

PROCEEDINGS

Talk on

BANGLADESH-NEPAL RELATIONS: PROSPECTS FOR SUB-REGIONAL COOPERATION



BISS Auditorium, Dhaka
18 February, 2020



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)

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Talk on

Bangladesh-Nepal Relations: Prospects for Sub-regional Cooperation

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organized a talk on “Bangladesh-Nepal Relations: Prospect for Sub-Regional Cooperation” on 18 February 2020 at BIISS Auditorium. H E Md Shahriar Alam, MP, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh graced the talk as the Chief Guest. H E Mr Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, Honourable Foreign Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal delivered the keynote speech in the event as the Guest of Honour. Ambassador M Fazlul Karim, Chairman, BIISS chaired the talk. He also delivered the welcome address.

Officials from different ministries of Bangladesh Government, representatives of various embassies, international and national organizations, former ambassadors, researchers, media and academia participated in the open discussion and raised their valuable opinions, observations and questions in the talk.



Welcome Address



Ambassador M Fazlul Karim
Chairman, BISS

Ambassador M Fazlul Karim, Chairman, BISS said that Bangladesh and Nepal have enjoyed excellent relations ever since the establishment of diplomatic ties. Nepal is not only a close neighbour but also a good friend of Bangladesh. Nepal was among the first few countries which recognized the independent Bangladesh. Bangladesh also remain on Nepal's side during her difficult times. The two countries share similar views on important international issues and work closely in various regional and international forums. The countries also have similar development visions with a view to attaining socio-economic progress and prosperity for the citizens. As Bangladesh aspires to achieve the goals of the Vision 2021 and Vision 2041, the Himalayan country has her own vision of a "Samriddha Nepal, Sukhi Nepali" ('Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali').

He noted that Bangladesh and Nepal have been cooperating in a number of vital sectors. However, there are many more potential areas which need to be explored. Sub-regional cooperation should be a





key focus area for both countries. South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world, but the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-regional cooperation is a promising initiative to integrate the four South Asian neighbours. Signing of the landmark Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) in 2015 paved the way for a seamless movement of goods and people across their borders, thereby encouraging regional integration and economic development. Implementation of the agreement will create new scopes to tap new resources which could not be explored effectively in the past. Trade and investment cooperation between the two countries will also be further expanded. Beside economic progress, connectivity will also help people-to-people contacts and promote human development which vital to development in any country.

He stated that to reap the benefits of the much anticipated “Asian Century”, it is imperative that countries of South Asia trace the common challenges together. So, regional initiatives can address some of the common stumbling blocks to the economic development. Cooperation in energy and connectivity will certainly be the key factors in the development dynamics of this region. In this regard, Nepal and Bhutan can be the source of energy security for the South Asian nations. Both of these countries have limited energy demand in the foreseeable future compared to their hydropower potential that is around 100,000 MW, which is the largest in this region. The two countries can pull their resources and engage the private sector to contribute to the massive investment needed to tap the hydropower resources of the region. There are some promising developments as Bangladesh and Nepal are working closely with India to start cross-border energy security. As Bangladesh's power demand is projected to be doubled by 2030, it has plans to import large amount of power from Nepal. The upcoming Bangladesh-Nepal Joint Steering Committee (JSC) meeting in March is expected to discuss the possibility of developing two hydropower projects: the 1,110 MW Sunkoshi II and 536 MW Sunkoshi III, located on the Sunkoshi River in central Nepal. The Bangladesh Power Development Board has issued a letter to Indian infrastructure giant, GMR Group, expressing its interest to enter into a contract to purchase 500 MW of electricity from its 900 MW Upper Karnali hydropower project in Nepal. If successful, these projects can be stepping stones for future sub-regional cooperation in South Asia. Bangladesh's private sector wants to tap the business opportunity of Nepal's hydropower through investing in several hydropower projects which should be encouraged.

He said that enhanced connectivity over land, air and sea can unleash region's socio-economic growth potentials. It is an area which offers enormous win-win opportunities for all relevant state level actors as well as their peoples. Bangladesh and Nepal are separated by only 22 kilometer of Indian land. As a land-locked country, Nepal would get a huge fillip in the field of logistics and connectivity if they could use the sea routes via Bangladeshi seaports, viz. Chattogram and Mongla. The launching of Padma Multipurpose Bridge will also greatly facilitate this effort for enhanced sub-regional connectivity. Following the opening of Kakarbhitta-Phulbari-Banglabandh transit route in 1997, Bangladesh has permitted Nepal to use the port facilities in Mongla. Bangladesh has also provided additional rail-transit corridor to Nepal via Rohanpur-Singhabad. The agreement on bus service is already in place, which needs to be made operational as soon as possible.

He highlighted two of the most prospectus areas of sub-regional cooperation between Bangladesh and Nepal. First is the tourism industry. Both Bangladesh and Nepal have huge potential in the travel, tourism and hospitality sector. In the past years, there have been exchanges of large numbers of tourists between the two countries. The majestic mountains of Nepal offer an attractive destination for Bangladeshis who are used to living in relatively flat terrain. Similarly, for Nepalis, Bangladesh is also an attractive tourist destination as it has the longest sea beach in the world Cox's Bazar, the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans and the exclusive beauty of the riverine landscape. Bangladesh is eagerly waiting to welcome more tourists from Nepal in coming years. People-to-people connectivity is another promising area of sub-regional cooperation between Bangladesh and Nepal. Bangladesh is a sought after destination for several aspiring students from many countries of South Asia as the country provides high yet affordable standards of education. Hundreds of Nepalese students come to Bangladesh every year to study medicine, nursing, dentistry, engineering, agriculture and other courses. Presently, more than 2,500 hundred Nepali students are studying in various institutions in Bangladesh. There should be frequent exchange of cultural troops and more sports related groups.

He concluded his speech with a hope that focusing on these two sectors along with energy, connectivity and trade will take the bilateral relation of Bangladesh and Nepal to great heights.



Keynote Address by the Guest of Honour



H E Mr Pradeep Kumar Gyawali

Honourable Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal

At the outset, H E Mr Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, Honourable Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal said that he was extremely honoured and privileged to be in Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) to share some of his thoughts on the topic of Nepal-Bangladesh relations and sub-regional cooperation. He informed that he was on a three days official visit in Bangladesh and had a very fruitful meeting with Foreign Minister. In that meeting, they discussed various aspects of Bangladesh-Nepal relations. He also had a fruitful discussion with the Commerce Minister on forging economic partnership through the expansion of trade, investment, tourism and development of multimodal connectivity.

He stated that Nepal and Bangladesh are two close friends than neighbours. Geographically, both countries are only a few miles away. This geographical proximity together with similarity in cultures, traditions and values explains their deep-rooted friendship, growing people-to-people contact and cementing ties. The two lands have been nurtured by wisdom and insights of the great saints and philosophers like Lord Buddha and Rabindranath Tagore. These are also bringing two countries spiritually, culturally and emotionally closer. Moreover, the rivers flowing down from the Himalayas of Nepal cultivated the fertile lands of Bangladesh and have enormously contributed to the development of civilization. Hence, both countries should take pride in this natural and civilizational heritage.

Nepal and Bangladesh relations have been continuously growing ever since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972. Two countries' relations are older and go beyond the formal landmark. He recalled with pride that Nepal was among the first few countries to recognize Bangladesh as an independent country. Later, Nepal's political leaders representing cross-section of Nepalese society had extended support to the independence struggle of Bangladesh. This historical fact is deeply cherished by Bangladesh. He noted that most of the countries are now maintaining democracies and have strong governments. This provides a strong footing to these countries to develop their relationships with each other in a meaningful way. Guided by the policy of maintaining friendship to all and enmity to none, Nepal attaches great importance to its relations



with Bangladesh. It believes that both countries can benefit from greater collaboration and partnership in a range of areas that are of mutual interest.

Speaking about the rich natural and human resources of Nepal and Bangladesh, he noted that optimal utilization of these valuable resources will be catalytic in transforming the development landscape creating prosperity and happiness for the people of Nepal and Bangladesh. Bilateral engagement of Nepal and Bangladesh extended to the vital areas of mutual interest, e.g., trade, energy, connectivity, tourism, education, culture and people-to-people relations. Thus, mutual support and cooperation at various multilateral forums on a range of issues of shared interest are visible also.

Referring to economic cooperation, he said that though the volume of bilateral trade is still at an immoderate level, there is immense scope for its expansion. Thus, there is a need for concrete measures so that both countries can enjoy mutually beneficial trade relationships. This can be drawn by fostering complementarities, eliminating both tariff and non-tariff trade barriers, adopting facilitating measures, developing required infrastructures, expanding connectivity and promoting productive sectors.

Energy is one of the most important areas of cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh. They have already agreed to work together on the development of the energy sector and its trade. Mr Gyawali insisted that Nepal's hydropower and Bangladesh's gas are offering a promising future for development. If developed properly, the development landscape of both countries will be vastly transformed. Two countries have recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to promote power trade. This will lead to fruitful cooperation between the two countries. In this process, they also need to develop trilateral cooperation involving Nepal, India and Bangladesh.



For wider interaction and engagement between the two countries smooth connectivity is a sine qua non. He suggested that both countries need more flight connections within the existing Dhaka-Kathmandu centers. The major regional centers like Saidpur of Bangladesh and Birendranagar of Nepal also need to connect by air. Moreover, there is also a possibility of connecting the Chattagram and Kathmandu by air. Likewise, linkage of waterways by connecting Nepal's rivers with that of India's and Bangladesh's will substantially improve connectivity and reduce the cost of transport and trade. Upgrading the roadways, developing the railways and their linkages will immensely augment to this process.

While talking about other areas where Nepal and Bangladesh partnership will be equally beneficial, he noted that Bangladesh is one of the most preferred destinations for Nepalese students to pursue higher education, especially in medical and engineering fields. He informed that currently, around six thousand Nepalese students are in Bangladesh. Indeed, maneuvering of service providers, ensuring quality education including required support to the students will help further expand cooperation in this sector.

Both Bangladesh and Nepal have attractive tourist destinations. Nepal has snow-capped mountains, green valleys and plain lands, rich biodiversity, beautiful nature, important historical and archaeological sites, cultural wealth and friendly and hospital people. Likewise, Bangladesh has fertile plain lands, beautiful sea beaches, mangrove forest and cultural and historical sites. Joint efforts for the development of this tourism industry will surely benefit both countries. At the national level, Nepal is celebrating the year 2020 as "Visit Nepal Year" to welcome more and more people from around the world. As a friendly country, it is expecting more tourists from Bangladesh.

Addressing the adverse effects of climate change, he said that it is the primary concern for both countries. The highlands of Nepal and the lowlands of Bangladesh have been bearing the huge bound of



global climate change. With the melting of the Nepal's Himalayan ices and the rise of sea levels in Bangladesh posing a serious existential threat to lowlands areas. Beyond these, environmental catastrophes like, floods and droughts have been regular features adversely affecting both countries' communities and their life. Keeping this in mind, Nepal has chosen the theme "Climate Change, Mountains and the Future of Humanity" for the first episode of the Sagarmatha Sambaad to be held in Kathmandu from 02 to 04 April 2020. He informed that the Sagarmatha Sambaad named after the tallest mountain in the world, Mount Everest. It is a global dialogue forum recently established by the government of Nepal to deliberate on the contemporary issues of regional and global significance in a multi-stakeholder setting on a bi-annual basis. He told that Nepal is expecting a high level of participation from Bangladesh and other countries belong to Hindukush, mountain range and coastal areas as well.

He emphasized that Nepal and Bangladesh relations have not only confined to the bilateral domain. Both countries support each other in various global forums on different issues of common interest ranging from climate change to international support for the developing countries. Both countries are among the largest contributors to the United Nations peacekeeping operations. He hoped that for the mutual benefit this spirit will be continued in the days ahead.

He also expressed his satisfaction regarding the rapid development of Bangladesh in economic and social sectors. Nepal is also deeply impressed by the tag "Made in Bangladesh" in many spheres within a short span of time. The economic growth rate of Bangladesh remains the highest in South Asia. With over 6.5 per cent economic growth rate for the last three years, Nepal ranks second after Bangladesh. As a close friend, Nepal would like to see continued economic growth, development and prosperity of Bangladesh. It also rejoices in the progress and prosperity of the friendly people of Bangladesh. He said that the government of Nepal has identified "Prosperous Nepal and Happy Nepali" as a national aspiration. With its sustain effort

and dedication, Nepal will achieve the status of the middle-income country before long and ultimately reach the developed country's ladder.

On the issue of sub-regional cooperation, he remarked that South Asian countries are on the same phrase. Furthermore, they have immense potential to benefit from deeper engagement and interdependence. Abundant natural resources, dynamic and educated human resources, geographical, cultural and civilizational linkages and growing people-to-people relations have created a sound basis for meaningful sub-regional cooperation. The full realization of these potentials is also needed. Individually, countries of South Asia have been engaging with each other on their own. However, a sub-regional platform can be more fruitful for generating benefit if interconnectedness developed, interdependence fostered in all aspects with the objectives of ensuring equitable sharing of benefits to all constituting members. In turn, this will ensure regional peace and stability further.

South Asian region has witnessed the evolution of various concepts in the form of sub-regional cooperation, e.g., growth triangle, growth quadrangle and growth polygon. The latest manifestation of these concepts is the BBIN. BBIN is taking shape with identified areas of sub-regional cooperation mainly emerging in transportation and connectivity. Bangladesh, Nepal and India have agreed to the operating procedures for the movement of vehicles in the sub-region under the BBIN motor vehicles agreement albeit Bhutan has expressed its interest in remaining out of it. Moreover, development of energy and its trade through synchronizing the grid system is under discussion. Thus, both countries can also develop sub-regional cooperation in other areas of interest especially in transit and connectivity.

He concluded the keynote speech by congratulating the government and people of Bangladesh on the celebration of the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Father of the Nation this year.



Address by the Chief Guest



H E Md Shahriar Alam, MP

*Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

At the outset, H E Md Shahriar Alam, MP, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh said that as a nation Bangladesh and its 160 million people are ever so grateful to Nepal for the contribution made by the then leadership towards Bangladesh's struggle and war of independence. Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman often reminds about those contributions. Even after the independence of Bangladesh when the country was struggling to feed the then 75 million people, Nepal went on to export 15 thousand tons of rice from its own limited resources. In the new era, things have progressed and in some other area things are yet to progress. The countries are yet to accomplish and fulfill the dreams of their nations.

He shared his views on the rail connectivity. He fondly recalled the memory about 10 years ago, when he accompanied the former Prime Minister of Nepal, Mr Madhav Kumar from Nepal to Mongla on a travel by road. The objective was to see the possibility of rail connectivity with Nepal, use as a transit port Mogla, and then train it from Mongla to Rajshahi, use Rohanpur-Singhabad corridor and then onto India and then onto Nepal. He was very pleased to note that the route is now being used, though not very often. He recollected that Nepal went on to use that route for bringing in fertilizers.

He suggested few major areas that can be emphasized further. He referred that the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina quite frequently uses the expression that she wants to build a facility using the corridor of India and between the two countries—Nepal and Bangladesh—in a way that tourists will be hiking in Nepal and next day or in the afternoon they can come and enjoy the sandy sea beaches of Cox's Bazar. This showed the level of seriousness, objective, plan and policy that the government in Bangladesh is



trying to adopt regarding tourism. He also referred to his discussion with the High Commission of India H E Riva Ganguly Das about the Chillahati transit point which is now ready to be inaugurated. He was positive that it will give further impetus and bring some pace to people-to-people and business-to-business connectivity.

Regarding road connectivity, he mentioned that there were discussions and talks taking place regarding it. The next issue was about energy. He was very happy to remind that it is probably the first of its kind in the sub-continent that Bangladesh, Nepal and India came together to set up a first ever hydro power plant in Nepal. He was hopeful that through this initiative all the three countries will be benefitted by sharing the power.

Towards the end, he expressed his gratitude to the Honourable Foreign Minister of Nepal, his team and colleague and everyone else to make this long awaited visit, a successful one. He also expressed his gratitude to BISS and everyone attending the seminar.

Open Discussion



Ambassador Farooq Sobhan asked the Nepalese Foreign Minister about his views on the prospects of SAARC. He also asked if Nepal intends to play a role in the revival of this organization. Addressing sub-regional co-operation, he questioned whether there can be a timeframe to put upon the energy sharing between the two countries. He referred to the trilateral energy cooperation in the hydropower sector and asked where exactly the three countries stand regarding the agreement. He wanted to know if any agreement had already been done among the three countries and the timeframe. In his final point, he wanted to know about the future of land and road connectivity as well as Nepal's prospects of having unhindered access to the Bangladeshi ports. He opined that there are some outstanding programmes to be addressed in this connection.



Mr Shahidul Islam Chowdhury, Journalist, the New Age reminded that it took 20 years for a Nepalese Foreign Minister to cross that few miles between Bangladesh and Nepal. He opined that SAARC now lacks political insight as it is run through bureaucratic leadership. In this regard, he wanted to know if the SAARC leaders have abandoned the organization.



Lt Gen Harun-Ar-Rashid (Retd.) conveyed his deep appreciation to Nepal for their relentless support given during the War of Liberation of Bangladesh. He asked the Minister how Bangladesh can get benefit from huge water resources of Nepal. He commented that both Nepal and Bangladesh have the potential to explore agriculture sector. He suggested that there should be frequent cultural exchanges in befitting manner.



Dr A Atiq Rahman, Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, stated that Bangladesh and Nepal are connected essentially by highland and lowland interaction. In this respect, he identified three important issues. First, the highland and lowland is the emerging concept within the water flow system and it goes in. Second, the snow and the glacier are melting faster than all predicted levels and any earlier models. The average 1°C increase in the tropical area like Bangladesh is almost equivalent to 4°C temperature increase on the top of the Himalaya within the Hindukush. It is the scientific imperative in a climate change world. Third, both Bangladesh and Nepal through contributing to the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) can take themselves a long way and give global leadership. This can be achieved if both countries complement each other in water management for energy and hydroelectricity. In this regard, two issues are

important. One is people displacement and other is ecosystem shift. On the other hand, they will get enormous benefits and opportunities. It will help both emerging Bangladesh and Nepal to be a rich country. Besides, he also noted that hydroelectricity is one of the few natural systems that offer to get energy without increasing the emission of greenhouse gas. Thus, he recommended both countries to come forward in this regard.



Response by the Keynote Speaker

In the beginning, H E Mr. Pradeep Kumar Gyawali thanked everyone who actively participated in the open discussion. Referring to the question on SAARC, he said that Nepal looks at SAARC as a very instrumental platform to design the destiny of 1.8 billion people of South Asia. When the pioneers established SAARC, they had a vision of very closely linked and integrated South Asia. If it succeeded, it could be one of the most advanced regions in the globe. But unfortunately, the region is very loosely integrated, the trade volume between the member states is also low and economically, physically and digitally, the integration is not at a satisfactory level. This is a big challenge for the region and that is why Nepal wants to reactivate the SAARC process. He acknowledged the differences among the member nations and suggested that the only way to mitigate the differences is broader discussions. He encouraged the SAARC member states to sit together across the table and narrow down the differences. He asked the policymakers to keep in mind that despite political differences, the destiny of the people of South Asia and the problems faced by the region like poverty, climate change and terrorism are so immense that no single country can address them without joint efforts. He also addressed the issue of the summit being postponed in 2016 and no other summit had been





organized for four years; but he pointed out the silver lining and added that the rest of the processes are still active. SAARC centres in various cities are actively running as well as various minister-level and senior official level meetings are also going on. He hoped that, in near future, the differences would be narrowed down and the political leaders of South Asia will review their positions to enhance new areas of cooperation. He opined that it is the only way to solve the problems the SAARC member-countries are facing now.

On energy sector, he said that using the huge hydro potential to address the energy crunch not only for the domestic demands but also for regional and sub-regional demands is important. These are the common assets of the region. Hence, every nation has its own stake and should be engaged in order to utilize these resources in a win-win situation. He pointed out two promising developments in this regard. In 2018, Bangladesh and Nepal signed a MoU on hydropower cooperation; and, very recently there have been an agreement between Bangladesh and the GMR group which is constructing hydropower project in Nepal to export 500 MW of electricity to Bangladeshi market. He stated that it is a major breakthrough which has paved the way for further development in energy cooperation in sub-regional level. He opined that the cooperation of India is very important in this regard. He also informed that India is ready to cooperate and share the facilities of their already existing transnational lines to enhance the energy cooperation between Nepal and Bangladesh.

Acknowledging that Bangladesh and Nepal have lost opportunities in the past, he suggested that the countries must not miss in the future as well since developments are taking place at many levels. In the past, Nepal was in transition and Bangladesh also had its own problems. But considering the emerging economy of South Asia, both the countries are in the right position. They have visionary leadership and strong political stability which contribute a lot to tap the potential in the energy sector.

Regarding the access to Bangladeshi ports, Mr Gyawali expressed his gratitude to Bangladesh

for providing Nepal with the generosity of transit facility. He also shared his gratefulness for the adequate infrastructure, i.e., road, railway and sea-port facilities provided by the Government of Bangladesh and added that Nepal is willing to utilize them. Very recently, Nepal has been engaged in using the potential of the inland waterways as well by using the Nepali rivers through Ganga, the Padma and other rivers to significantly reduce the transportation cost.

He also mentioned that although in other ministerial level there were frequent visits in between Nepal and Bangladesh, this is the first time at the foreign ministerial level. Acknowledging the gap, he promised that there will be more visits in the days ahead. He also thanked everyone for the nice words about Nepal and its act of recognizing Bangladesh as an independent country as one of the first countries. He added that it was a humanitarian responsibility for a genuine cause which also added a new dimension to friendship and closeness.

About the water management, Mr Gyawali pointed out that flood management is a very important aspect. He informed the audience that Nepal has developed some flood forecasting systems and during the morning-meeting on that day, they decided to reactivate the expert committee in order to bring new ideas and recommendation. On the issue of climate change, he suggested both of the countries to walk together as they have ecological linkages. He particularly focused on the mountains and the oceans of the two countries and added that collaborative approaches must be taken into consideration bringing other mountainous countries, island countries and coastal countries together to address this alarming situation. According to him, it is a pertinent issue and is in the priority list.

To answer the question on cultural exchanges, he referred to different visits of the cultural groups and promised that different media representatives will be appointed to address mutual interests in this area.

Prepared by

Dr. Mahfuz Kabir, Resarch Director
Moutusi Islam, Research Officer
Syeda Tanzia Sultana, Research Officer
Ayesha Binte Towhid, Research Officer
Nahian Reza, Research Intern

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Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

1/46, Old Elephant Road (West of Ramna Police Station), Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh

Fax: 88-02-48312625, E-mail: info@biiss.org, Website: www.biiss.org