation centred on Islamist agenda and growing tutelage of China – Pak combine. Interim administration seems to be institutionalising anti India and anti-Hasina rhetoric into policy frameworks. This paper hypothesises that India would remain central to Bangladesh's strategic geography and Bangladesh stands to lose more from pursuing divergent policies detrimental to Indian interests. India needs a multipronged strategy to nudge Bangladesh towards its own enlightened national interests. Concurrently, India needs to look beyond Bangladesh to develop alternate transit routes to its northeast, augment connectivity in Siliguri Corridor and pursue host of other alternatives and options.

Introduction

Turn of events in July – Aug 24 in Bangladesh and the resultant turmoil in Bangladesh hit Indian establishment as a classical black swan event and has rightly engaged the Indian academic, foreign policy and security establishments ever since. The author had reviewed the developments and attempted to project five scenarios in Dec 24 in an article published on CLAWS web site (Bangladesh Turmoil: Ethnocentric Outlook Is Need of The Hour – CLAWS).

Ever since, Bangladesh continues to remain on a downward spiral with clear signs of growing anti-India sentiments in the interim administration which is also reflected in its foreign policy orientation, marked by developing allegiance and tilt towards Pakistan and China. Domestically, priorities of the administration are clearly focused on rewriting history of liberation with a doctored narrative, changing the basic principles of constitution specially 'secularism' and 'socialism', both of which the constituency to which current dispensation owes its loyalty, believes were thrust upon Bangladesh by Indian establishment in immediate wake of liberation. While the debate over identity, their historic context and the story of polarised beliefs on nationalism in Bangladesh is a topic for examination on some other day, the fact is that there is no significant change in socio political contours dictating the five scenarios envisaged for Bangladesh's future earlier. In fact, trajectory of possibilities has only got reinforced towards some. Identity politics driven by Bangladeshi and Islamic narrative are driving domestic and foreign policies, relegating the Bengali identity in priority.

This brief triggered by infamous remarks of Md Yunus about India's North Eastern Region (NER), while interacting with Chinese Business community during his visit to China, aims to **contextualise the Strategic geography of Bangladesh with respect to India's Act East Policy**. In his zest to bid for making Bangladesh a manufacturing hub for Chinese industry, Yunus claimed Bangladesh as the sole guardian of Bay of Bengal and referred to landlocked status of India's NER, Nepal and Bhutan. He called upon Chinese Business entities to exploit Bangladesh as gateway for economic expansion. While Bangladesh says that Yunus made the statement with honest intentions, it will be naïve for any serious observer of the region to buy Yunus' argument let alone the Chinese. Indian External Affairs Minister was as such quick to point out the misplaced assumptions and cherry picking on

connectivity in the region. Presumably, the **comments and beliefs of Chief Advisor of Bangladesh have origins in the construct of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) connectivity architecture**, idea of which was first mooted by Rehman Sobhan (Bangladesh) in 1990s and envisaged multi-modal transport connectivity between Kolkata and Kunming via Bangladesh and Myanmar. BCIM-EC was one of the six proposed economic corridors of BRI. In this, Bangladesh sees itself as the bridgehead between Kunming and Bay of Bengal. Indian reservations on BCIM-EC are well known and the idea is unlikely to find any takers in the current geopolitical setting of the Region. It was due to sovereignty concerns of India on BRI in reference to CPEC that India opted out of it and did not attend the Belt and Road Forum. Consequently, the BCIM-EC was also dropped from the ambit of BRI. Therefore, while Bangladesh is well within its sovereign rights to bid for Chinese investments into its territory, linking it to India's NER is simply misplaced and preposterous. More so, coming in backdrop of deteriorating bilateral equations, this uncalled-for statement marked a new low and rightly drew sharp reactions from some of the leading Indian politicians and think-tanks. Besides, **India now seems to be nearing an inflection point of shedding its soft paddling in order to temper Bangladesh into realism**. Cancellation of transshipment facility to Bangladesh in vogue since 2020, halting of nearly Rs 5,000 crore worth of funding / construction work on railway connectivity projects viz Akhaura–Agartala Cross-Border Rail Link, the Khulna–Mongla Port Rail Line, and the Dhaka–Tongi–Joydebpur rail expansion line are few steps in this direction¹.

Apropos; this brief seeks to hypothesise that India is central to strategic geography of Bangladesh and the latter has more to lose in case it chooses a divergent strategy detrimental to Indian

1 (FP News Desk, 2025)

interests. It will evaluate connectivity propositions through Bangladesh under ambit of Indian 'Act East Policy' and also explore Indian options and alternatives in light of hardening anti-India stance of Bangladeshi dispensation. A brief review of developments and likely scenarios with respect to future prospects of Bangladesh has also been made to contextualise the issue at hand.

Review of Developments

Possible Futures

Developments in Bangladesh have serious impact on India's connectivity prospects and also raises significant security concerns. Clock is being reversed at fast pace to negate and undo achievements of 15 years of Golden period in bilateral relations under Sheikh Hasina. The period was marked by significant progress with respect to multi model connectivity and border management. Ever since Hasina's exit, there is a rising anti-Hindu violence which Bangladesh officially attributes to media exaggeration, Bangladesh – Pakistan Defence nexus, attempts at wooing Chinese investments for Teesta Basin development project and proposal of revival of airfield at Lalmonirhat, has obvious implications. More importantly, it is the basic reconfiguration of socio-political fabric of Bangladesh under de-facto writ of Islamic parties which is of greatest consequence.

Five scenarios, earlier envisaged, are refreshed and updated with key related developments as under: -

- (a) **Scenario 1 - Interim Government Morphs into a Political Force.** Several members of the influential 'Students Against Discrimination' holding key positions in the interim government and who spearheaded the movement leading to ouster of Hasina morphed into a political party

christened as **Jatiya Nagorik Party (National Citizen Party (NCP))** on 28 Feb 25. Nahid Islam, member of the Yunus cabinet and adviser in the information and telecommunications ministry, resigned and became convener of the party. Some of his colleagues viz Asif Mahmud and Mahfuz Alam continue to hold influential positions in interim government. Clearly, Yunus would prefer the NCP to form Government by getting legitimacy through the popular ballot. He is also wooing support of Islamic forces such as Jamaat and Hifazat. NCP as such also has representation of former members of Islami Chhatra Shibir, student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami. This appears to be the primary reason why elections are getting delayed despite the mandated 90 days clause. The interim government keeps testing waters with respect to mood on elections. On 10 April 25, Home adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury made a statement that people are telling them to stay for five more years in power. BNP has been quick to point out that interim government has no right to stay in power for five years². It is pressing for elections by Dec 25 realising that its possibilities of coming back to power are inversely proportional to delay. Yunus had earlier indicated no firm timelines and had only hinted at Dec 25 or early next year as the probable timelines. Ibid scenario was given a score of 5 out of 10 earlier. However, with the establishment of NCP and backing of establishment that it has bequeathed, odds are stacking up in its favour. It however, faces challenges of inability at stabilising law and order and ameliorating economic hardships of common man. Dhaka's streets are becoming

2 Report. (2025). "BNP Rejects Interim Government's Claim for Extended Rule." Dhaka Tribune, April 12, 2025.

increasingly unsafe, and the economic situation remains fragile³. **On the whole, aspirational vision of NCP may also attract an average citizen looking to break the binary politics of Bangladesh (ever since the parliamentary democratic process got reinitiated in 1991 on exit of Ershad). Hence, scenario possibility may now score a 6 or 7 out of 10.**

- (b) **Scenario 2 - Military in Saddle.** Bangladesh Army Chief on 25 Feb at an event marked in remembrance of Pilkhana massacre of 2009 expressed concerns over deteriorating law and order and blamed it on infighting amongst various stake holders. His warning that the gains of the student-led revolution were at risk, fuelled some Coup rumours in Dhaka. However, **given the factionalism and polarisation within the Army, past experiences and lessons which the Generals have drawn for themselves, possibilities of a Coup continue to be minimal.** Besides, the Army Chief has also dispelled these rumours and expressed support for Yunus dispensation. Recently, differences between the Yunus administration and Army Chief over **Humanitarian Corridor** to Rakhine in Myanmar and over timing of elections were also discernable. Notwithstanding, the Bangladesh Army has clarified that there is no such difference and the Army is working in unison with the Interim Government⁴. The scenario, therefore could only manifest as a Hobson's choice in case anarchy and chaos grips the country due to infighting amongst political parties. **Scenario value remains at 4 out of 10.**

3 Islamic, M (2024) : "Security and Economic Challenges in Post-Hasina Bangladesh". Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper 321.

4 (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha , 2025)

- (c) **Scenario 3 - Islamic Republic of Bangladesh.** This scenario is premised on Jamaat-e-Islami or Islamist orgs viz Hifazat getting reins of power. **While, on their own they are unlikely to get any success, these parties have substantial hold on BNP and NCP, both of which are the lead contenders in envisaged elections. Hence, they will play the role of kingmaker and influence the policies from backseat. We can expect Islamist influence growing under the patronage of political establishment. This continues to be the lead scenario and can be placed as 7 or 8 out of 10.**
- (d) **Scenario 4 - Chaos Morphing Into Anarchy and Scenario 5 - Awami League Back in Reins.** Both these scenarios continue to retain their possibilities **as per previous predictions with values ranging from 1 to 1.5 out of 10.**

Strategic Geography of Bangladesh

Strategic Geography - Framework

Strategic geography of a Nation encapsulates geography as well as its geographical positioning. It is eternal and fundamental to geopolitics and forms the basis for any nation to contextualise its geo-economics and geo strategy / foreign policies. It would encompass spatial areas that affect security and prosperity of a nation. Control of access to such spatial areas is obviously crucial. Geostrategy manifesting in foreign policies essentially combines geography and associated strategy of a Nation. It is concerned with the strategic value of geographic factors (resources, access to the sea, etc.) and how to maximise these to safeguard / further one's own national Interests. While geography describes earth in terms of its physical features, distribution of population, land use, economic resource of the country etc., strategy, on the other hand, deals with ways, means and ends to achieve goals of the state. While imagining its strategic geography, a nation also needs to

factor realistic assessments of its Comprehensive National Power. Like most countries, Bangladesh's strategic geography is both a source of opportunities and challenges, profoundly shaping its national security, economic prospects, and foreign policy.

Strategic Geography – Recompenses

In the aforesaid context, possible extent of Bangladesh's strategic geography may be bounded by India, Nepal, Bhutan, India's NER, China, Myanmar, Bay of Bengal and its access from Indian Ocean including littoral States of Sri Lanka and SE Asia. Apropos, Bangladesh seeks to drive its geopolitical salience projecting itself as **land bridge between South and SE Asia**. It considers itself **proximate neighbour of China** (separated from China with an aerial distance of about 100 km and hence, fundamental basis for idea of BCIM-EC seeking to project itself as **land bridge between Kunming and Bay of Bengal**) and a narrow strip of **Siliguri Corridor** makes Nepal and Bhutan its close neighbours separated from the northern border of Bangladesh by mere 22 km and 30 km of Indian territory respectively. Besides, it abuts the strategic Siliguri Corridor that connects India's heartland with its northeastern region. Geographically, it **straddles the Bay of Bengal** on its south, hence, it offers Nepal, Bhutan and India's NER (by extension even to China) an alternate economical access to oceans for sea borne trade via Bay of Bengal. With its spatial placement vis-a-vis India's NER, proximity to SE Asia, Nepal and Bhutan, Bangladesh stands out as a natural pillar for India's Act East Policy. In fact, it is due to this virtue that Bangladesh finds itself at **centre of some of seminal Indian regional and sub-regional initiatives viz Act East Policy, BBIN and BIMSTEC**, besides being the largest trading partner of India in the sub region. Refer **Figure 1**

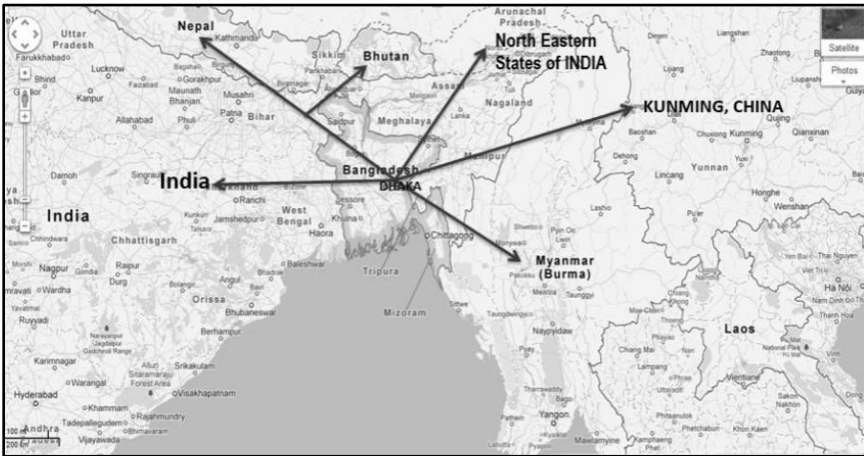


Figure 1 : Bangladesh's Strategic Geography

Source: <http://www.massa.net.my/a-brief-on-trade-and-investmentopportunities-in-Bangladesh>.

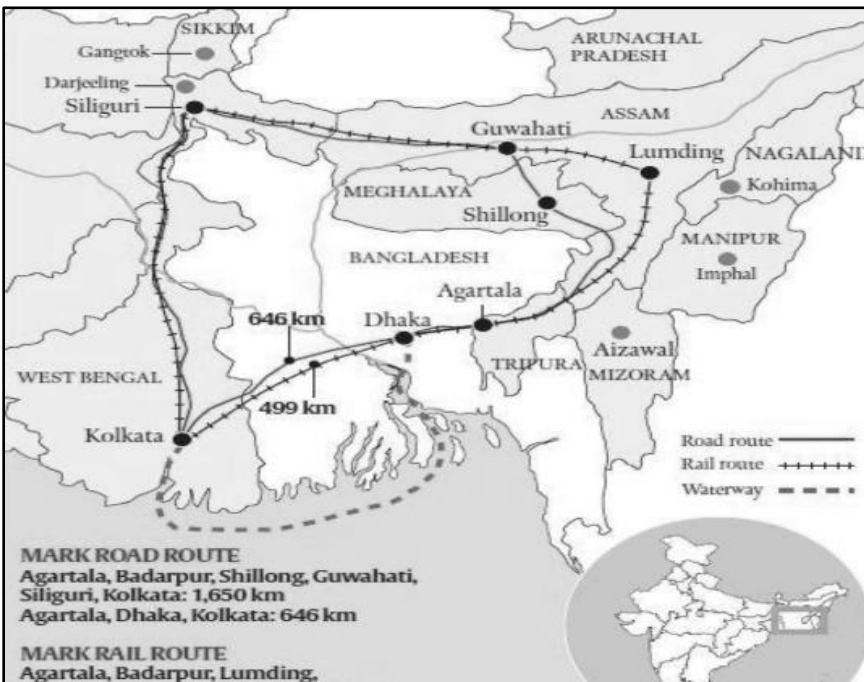


Figure 2 : Connectivity to NER

BANGLADESH ADRIFT: REINVIGORATING AND REIMAGINING INDIAN CONNECTIVITY PROPOSITIONS THROUGH BANGLADESH

Prior to the partition of India in 1947, trade and commerce of India's NE with the rest of India and the outside world used to pass through the territories of what is now Bangladesh. Rail and river transit across the erstwhile East Pakistan continued till 1965 when, as a consequence of war between India and Pakistan, all transit traffic was suspended. Transit through Bangladesh cuts down 1000-1200 km road distance to NE States for India. See **Table-1** below.

From	To	Via Siliguri Corridor	Via Bangladesh	Distance Differential
Agartala	Kolkata	1680 kms	450 kms	1230 kms
Silchar	Kolkata	1407 kms	600 kms	807 kms
Guwahati	Kolkata	1081 kms	830 kms	261 kms
Shillong	Kolkata	1181 kms	720 kms	461 kms
Imphal	Kolkata	1742 kms	900 kms	842 kms
Aizawl	Kolkata	1657 kms	800 kms	857 kms

Table 1 : Connectivity Differential Between NE & Kolkata via Siliguri Corridor vis-à-vis Bangladesh

Source: P. 138, Security and Development in India's Northeast, Gurudas Das, OUP, 2012, cited by Subir Bhaumik, 'Look East Through North East', ORF Occasional Paper #51, June 2014.

Strategic Geography – Constraints

Extending just about 820 km north-south and 600 km east-west, Bangladesh is largely a **low-lying deltaic plain** formed by Ganges (Padma), Brahmaputra (Jamuna), and Meghna Rivers. It is a land starved country and is densely populated with a **population density of 1,350 per Km²** and 8th largest populated country in the world⁵. It is one of the most disaster and climate vulnerable

5 (Worldometer , 2025)

countries in the world, frequently experiencing extreme weather events such as cyclones, floods, droughts, and sea-level rise. It ranked at **31 amongst 173 Countries** surveyed by 2025 Germanwatch's Climate Risk Index covering the period 1993–2022⁶. Bangladesh lies between the Himalayas in the North and the Bay of Bengal in the South, making it **highly susceptible to long monsoons, catastrophic floods, and cyclones**. The country acts as a drainage basin for Himalayan Rivers, leading to frequent inundation. It is among the world's most flood-prone countries due to its low elevation, with 90% of the land is less than a meter above sea level. A 1.5m rise in sea level is estimated to affect 17 million people and 16% of land⁷. More or less each and every year it has been experiencing disastrous floods. Bay of Bengal is also a source of powerful cyclones. The 1970 Bhola cyclone killed up to 4,50,000 people and was a catalyst for Bangladesh's independence movement⁸. Other major cyclones - Sidr (2007), Alia (2009), Roanur (2016), Bulbul (2019), and Amphan (2020) have caused massive destruction. From 1972 to 2017, Bangladesh experienced a total of 297 natural disasters. In this period, 2,29,521 people have died, 39,63,16,766 have been affected and economic damage was 1,90,67,901 thousand US\$ due to natural disasters⁹.

6 (Germanwatch, 2025)

7 (Sea level change Landforms of REJUVENATION, n.d.)

8 Hossain, N. (2023). "Climate Vulnerability Assessment of Bangladesh." *Environmental Studies Journal*, 42(2), 125-142.

9 (Abdul Baten, 2018)

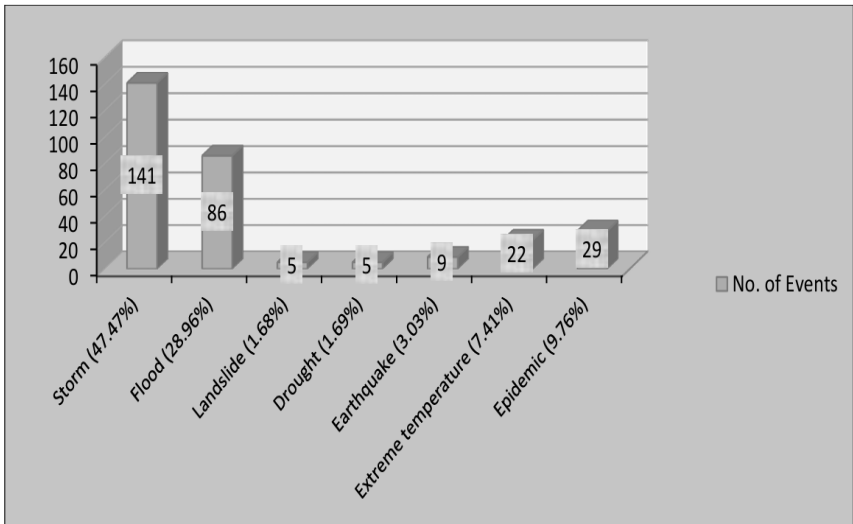


Figure 3: Frequency of Natural Disaster in Bangladesh since 1972 till 2017

Disaster Type	Total Deaths	Total Affected
Food	42,279	30,42,56,323
Storm	1,74,288	6,34,45,949
Epidemic	1,01,88	30,42,429
Landslide	263	1,36,470
Extreme Temperature	2,440	4,14,200
Earthquake	45	19,395
Drought	18	2,50,02,000
Total	2,29,524	39,63,16,766

Table 2: Impacts of Natural Disasters on Bangladesh Since 1972 till 2017

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330360643_Natural_Disasters_and_Management_Systems_of_Bangladesh_from_1972_to_2017_Special_Focus_on_Flood.

Further, **near neighbours of Bangladesh do not share land borders with it**. It is landlocked on three sides by India. There are 54 trans boundary rivers and Bangladesh being a **lower riparian of India** has its own set of challenges. Disputes over Farakka barrage and Teesta water sharing are manifestation of same. **Lack of deep-water port facilities** restricts the handling of large cargo vessels and increases business costs. Over 98% of Bangladesh's containerised trade passes through Chittagong port, creating a logistical chokepoint. Given the tyranny of geography Bangladesh faces, **its innate geography is regarded as a curse by many**¹⁰. Bangladesh has an EEZ of 148,000 sq km with potential for fisheries. However, Bangladesh uses only approximately 24,000 sq km of area for fishing due to lack of fishing gear and smaller fishing vessels result in less catch. Potential of availability of gas in EEZ is around 17-103 TCF. However, due to inadequate capacity for oil and gas exploration, Bangladesh continues to be one of the world's top most importer of gas.

Contours of Bangladesh's Geo Strategy

Base, Means, Capacity (BMC) equation is a classical way of making a SWOT assessment of any country. Here, 'Base' encompasses spatial, material and population as given by nature; 'Means' are essentially man-made competencies and generally include military, economic and political aspects; while 'Capacities' are politico-social and psychological. From the analysis of Strategic geography in the preceding section, it is evident that **Bangladesh enjoys tremendous positional/ locational advantage by virtue of its geographical disposition**. However, its inherent land mass is hugely challenging proposition. Further, India emerges as its numero-uno influencer in its strategic geography. There is a natural

10 Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies. (2024). "Strategic Geography of Bangladesh: Vulnerabilities and Advantages." BIIS Papers, 26(1), 12-28.

marriage of interests and prospects of win – win situation for both and Bangladesh can aspire to **play the role of node and hub in the regional connectivity architecture**. However, this has to be **premised on stable bilateral equations with India** since Indian primacy in sub regional and regional connectivity architecture cannot be overstated. Simply put, **if India's NER is semi-landlocked, so is Bangladesh which is also 'India locked'**. Bangladesh needs to correctly contextualise and prioritise its prospect keeping in view its own enlightened national Interests and not merely work to institutionalise anti-India rhetoric into policies. India dominates its strategic geography both from land and seaward point of view. As regards its economy (means), Bangladesh has certainly made strident progress and is no more aid driven. However, it lacks diversification as Agriculture, RMG Sector, overseas remittances are the only prime movers of economy. Demographically, Bangladesh is blessed with homogenous population as 98% is Bengali speaking. It has also been able to control population growth with effective birth control measures since 1980s. However, it continues to be densely populated. Further, it has a deeply polarised society with multiple identities and associated political affiliations. In addition, **agitational dynamics manifesting in a unique 'hartal' culture** often derails progressive/ developmental agenda. Vested interests possibly exploited this malaise to the hilt in orchestrating ouster of Hasina Government and violence and targeted attacks that followed in its immediate wake and keeps surfacing often whether it is gutting down of 32 Dhanamondi (personal residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman converted into Bangabandhu Memorial Museum), looting of official residence of PM of Bangladesh and Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre or forcing Chief Justice to quit. Therefore, it can be surmised that **Bangladesh will score significantly low on BMC outcomes**.

Awami League Governance. Her authoritarian approach to governance apart, Sheikh Hasina dispensation needs to be credited for **remarkably balancing its geo strategy with diktats of strategic geography**. Her regime saw **unprecedented progress on sub regional connectivity**, proactive participation in seminal Indian connectivity projects both bilaterally and through regional / sub regional groupings. As a result, her tenure saw an **unprecedented economic growth** and Bangladesh was at the cusp of shedding its LDC status, having crossed the benchmark for being an LDC graduate on two occasions in 2018 and 2021. Ongoing turmoil would unfortunately push back Bangladesh on triumvirate criteria of Gross National Income (GNI), Human Assets Index (HAI), and Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI), which decide the developmental status of a country. Sheikh Hasina Government **successfully resolved the long pending boundary issue** with India, which resulted in the transfer of 111 enclaves to Bangladesh by India in return of 51 enclaves. A string of trade and investment agreements accompanied the land deal, with \$4.5 billion of investments in power and a \$2 billion credit facility for Bangladesh unveiled during Modi's visit in June 2015. India also committed to enhancing maritime domain awareness by placing surveillance radars on southern coastline of Bangladesh. She tamed rising threats of Islamic militancy and radicalisation and kept the military in their barracks in a country with a history of army take overs. She also assuaged Indian security concerns by shunning use of Bangladesh territory by Indian insurgent groups. Hasina understood the **logic of cooperation on Bangladesh - India connectivity in the wider sub-regional context to exploit her country's positional advantage**. Crucial sub regional connectivity initiative like BBIN fructified during her Governance. It was during her regime that Bangladesh started working on connectivity with desired seriousness. Despite the obvious logic of gains through connectivity between Bangladesh and India's NER, political

rivalries in the then East Pakistan, coupled with the fact that Bangladesh, in the post-1971 period, did not take any steps to create a larger economic space in the sub region until the 2000s, impacted the economic potential of the region. **Bilateral cooperation on connectivity peaked during her regime with six pre - 1965 rail links having been rehabilitated. Three railways and five bus services began operating between the two countries giving boost to trade, commerce and people to people connectivity.** Bilateral and sub-regional **energy cooperation** also saw a remarkable growth. **Defence cooperation was marked multiple level of bilateral engagements including annual joint exercises by all three services.** Yet another landmark achievement was her **ability to balance Bangladesh's engagements with China with remarkable finesse.** Bangladesh became part of BRI project. This was followed by President Xi Jinping's visit to Dhaka which took the economic engagement to next level. In fact, foreign policy dictum enunciated in the 1972 Constitution talks of 'Friendship to All, Malice towards None' as the basis of foreign relations. **Hasina Government followed this dictum and ensured multilateralism in its foreign policy** quite akin to Indian policy outlook. Consequently, the country enjoyed good relations with US, EU, Japan, Middle East, India and China at the same time. This enabled shrewdly avoiding predatory Chinese economic policies unlike some of the countries in the neighborhood. **It can be safely said Bangladesh in her time was punching well above its weight.**

Interim Administration. On the contrary, Yunus dispensation driven by innate anti-India outlook has thrown its weight towards China - Pak combine. Visible hostile stance towards India is essentially a reflection of ongoing internal dynamics of Bangladesh. As elucidated preceding section, Islamist party's emergence as power centre in future polity of Bangladesh is the most likely scenario. **Imposition of ban on Awami League** and its affiliated organisations, under the Anti-Terrorism Act, until the International

Crimes Tribunal completes the trial of the party and its leaders¹¹ has **effectively foreclosed political future of Awami League** for foreseeable future. Hence, there is no balancing force in polity. It is also a reflection of ongoing political and social vengeance in Bangladesh. **Undoing decisions of previous government appears to give a sense of justice or achievement and also acts as façade to cover up inadequacies of current dispensation.** The interim administration has also indicated its desire to **review 10 MoUs signed by Hasina with India in Jun 24.** One of the most discussed MoUs was on providing rail transit to India through Bangladesh. Adani Power deal is also under review and legal notices have been served to that effect. A committee formed on review of foreign loans has indicated review of the energy sector's foreign loan agreements and other contracts¹². Remaining projects under Indian Line of Credit remain suspended as work force has exited Bangladesh amidst rising social unrest. Yarn imports from India have also been suspended. Unsurprisingly, **ties with Pakistan are being reset at political, diplomatic, economic and military level with much vigour.** Training assistance, supply of ammunition and armament from Pakistan, Joint military exercises and exchange of visits including by DG ISI are significant concerning developments for India. Shipments from Pakistan have been exempted from mandatory custom checks. A government-to-government (**G2G**) **deal with Pakistan to import 50,000 tons rice** was agreed. Later, a **Pakistani-flagged ship** carrying 26,250 metric tons of government-imported rice from Pakistan **arrived at Chittagong on 13 Nov 24** marking the **first direct G2G trade between Bangladesh and Pakistan since independence**¹³. This was followed by an **agreement to enable launch of direct passenger and cargo flights**

11 (Star Online Report, 2025)

12 (Staff Correspondent, 2024)

13 (UNB, 2024)

between the two countries in January 2025¹⁴. Bangladesh has demanded \$4.52 billion from Pakistan as its share of pre-1971 assets, along with a formal apology for the genocide committed against Bangladeshis by the Pakistan military¹⁵ during the foreign secretary level talks in Dhaka after 15 years. Trump coming back to power in US was a setback for Yunus dispensation as Trump denounced the alleged deep state funding for a regime change in Bangladesh. US, being the largest export destination of Bangladesh, enhancement of tariffs from 16 to 37 % is yet another setback. Yunus has been **trying to develop leverages with US** by signing Artemis Accords, giving license to Elon Musk's satellite internet venture, Starlink and even agreeing to a UN humanitarian Corridor to Rakhine. His visit to China was essentially centered on getting favorable interest rates for existing loans to make them financially viable, attract Chinese investments and relocation of Chinese manufacturing in view of US tariffs regime vis-a-vis China. Yunus - Modi meeting on sidelines of BIMSTEC meet in Bangkok did not yield any significant outcome. In fact, Government of India's announcement on annulment of the Transshipment agreement in immediate wake of this meeting speaks for itself. While fundamentally, **Bangladesh's outreach towards US and China is on similar lines as Hasina Government, difference lies in its approach to relations with India, its engagements with Pakistan, the Islamist drift and a visible attempt to play 'China Card' against India.** While its outreach to China is being hailed as a major achievement, **China on its part has not given any significant weight to Yunus dispensation.** Analysts estimate that about \$12 billion of China's loans to Bangladesh are 'risky'. Therefore, while Hasina was offered US \$2 billion, Yunus was offered US \$2.1 billion loan. One economic and technological cooperation agreement and

14 (The Bangladesh Minitor, 2025)

15 (Diplomatic Correspondent, 2025)

eight MoUs got signed during the visit¹⁶. In his bid to needle India, Yunus made the infamous remark on NER as also sought Chinese participation in Teesta Project.

Indian Connectivity Paradigm: Act East Policy and Bangladesh

India's 'Look East Policy (LEP)' (1992) and 'Act East Policy (AEP)' (2014 onwards) are focused on reaching out and integrating with economies of ASEAN countries. While the policy has registered an impressive growth, one of the key problems **inhibiting growth in trade is absence of physical connectivity with ASEAN which has been limited to only ocean and air shipping**. AEP seeks to develop these linkages with **NER acting as the hub of physical connectivity architecture**. Bangladesh and Myanmar are the only options for land connectivity to fructify and it was also in their interest to reap the dividends of connectivity, making Indian drive a win – win proposition. As such both the countries are members of crucial regional/ sub regional groupings, spearheading connectivity projects as enablers for economic growth of the region. **Ventures through Myanmar were a laggard owing to insurgencies in NER as well as Myanmar. While internal situation in NER is largely stable, ongoing instabilities and turbulence in both these countries is a challenge which India needs to navigate**. Figure 4 below depicts the India – ASEAN connectivity paradigm. This connectivity architecture is being pursued under large number of National Infrastructure development programmes and through various bilateral cooperations, sub regional and regional groupings viz BIMSTEC, BBIN, SASEC, MGC etc. Connectivity to ASEAN is being pursued through Sea and Land links. In the land connectivity paradigm,

16 (Jayanta Roy Chaudhary, 2025)

Bangladesh essentially stands out as a transit hub to India's NER and Myanmar is the bridge connecting ASEAN.

Various connectivity projects and groupings facilitating cooperative framework are elucidated in succeeding paragraphs of this section. Role, relevance and endeavours of Bangladesh have been specially contextualised. It will be evident that **Bangladesh can ill afford to part ways with contrarian policies.**

Hasina's Approach on Connectivity. Prior to partition in 1947, undivided India was one thriving economic entity. In fact, Bay of Bengal region was more developed compared to many other parts of British India. The goods produced in this region were transported to other parts of India by rail and road through East Bengal and also exported globally through Chittagong Port¹⁷. Division of India's NER into India and Pakistan (East) severed these linkages. Later, post its independence, Bangladesh started focusing on connectivity only in 2000s. It is noteworthy that **connectivity through Bangladesh during Hasina regime witnessed impressive growth as she provided an enabling environment.** Bangladesh became founding member of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in her first stint as PM. Her second stint saw active negotiations on the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement (BBIN MVA) from 2010/ 11 onwards. The BBIN construct was formalised in 2014 under her premiership during 18th SAARC summit. Ever since, Bangladesh pursued many inter and intra-regional connectivity projects under ambit of Trans-Asian Railway and Asian Highway initiatives, BIMSTEC, BBIN and South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Initiative under aegis of Asian Development Bank (ADB). SAARC also undertook a Regional Multimodal Transportation Study in 2006. However, as

17 (Hasan, 2021)

the grouping is practically nonfunctional, connectivity projects under its ambit have either not made any substantial headway or in some cases connectivity remains suspended. The **logic of connectivity formed basis of Bangladesh's engagements in the various connectivity initiatives in Asia-Pacific, specifically in the sub-region during Hasina's rule**¹⁸. Further, in 2023 under her premiership that Bangladesh released its formal approach on Indo Pacific in form of **Indo-Pacific Outlook to realise its 'Vision 2041'** which seeks to build a knowledge based developed country by 2041. It is a seminal document which outlines a balanced approach in Indo Pacific region.

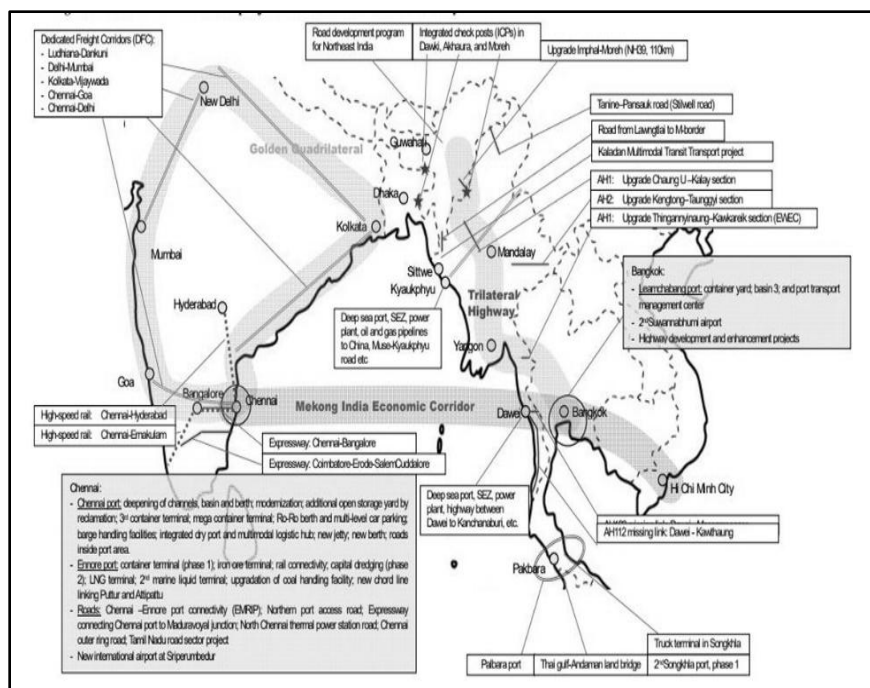


Figure 4 : India – ASEAN Connectivity Paradigm

Source: ASEAN-India Connectivity: The Comprehensive Asia Development Plan, Phase II, ERIA Research Project Report 2010-7.

18 (Haque, 2023)

Trans Asian Highway (TAH) and Trans Asian Railway (TAR) Routes. Three TAH routes are planned through Bangladesh. Two of these connect India at both ends (TAH 1 & 2) and other could be extended to neighbouring Myanmar via Teknaf (TAH 41). Similarly, there are four railway alignments of Bangladesh under TAR. TAR 1 being the mother or main artery connecting India to Myanmar via Bangladesh. Other alignments are subsidiaries merging with TAR 1 and extend trans-border connectivity to India.

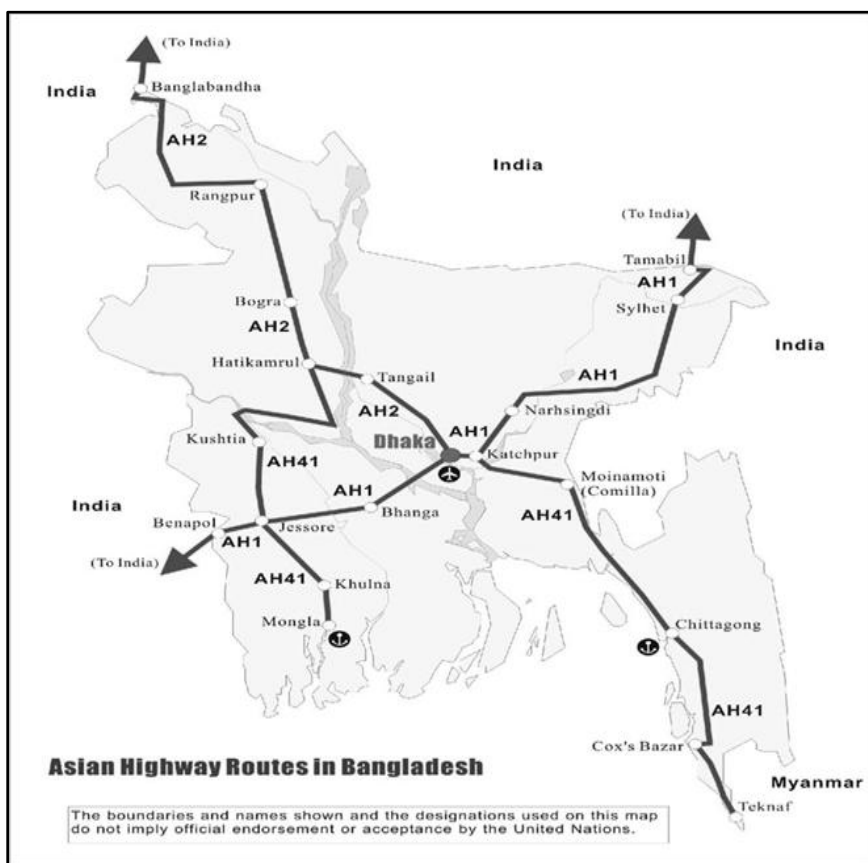


Figure 5 : TAH and TAR Routes

Source: https://s3.amazonaws.com/somewherein/assets/images/kiritiroydbblog_1252489743_1-Bangladesh-part.jpg

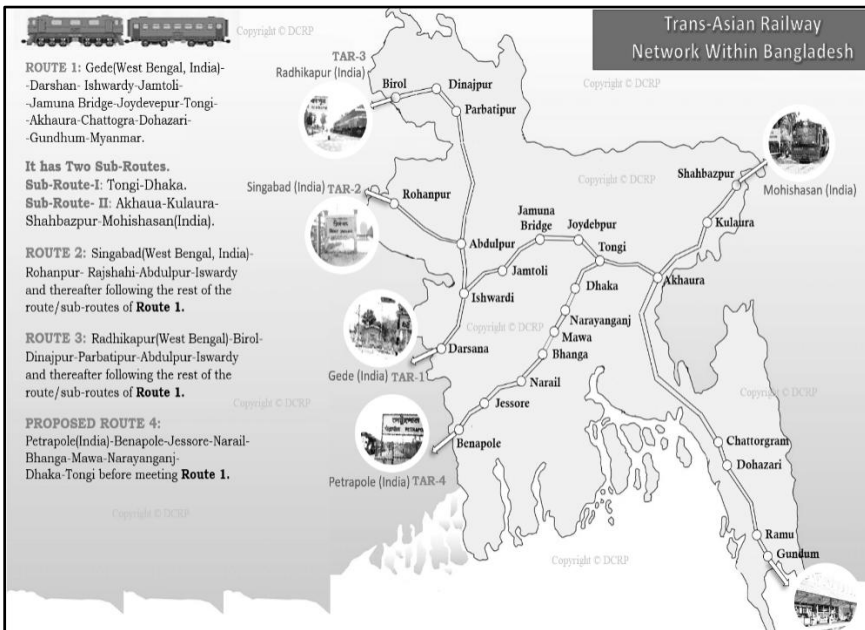


Figure 6: Trans Asian Railway Network Within Bangladesh

Source: <https://dhz-coxb-railway.com/trans-asian-railway-network/>

SASEC. SASEC as part of ADB came into being in 2001 at behest of the regional bodies seeking funding for their connectivity projects. SASEC has identified six Economic Corridors aimed at integrating economies of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. **Out of the six SASEC Corridors, Bangladesh figures in four corridors one of which is a maritime economic corridor.**

These are Sri Lanka-India-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar Corridor; Nepal-India-Bangladesh Corridor; Bhutan-India Bangladesh Corridor; Myanmar-Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Maldives (Maritime) Corridor. Connectivity architecture planned under these corridors is depicted in **Figures 7 to 9** below (*The maps are schematic representations only and may not show exact international boundaries:-*

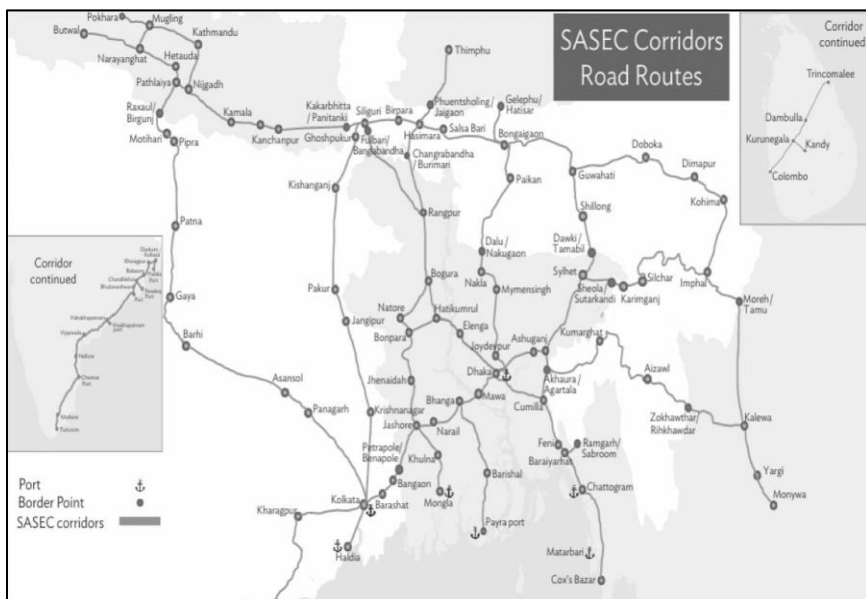


Figure 7: Road Routes along SASEC Corridors

Source: ADB. As published in Action Plan for SASEC Initiatives 2024 – 2026.

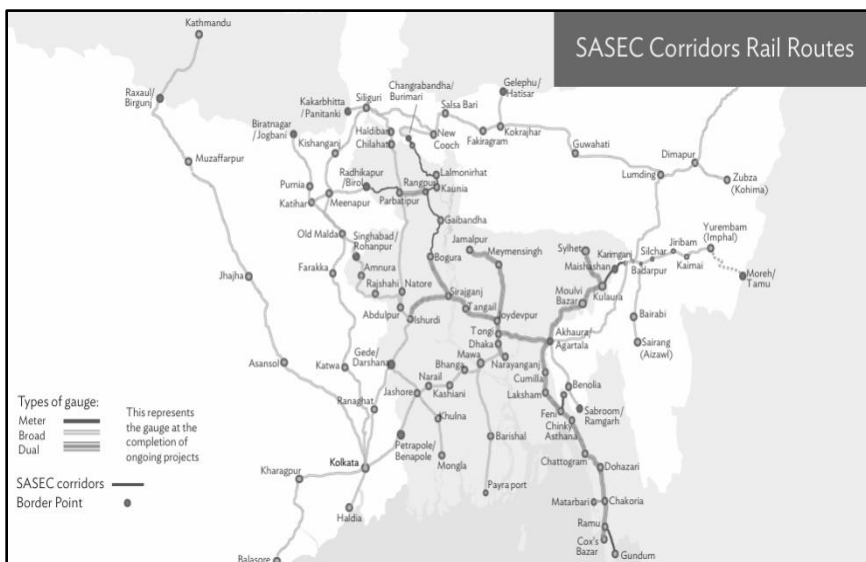


Figure 8: Rail Routes along SASEC Corridors

Source: ADB. As published in Action Plan for SASEC Initiatives 2024 – 2026.

Corridor	Exporter	In Transit	Importer
Kathmandu - Kakarvitta - Panitanki - Fulbari - Dhaka - Chittagong	Nepal	India	Bangladesh
Thimphu - Phuntsholing - Jaigaon - Changrabandha - Burimari - Dhaka	Bhutan	India	Bangladesh
Lucknow - Gorakhpur - Sonauli - Bhairawa - Kathmandu	India		Nepal
Kolkata - Raxaul - Birgunj - Kathmandu	India		Nepal
Corridor	Exporter	In Transit	Importer
Jaigaon - Gelephu - Samdrup Jongkhar - Guwahati - Dawki - Tamabil - Dhaka	Bhutan	India	Bangladesh
Kolkata - Petrapole - Benapole - Dhaka	India		Bangladesh
Fulbari - Banglabandha - Rangpur- Dhaka - Chittagong	India		Bangladesh
Agartala - Akhaura - Comilla - Chittaganj	India		Bangladesh

Table 3 : BBIN MVA Corridors

Source: [https://www.cuts-international.org/bbinmva/pdf/Report
Connecting_Corridors_beyond_Borders.pdf](https://www.cuts-international.org/bbinmva/pdf/Report_Connecting_Corridors_beyond_Borders.pdf)

BIMSTEC Connectivity. BIMSTEC is a unique grouping which transcends South and Southeast Asia and seeks to integrate the economies of two sub regions with a view to make them growth engine for Asian economic growth. An ADB study formulated **BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity**

till 2028. It adopts a holistic approach, covering both hard infrastructure and soft connectivity. While the master plan is not a binding document, it is a comprehensive 10-year road map which seeks to integrate connectivity projects under ambit of other regional organisations or groupings with overlapping geographical territory. These include Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) Master Plan on Connectivity 2025 (MPAC 2025), the Ayeyawaddy–Chao Phrya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC) program. Indian driven projects viz India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTTH) and Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP), coastal connectivity and IWT through Bangladesh are also part of this plan. There are large number of flagship projects in Bangladesh as well. These include enhancing arterial links to ports and borders, upgrading border roads and port access roads, rail connectivity and ports and airports infrastructure²⁰. BBIN and SASEC complement the efforts of BIMSTEC. Centrality of BIMSTEC standing out as the bridge to enable connectivity between crucial regions of Asia is well established. Key connectivity projects are the IMT acting as the land link and Sea Link being provided through Bay of Bengal connecting to ACMECS under the ambit of Mekong Ganga Cooperation programme. Hence, underscoring centrality of Indian driven initiatives. See **Figure 10** showing the centrality of BIMSTEC as unifying force.

20 (BIMSTEC MASTER PLAN FOR TRANSPORT CONNECTIVITY DEC 2020, 2020)

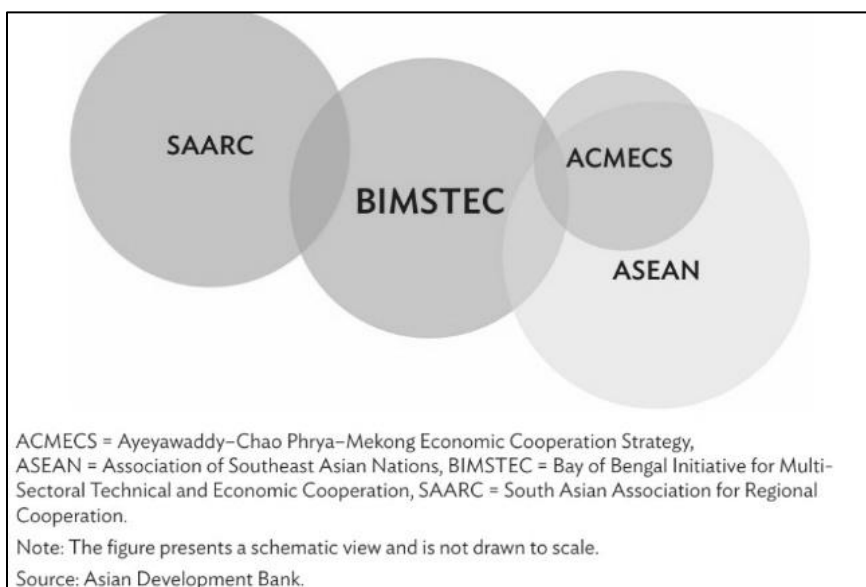


Figure 10: BIMSTEC Centrality

Status of Connectivity through Bangladesh

Waterways Connectivity

Inland Water Transport (IWT). Historically, the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Barak – Surma - Meghna, Karnafuli, Gumti, Tista, Atrai, Korotoya and many other rivers formed the transportation network in the region. River Transit (IWT) was restarted in 1972 with signing of Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWT&T). In 2015, the protocol was renewed for five years. Ever since, mutually it was agreed to put the protocol in auto renewal mode. There are 10 protocols routes and 22 ports of call. To ensure optimum employment, dredging of rivers and further improving the soft connectivity was also being pursued mutually with previous dispensation in Bangladesh. National Waterway – 1 (NW 1) from Allahabad to Haldia (Ganges) and National Waterway-2 (NW 2) from Sadiya to Dhubri (Brahmaputra) are critical waterways to enable IWT connectivity amongst BBIN countries.

Nepal gets connected to NW 1 at intermodal terminal at Kalughat and the multimodal terminals at Sahibganj. Similarly, Bhutan gets linked to NW 2 at Dhubri and Jogigopha. See **Figure 11**.

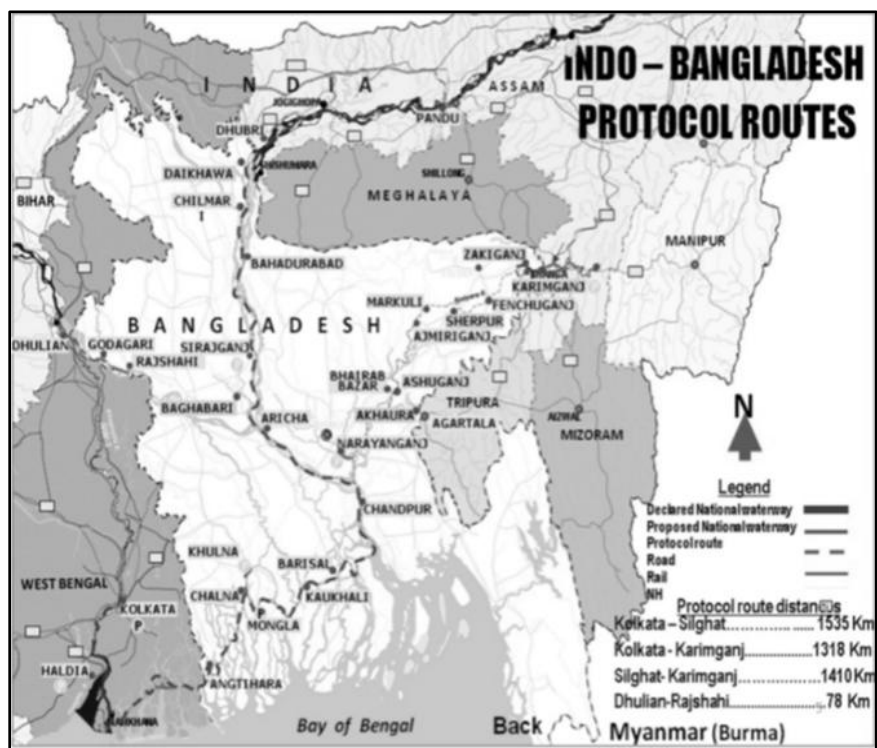


Figure 11: IWT Network

Coastal Shipping. Bangladesh has three ports out of 19 ports on Bay of Bengal Rim (Chittagong and Mangla are functional with handling capacity of 3.7 million TEU and 129 million Metric Tons respectively and Matabari port is under development). Suitably connected port infrastructure with IWT can be a force multiplier for Bangladesh and India's NER connectivity. Bilateral coastal shipping agreement between the two was signed in 2015.

This agreement was a game changer allowing two-way direct container shipping services between India and Bangladesh through their respective ports. It enabled decongestion of Land Customs

Stations (LCS) viz Petrapole-Benapole. The shipping time gets reduced from 25/30 days to 04/10 days. In 2018, Bangladesh and India concluded a bilateral agreement to allow the use of Chittagong and Mongla Port.

Under this agreement, Bangladesh can use Indian ports on Eastern coasts should Chittagong/ Mongla get overcrowded or are unable to handle deep vessels. India could access northeastern states of Tripura and Mizoram for cargo using Mongla and Chittagong ports.

In 2023, Bangladesh agreed allow usage of Chittagong and Mongla Ports for transportation of goods to its NER using protocol routes. This enabled two-way movement of goods/ cargo from these two ports in Bangladesh to Agartala via Akhaura; Dawki via Tamabil; Sutarkandi via Sheola; Srimantapur via Bibirbazar²¹. **BIMSTEC Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement (BMTCA)** signed during 6th BIMSTEC Summit in April 2025 at Bangkok is yet another milestone which will immensely facilitate Coastal Shipping by providing National treatment to vessels, establishing Joint Shipping Coordination Committee, Mutual recognition of seafarer certificates and providing Dispute resolution framework. This will widen the scope of coastal shipping from existing bilateral arrangement between two countries to regional / sub regional level. See **Figure 12**.

21 (Islam, 2023)

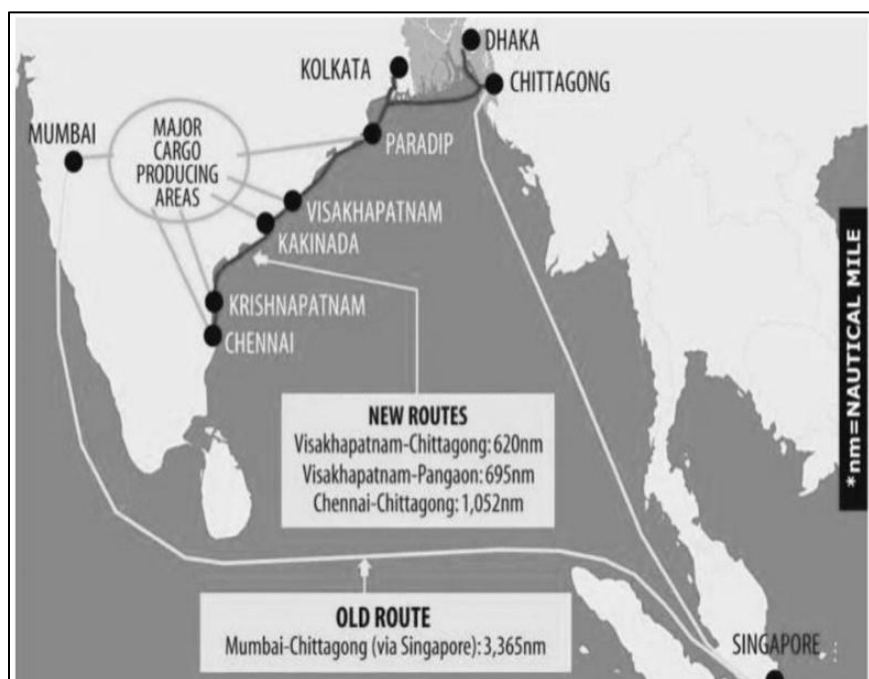


Figure 12: Old and New Shipping Routes between India and Bangladesh

Source: <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/coastal-shipping-could-reinvigorate-bilateral-ties-between-india-and-bangladesh>

Road Connectivity

Road transport is the predominant mode of transport in Bangladesh accounting for 80% of total traffic moved. However, currently it lacks Asian Highway Class I highway networks and relies on class II and III highways which pose challenges for bilateral/ regional connectivity. Five bus services routes are currently operational between India and Bangladesh connecting cities of Kolkata, Agartala and Guwahati to Dhaka and further up to Khulna. These are Kolkata-Dhaka (1999), Dhaka-Agartala (2001), Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala (2015), Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati (2015) and Kolkata - Khulna - Dhaka. For facilitating trade and transit, Bangladesh Land Port Authority currently operates seven (out of

its total 11) land ports with India. Similarly, India has a total of 12 operational ports (out of its 22) including four Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) with Bangladesh²².

Road transportation of goods follows the SASEC and BBIN economic corridors as elucidated in preceding section.

Rail Connectivity

Railway as a mode of transport has been a laggard in the entire South Asia. India has the largest and most well-developed railway network in the region and even their average modal share of domestic freight is hugely skewed in favour of Road transportation. **Table 4** below indicates average modal share of domestic freight in BBIN countries.

	Mode			
	Road	Rail	Waterways	Air#
India	60	31	9	-
Bangladesh	85	4	11	-
Nepal	78	13*	0	10
Bhutan	100	0	0	-
International	25-30	50-55	20-25	-
<i>Note: *Refers to Nepal's third-country trade through Indian Railways. #refers to the share of air in freight movement.</i>				

Table 4: Rail Connectivity

Source: Sinha, R. (2024). Express Routes: India's Railway Connectivity with South Asia (CSEP Working Paper 85). New Delhi: Centre for Social and Economic Progress.

²² (Land Ports Authority of India, n.d.)

India has progressed rail connectivity through Bangladesh under bilateral and multilateral frameworks for planning and funding. 75% of India's developmental cooperation in Bangladesh through lines of credit is dedicated to infrastructure development. SASEC Rail Corridor 2 follows alignment of Kolkata-Ranaghat-Gede-Tangail-Dhaka-Comilla-Chittagong-Cox's Bazar (675 km). However, owing to issue related to different gauges and other infrastructure issues, currently focus is only on establishing cross border connectivity only through bilateral level. Even in MPAC 2025, there is a reduced emphasis on railway connectivity.

Within the region India has maximum railway linkages with Bangladesh. Six out of seven historical railway lines between both countries have been revived for both freight and passenger movement. There are three operational passenger trains between India and Bangladesh. These are the Maitree Express (Kolkata-Dhaka), Bandhan Express (Kolkata-Khulna) and Maitali Express (New Jalpaiguri-Dhaka). However, all train services and some freight operations have been indefinitely suspended since July / Aug 2024 due to the recent political turmoil. In June 2024, Final Location Surveys (FLSs) for 861 km were cleared by Indian Railways for additional railway lines with Bangladesh on 11 routes. This entails construction of new railway lines, extension of existing freight links, and gauge conversion Bangladesh. It also included crucial Agartala-Akhaura rail link, Benolia-Feni- Chittagong link and revival of Mahisasan - Shahbazpur rail connectivity²³. Table 5 below shows details of India Bangladesh Freight Rail Linkages and Table 6 below shows the details of New Railway Lines between India and Bangladesh Approved for FLS in 2024.

23 (Sinha, 2024)

Country	Station in India	Station in Neighboring Country	Distance (Kms)*	Current Status (2024)
Bangladesh	Petrapole	Benapole	1.8	Operational
	Gede	Darshana	3	Operational
	Haldibari	Chilahati	7.5	Operational
	Singbad	Rohanpur	10	Operational
	Radhikapur	Birol	11	Operational
	Agartala	Akhaura	12.24	Inaugurated
	Mahisasan	Shabazpur	11	Planned

Note: *Refers only to cross-border component. These railways are further planned to connect to the domestic railway networks.

Table 5 : India–Bangladesh Freight Rail Linkages

Source: Sinha, R. (2024). Express Routes: India’s Railway Connectivity with South Asia (CSEP Working Paper 85). New Delhi: Centre for Social and Economic Progress.

Route	New Construction (km)	Gauge Conversion (km)
Balurghat–Hili–Parbatipur–Kaunia–Lalmanirhat–Mogalhat–Gitaldaha	14	18
Balurghat–Gitaldaha–Bamanhat–Sonahat–Golakganj–Dhubri	38	18
Mangurjan–Pirganj–Thakurgaon–Panchgarh–Haldibari	60	-
Dalkhola–Pirganj–Thakurgaon–Panchgarh–Haldibari	80	-
Radhikapur–Birol–Parbatipur–Kaunia–Gitaldaha	14	18
Belonia–Feni–Chottogram	38	93
Gede–Darsana–Ishwardi–Tongi–Bhairab Bazar–Akhaura–Agartala	-	100
Petrapole–Benapole–Nabharon–Jessore–Rupdia–Padmabila–Lohagara–Kashiani–Shibchar–Mawa–Nimtala–Gendaria–Dhaka–Tongi–Bhairab Bazar–Akhaur	-	120
Forbesganj–Lakshampur	17	-
Thakurganj–Chattarhat	24	-
Kumedpur–Ambari Falakata	170	-

Table 6 : New Railway Lines Approved for FLS In 2024

Source: Sinha, R. (2024). Express Routes: India’s Railway Connectivity with South Asia (CSEP Working Paper 85). New Delhi: Centre for Social and Economic Progress.

Identifying Lines of Efforts

Bangladesh indeed is India's most consequential neighbour. It not only shares longest land boundary spanning five Indian States of northeast, it also has the longest sea board with India. Its centrality as most consequential neighbour is well established not only through the strategic geography but also in deep rooted historical and civilizational connect. Unfortunately, the connectivity agenda which could have cemented this connect further in modern day and age got disrupted by India's partition and more importantly later due to adversarial policy orientation of successive governments in post-independence phase of Bangladesh. 1975 assassination of Mujib was the watershed moment in this regard. The military regimes of Zia Ur Rehman, Ershad and BNP rule in its wake were marked by anti-India outlook. Regional and sub-regional connectivity agenda dictated by Bangladesh's strategic geography took a back seat. This got revived in Hasina's rule and substantial progress has been made ever since. This needed to be carried forward by pursuing not only physical connectivity infrastructure but also substantial ground needed to be covered to establish soft connectivity. However, post Hasina Bangladesh has witnessed unabated policy reversals, revengeful domestic policy and growing anti-India sentiment.

India cannot remain a mute spectator to the fast-paced geo strategic realignment being pursued by Bangladesh under its interim administration, for one it is purely driven by animosity towards India. Besides, it is certainly not even in best interest of Bangladesh to defy the logic of its own strategic geography and years of endeavours focused at pursuing the connectivity agenda. With Awami League having been banned from forthcoming election, there is no hope even in post-election scenario and Islamist

agenda is likely to continue to be predominant policy strand for foreseeable future in Bangladesh. In this milieu, India has to adopt a multifaceted approach to safeguard its own interests in pursuing its connectivity agenda. While India made the apt choice by adopting an approach of strategic patience in backdrop of tumultuous development since 05 Aug 24, there is a need to graduate to a **more proactive approach to knock the Bangladeshi establishment into consciousness of its own enlightened national interest**. Towards this, Indian External Affairs Minister has set the pace in response to Yunus' statement in China by highlighting that India not just has a long eastern sea board of about 6,500Km but that its NER shares borders with five nations around the Bay of Bengal.

Multipronged approach of India needs to focus on following lines of efforts: -

- (a) Reinvigorate connectivity through Myanmar.
- (b) KMTTP Integration with NER Connectivity.
- (c) Develop redundancies and alternatives to connectivity via Siliguri Corridor.
- (d) Leverage Bhutan's Gelephu mindfulness City Project.
- (e) Proposed Connectivity Architecture: NER of India.
- (f) Contours of Indian Engagements with Bangladesh.

Reinvigorate Connectivity through Myanmar

Myanmar shares a border with four of India's NE states; Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. There are **two main avenues** driving India's outreach to ASEAN Countries under ambit of Act East Policy and **Myanmar holds the key to both** these avenues. These being the sea route as the west link of the

Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC), and the land route centers around the main artery of India - Myanmar - Thailand (IMT) trilateral highway with various other options to connect to it. These two routes, namely, the west link of MIEC and the Trilateral Highway are the key for the successful enhancement of the connectivity between ASEAN and India.

The **Sea Route** as the west link of MIEC, from Bangkok to Chennai via Dawei, is designed to enhance the connectivity between the two Tier 1 regions. Bangkok and Chennai have formed agglomerations of manufacturing industry by inviting a large amount of foreign direct investment most notably in automotive and electronics sectors. The enhanced connectivity between Bangkok and Chennai is expected to enable those manufacturing hubs. The **Land routes** (IMT and KMTTP) help in connecting Myanmar and larger ASEAN with India's NER which in turn also has Nepal and Bhutan as its rearward linkages.

Bangladesh gains relevance primarily as a transit highway to India's NER employing multimodal connectivity avenues of road, rail, IWT and coastal connectivity. KMTTP stands out as a significant vital alternative for transit to NER. **KMTTP cuts down the distance to Southern Northeastern states**, with shorter transit time and more efficient cargo handling. Cargo moved on KMTTP covers about 917 km, as compared to the approximately 1,500 km long route by rail from Kolkata to Aizawl.

Two of the most crucial projects are the KMTTP and the IMT Trilateral Highway. Unfortunately, owing to variety of reasons of which security situation in Myanmar being the most crucial, both projects have been delayed. KMTTP aims at connecting Kolkata port to Sittwe port in Myanmar's Rakhine state; linking Sittwe port to Paletwa along the Kaladan River through IWT, and finally connect Paletwa to Zorinpui on the India/ Myanmar border by

road. Deep-sea port at Sittwe, dredging and modernising of Kaladan waterway and construction of a jetty at Paletwa has been also been completed. Extension of NH 54 to Zorinpui on Indian side has also been completed. The only **challenge is road connectivity from Paletwa to Zorinpui**. This faces the environmental, terrain and security challenges. Ongoing insurgencies coupled with post-coup dynamics have added to challenges to both of these Indian flagship projects. However, both the military Junta and democratic dispensation that preceded it have been favourably inclined to these projects. Of the two projects **KMTTP**, has progressed more substantively and is a **low hanging fruit** but will require a multifaceted engagement with all stake holders viz Arakan Army (AA) which is also part of the Brotherhood Alliance of three lead Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) in Myanmar, the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile and its armed wing The People's Defence Force (PDF) and the Military Junta. In this regard, certain initiatives by Indian establishment are encouraging. An Indian parliamentarian visited Paletwa after crossing over from Zorinpui to assess the progress on KMTTP. He also met the leaders of Arakan Army²⁴. In addition, there was a Seminar titled 'Constitutionalism and Federalism' organised by Indian Council of World Affairs at New Delhi in Nov 2024. Unconfirmed media reports suggest participation by anti-junta EAOs from Rakhine, Chin and Kachin States being invited for the Seminar²⁵. India needs to vigorously pursue both KMTTP and IMT projects. Engagement with EAO at Track II/ III level is much called for.

24 (Choudhury, 2024)

25 (Reuters, 2024)

KMTTP Integration with NER Connectivity (India-Myanmar Economic Corridor)

Recently Indian Cabinet cleared the 166.80 km Greenfield High-Speed Corridor from Shillong to Silchar. This will enable transformation of NH-06 as a four-lane access-controlled Greenfield corridor. It is the **first high-speed corridor project** in the NE. **Silchar is suitably poised as entry point** for connecting Mizoram, Tripura and Manipur as well as the Barak Valley region of Assam. It can become a **major connectivity hub** for the entire NER and a gateway for India's Act East Policy. It is noteworthy that Silchar is also the hub for rail road connectivity to Imphal (NH 37 and Jiribam - Imphal Railway Line) which eventually connects to IMT. Survey work for Imphal - Moreh Line has also been completed. A railway line to Aizawl is also planned besides the existing connectivity to Agartala and Guwahati both of which are electrified tracks. Currently, a 52 km long railway line from Bairabi to Sairang (20 Km North of Aizawl) is under construction. In August 2015, Indian Railway had also completed a survey for a possible new route extension from Sairang to Hmawngbuchhuah on Mizoram's southern tip on the border of Myanmar where at nearby Zochachhuah KMTTP road enters Myanmar²⁶. This **railway line could also be extended to Paletwa and onwards to Sittwe as part of KMTTP**. Thus, adding railway as an additional mode of transportation. NE States of Tripura, Mizoram, and Manipur on average witness two to three train loads of about 5,000 metric tons of essential commodities daily. Rerouting such volumes on KMTTP would require a large fleet of IWT vessels and hundreds of trucks to carry these goods from Sittwe to Aizawl and other freight terminals. Movement of such large quantities and multiple handlings would add to logistics costs and time delays²⁷. A rail link

26 (Consultant, n.d.)

27 (Jamshed, 2025)

connecting Sairang to Sittwe would entail distance of 375 km would enable larger cargo movement in single mode from Sittwe onwards. This would then truly become **India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (IMEC)**, a win - win proposition for both the Countries.

Redundancies and Alternatives to Connectivity via Siliguri Corridor

Owing to its narrow depth, proximity borders from four neighbouring countries and network of arterial highways, railways, oil pipe lines connecting India's NER and presence of other economic assets; Siliguri Corridor stands out as India's geographical jugular vein. Often, Bangladesh seeks to project it as Indian vulnerability and tries to play it up as a leverage. This negative approach marked a new low when during the recently concluded OP SINDOOR, Major General (Retd) A.L.M. Fazlur Rahman, Ex Director General of the Bangladesh Rifles (Now BGB) made a statement suggesting occupation of India's northeast in coordination with China if India attacked Pakistan²⁸. Similarly, on Victory Day (16 Dec), Mahfuz Alam, Advisor in Interim Administration in a Facebook post put out a map portraying the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam as territories of Bangladesh²⁹. The post was deleted under Indian protests and the Interim Government distanced itself from remarks of Fazlur Rahman. During visit of Yunus to China, he sought Chinese investments in Teesta basin projects and for resuscitation of Lalmonirhat Airfield. While **Bangladesh is not in any meaningful position to pose a conventional military threat** to India, presence of Chinese in close proximity economic interests and presence in close proximity has its own set of challenges. To negate any adversarial fall out, India must focus on **modernisation of**

28 (UT Desk, 2025)

29 (TNEC News Desk, 2024)

transportation infrastructure with multiple redundancies in system. To negate penalty of transportation time and distance, investments in **high-speed rail connectivity** should be planned. Parallel to existing highways in the corridor, **High Speed Road Corridor Expressway** is also desirable. This will add to redundancies, enhance traffic flow and cut down cost as well time in transportation of goods. Vulnerable sections of the communication arteries must be augmented and strengthened by **tunneling, creation of additional bridges on water bodies and creation of shunts and bypasses**. The corridor's proximity to Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, as well as the Chumbi Valley (near the tri-junction with China), amplifies its strategic salience. The corridor's development should be integrated into broader Act East Policy goals.

Leverage Bhutan's Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) Project

Bhutan has embarked upon a unique spirituality driven economic transformation by designating Gelephu as a Special Administration Region (SAR). It is positioning **GMC on lines of Singapore model** thriving on regional and sub-regional connectivity. As part of the project, Bhutan aims to provide business friendly regulations to make GMC a clean technology innovation hub by attracting global investment. Spread over some 2500 sq km, the project entails creating economic clusters as under³⁰: -

- (a) Spirituality centered on mindfulness and cultural heritage.
- (b) Health and Wellness to turn GMC into a global destination for holistic health.
- (c) Education and Knowledge – Promoting Mindful Learning.

30 (Dorji, 2025)

- (d) Green Energy and Tech - Leveraging renewable energy potential and foster innovation.
- (e) Finance and Digital Assets including digital currency.
- (f) Agri-Tech to promote sustainable agriculture practices.
- (g) Aviation and Logistics: Multi modal connectivity including developing an International Airport.

India needs to get fully integrated with GMC as its vision, thrust areas and developmental plans are completely aligned with our spiritual and cultural heritage. Indian spiritual leaders and organisations may also align with the project. India's NER must be an enabler to open avenues for GMC's multimodal connectivity to South Asia, SE Asia and larger ASEAN. As part of the project, a 58-km rail link between Gelephu and Kokrajhar is already planned. The 127C highway running parallel to it could also be transformed into an Expressway to linking GMC to NH 27 which should also be developed as Expressway till Guwahati and onwards to Shillong to connect to Silchar – Shillong Expressway.

Proposed Connectivity Architecture: NER of India

NER is home to abundant mineral reserves, 75% of India's on shore oil and natural gas reserves, hydropower potential of 84,000MW and vast tourism potential. Despite rich natural resources and high literacy levels, this region has been an economic laggard on account of number of intertwined issues. While the internal security situation has shown significant progress in last decade or so, a pattern of low capital formation, poor infrastructure, high levels of poverty and unemployment, poor geographical and physical connectivity and lack of exploitation of inherent strengths of the region has precluded realisation of full growth potential. A multi prong approach to promote investment led growth within the region and development of multimodal

connectivity with rest of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar is desirable. Indian government aims to develop NER as the **‘Front-Runner of Growth’** and has been laying significant impetus to multifaceted development in NER. Recently concluded Rising North East Investors Summit enabled in bringing in large number of investments in the region in key sectors of tourism, hospitality, infrastructure, energy, IT, agro-food processing and healthcare. Over ₹4.3 lakh crore in investment proposals from lead industrial houses viz RIL, Adani and Vedanta Group got finalised in this summit. PM Modi during his speech highlighted that in last decade, construction of 11,000 kilometers of highways, extensive new railway lines, a doubling of airport from 74 (2014) to 159 (2024), development of waterways on the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers, and establishment of a 1,600-kilometre-long Northeast Gas Grid has been completed.

There is a need to relentlessly pursue connectivity infrastructure under SASEC Action Plan, BIMSTEC Economic Corridors and MPAC 2025. Various projects such as Silchar-Saurashtra East-West Corridor under National Highways Development Project, East Coast Economic Corridor (ECEC) and North East Economic Corridor (NEEC) and Seven Sisters Corridor should from the basis of integrated infrastructure development to connect NER as well as promote better connectivity within the region.

Seven Sisters’ Corridor or the NEEC need to be developed on lines of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor. In the northeast, Seven Sisters Corridor will link the seven states of the NE with each other and to contiguous neighbours like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan. More and more connectivity links under ambit of these projects should be planned as Expressways. A proposed future profile of connectivity in India’s NER is as shown in **Figure 12**.

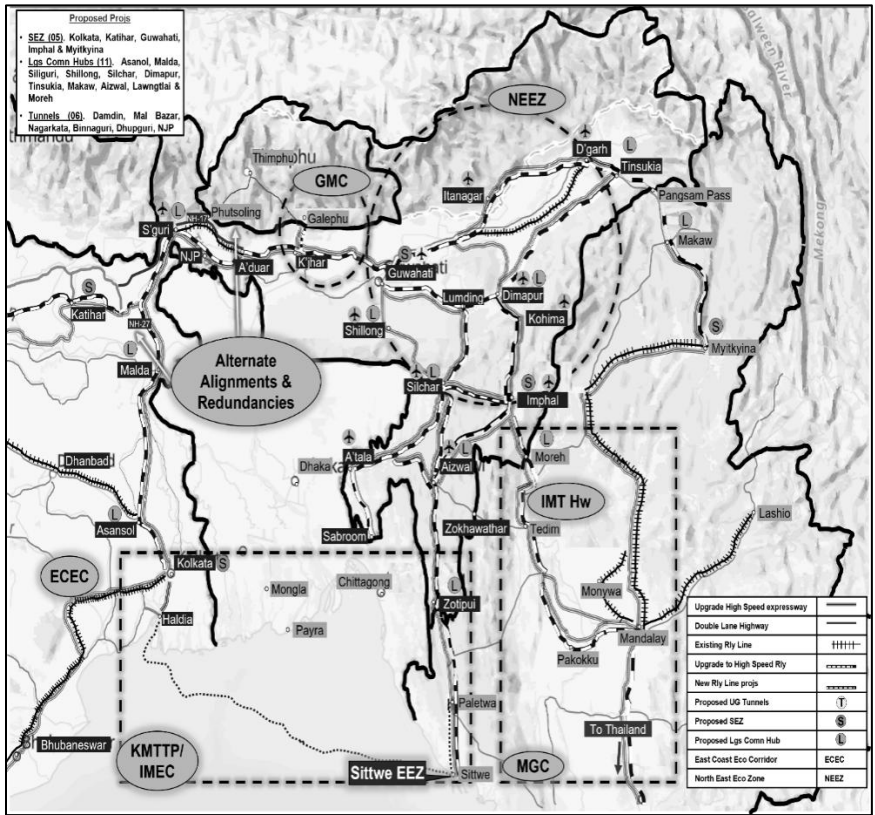


Figure 12: Proposed Connectivity Paradigm - NER

Contours of Indian Engagements with Bangladesh

In backdrop of continuing Bangladeshi drift in its strategic outlook, India needs to recalibrate its engagement with the Country through a mixed bag of policies. At the macro level, it must be realized that stable and peaceful Bangladesh is certainly in Indian interest. Therefore, while adopting a completely hostile stance may hasten the drift of Bangladesh towards China - Pak - Turkiye nexus, a calibrated escalation to drive home the risks and fallouts of such an alignment on Bangladesh is imperative. Some of the recent actions related to imposing restrictions on bilateral trade and commerce by Indian Government are right steps in this direction.

Withdrawal of privileges like Duty Free Quota Free (DFQF) access and export subsidies to Indian markets could also be looked at. Additionally, India could look at following policy approach: -

- (a) Alternate connectivity options as elucidated in preceding section must be expedited with full vigour. Aim should be to augment our infrastructure in the NER, pursue connectivity with other willing partners in South Asia and Myanmar. Avenues of coastal connectivity with Thailand must be pursued under ambit of BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping arrangements.
- (b) There is a need to reach out to Bangladeshi think tanks, intellectuals/ academicians, important public personalities through Track II / III route. Indians and Bangladeshis have many connections with each other at personal level. One of the crucial aspects is **defence diplomacy which traditionally has been a strong arm of our diplomatic outreach in Bangladesh**. People-to-people ties through tourism, medical visas and business/ cultural exchanges, where feasible must continue. Outreach to leadership of BNP to sensitise them of implications of Yunus led dispensation is also important. Issues such as strategic imperative for Bangladesh to maintain friendly outlook towards India and carefully balancing its relations with US and China need to be highlighted. Bangladesh's policies under Yunus administration are self-defeating and may lead to debt traps and challenges akin to some other nations in the region. Bangladesh needs to be mindful of debt traps and predatory economic policies followed by some countries. In case Bangladesh does not correct the course, spectacular chapter of its growth story will get reversed.

- (c) India must engage closely with US, Japan and EU to highlight implications of Chinese dominance over Bangladesh on larger strategic balance in Indo-Pacific region, Radicalisation of society and Islamisation of polity and more importantly, the Government policies. It is noteworthy that US, Japan, China & India are among Bangladesh's most important economic partners in Indo-Pacific region and contribute maximum to its economy. Overall, it is a trade deficit economy with deficit of 22 Bn USD as of Dec 24. While China leads the imports, US and India are the lead exports destinations for Bangladesh. Similarly, US and India have a lead over China in terms of FDI in Bangladesh. Japan is the largest donor of Project Aid to Bangladesh followed by China and India signifying the countries good relationship with Bangladesh. US, Japan, the EU must offer alternatives to Bangladesh under the Blue Dot Network framework.
- (d) India must continue to engage with BIMSTEC and BBIN nations to highlight actions of Bangladesh being against the understanding of these groupings. Relevant issues also need to be raised at multilateral meetings of these forums.
- (e) A concerted drive is needed to curb illegal immigration by efficient border management. Besides, illegal migrants identified need to be deported to Bangladesh. There is also a need to strengthen intelligence monitoring mechanisms including cyber surveillance in States bordering Bangladesh to monitor ISI backed elements. Community policing in vulnerable Indian states to prevent infiltration may also be encouraged.
- (f) Calibrated escalation of trade restrictions in response to adversarial policies and actions of interim government of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Situation in Bangladesh is dynamic and fast evolving. While it is not the case here to debate the legality/ constitutional validity of Interim Government, it is evident that Interim Administration in Bangladesh has far exceeded its constitutional obligation by insisting on reforms before elections and prolonging their stay in power. This has led to consolidation by Islamic elements specially Yunus' protegee in form of Jatiya Nagorik Party and organisations like JEI and Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh. An Interim Government is obliged to hold elections within 90 days. However, Yunus seems to be in no hurry. Disillusionment of Army Chief as also the BNP is justifiably understandable in this regard. Besides, some of the policies such as provisioning of Humanitarian Corridor to Rakhine State of Myanmar are perceived against the national interests by many analysts in Bangladesh.

Some of the Advisors in interim administration have known anti-India stance. Policies of current dispensation are distinctly adversarial to Indian interests. Further, probable scenarios indicate, continuation of these policies in near future in Bangladesh, **it is imperative for India to reinvigorate and redefine its connectivity options under Act East Policy toward its NER.**

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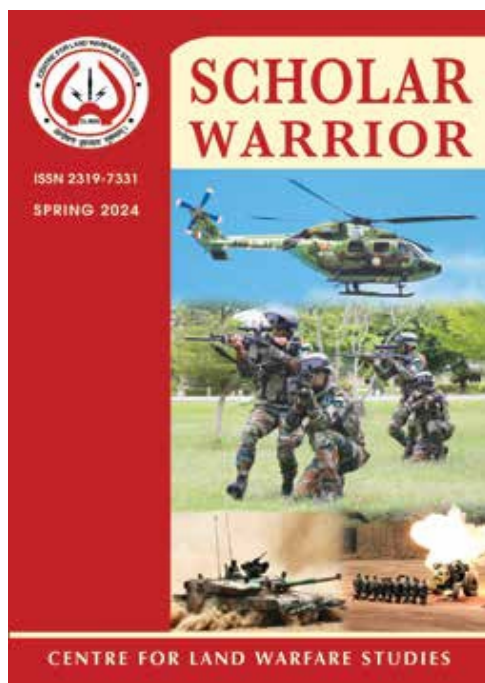
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Despite its cohesive geography and common historical legacy, South Asia remains the least connected region of the world. Owing to enabling security environment, bilateral relations and convergence of interests during Hasina's regime, last decade plus witnessed significant boost to connectivity agenda. Political transformation in Bangladesh following Hasina's ouster has fundamentally altered prospects of South Asian connectivity. This research forecasts Bangladesh's political future to be predominantly under Islamic influence and its strategic orientation under patronage of China – Pak combine. Pathologically anti India, such a geopolitical recalibration by Bangladesh will undo the achievements of Hasina Government albeit to much detriment to itself.

The study points out that if India's northeast is semi-landlocked, so is Bangladesh which is also 'India locked'. Bangladesh needs to correctly contextualise its own enlightened national interests and not merely institutionalise anti-India rhetoric into policies. India dominates its strategic geography both from land and seaward point of view. Besides nudging Bangladesh to correct course, this study recommends Indian policymakers to re-examine and reinvigorate connectivity through Myanmar, upgrade the Kaladan project to India – Myanmar Economic Corridor and provides host of other actionable alternatives.

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